41. Sanjay Gupta, interviewed by author, Noida, 2 September 2005.
42. 'Prabhat Khabar to launch its Siliguri edition on March 10', Sumita Patra, 6 March 2006. exchange4media.com.
43. 'Eyeing the Punjabi Pie', Shuchi Bansal, 23 August 1999. *Business World.*
44. See indices for it in *Jharkhand Development Report 2006*, published by *Prabhat Khabar*.
45. Vasavi, 24 April 2003, Palamu.
46. 'Amar Ujala launches Dharamsala edition', Indo Asian News Service, 7 December 2005.
47. Atul Maheshwari interviewed for *Content is King*. exchange4media.com, 31 May 2004.

# 5

# Local News Gatherers

*'Anyone who is willing to get advertisements can become a stringer.'*

Newspaper expansion and the localisation which followed had many colourful consequences for daily journalism in the Hindi heartland. It created a genre of news which did not exist before in this region, and a new breed of news gatherer. A local public sphere rich in possibilities began to evolve once local pages for districts, and subdivisions thereof, became the norm. With newspaper managements deciding that the way to create new readers was to give them news from where they belonged, a new genre of news emerged brought by a new tribe of news gatherers. 'How local is local? From the region, the town, the neighbourhood or the street?' (Franklin and Murphy 1998). To that question was added another one: how much of the everyday jumble of local occurances qualify as news?

The logic of creating a local public sphere was irrefutable. That was after all the level where governance touched the citizen, and communities acted out their cultural rituals and social concerns. As urban and rural local self-governance took root in India, as local communities become more vocal and more conscious of their rights, as local commercial interests came forward to make viable the publications that could engender such a space, its emergence became inevitable. Local politics, civic services, law and order all demand discussion and accountability in a democracy, even as cultural practices seek media space. And because human nature rather than idealism governs the realm of local discourse, crime news assumes primacy in the pages of the local press.

## *Rise of the Citizen Journalist*

The rapid plunge into localisation led to a democratisation of news-gathering which encompassed the citizenry at large. It turned local lawyers, teachers, shopkeepers and busybodies into citizen journalists. They had no conventional journalism training but a clear understanding of local concerns: crime, corruption, poor quality services in government schools and hospitals, and in terms of maintenance of roads and sewage systems. They also had a clear sense of how local interests operated, and approached issues with an instinct for self-preservation. And because the newsmakers and news providers were drawn from the more vocal sections of the community, the local public sphere also became a reflection of the local power structure in terms of caste and class. Mediators in the local power structure, such as panchayat leaders, religious leaders and social activists became both actors in, and beneficiaries of, the local news universe.

Local editions were open to news being brought and given to them in the same way that much bigger newspapers in the cities had a mechanism to receive press releases. At the *mofussil* level the dependence on these 'handouts' for space filling was much greater, and no news was too small to be dignified with space on the local pages. As space for such coverage expanded, stringers as well as district level news bureaus were eager to receive small handwritten items of who had said or done what, and where. The craving for publicity that a local school, hospital or ladies club might have was abundantly gratified. Though gentry were favoured, local district pull-outs also turned very ordinary people into newsmakers as reporters hunted for stories and pictures to fill the day's pages.

As more people read newspapers for a reflection of what was going on in their neighbourhood there was also an increase in popular awareness. If the space created in local pull-outs promoted self-aggrandisement of those who governed, it also demanded accountability. And if it served commercial intent, it also strengthened cultural bonds. Central to the shaping of this public sphere were the armies of local news gatherers who came into existence as newspapers calibrated their costs and benefits in publishing district-level pull-outs or additional pages within an edition for different areas.



Beginning with the mid-1980s in the Hindi-speaking states there was an exponential growth in the development of the rural and semi-urban news machine. Many cogs were put in place to create this news gathering and delivering operation, which expanded as the radius of the rural newspaper revolution grew. It began to take in roadside villages which could never have dreamt that they would figure on a news map. The newspaper industry cast its readership net wider and began to reach out to hitherto untapped readers because there was now commercial interest in the rural Indian. He was a potential consumer.

The parallel impetus for localisation came from the fact that television had come in from the early 1990s and begun to corner much of the advertising pie. By the 1990s regional newspapers were looking elsewhere, at local markets, for the potential they had to offer. The decade of 2000 began with an advertising recession and newspapers such as *Rajasthan Patrika* worked harder to create alternate sources of advertising by leveraging the paper's increasing small town and rural reach. The advertising was there then, waiting to be tapped, but you had to find news to fill the pages on which people could advertise. By then the *Patrika* was claiming to reach 300 panchayats and *tehsil*s (development blocks). *Dainik Bhaskar* was claiming that 50 per cent of each edition's circulation was in the rural areas. So what news would you give these rural areas, and who would produce it?

District editions also demanded delivery networks that facilitated greater localisation. These originated with trains and then switched to taxis and buses, because train routes had limitations, you could only drop papers at five or six stations. With road transport you could drop smaller bundles in more places. But when your paper began to reach smaller places, your news network also had to encompass these places, to deliver incident-based, problem-based reporting that would draw readers.[1] How would a newspaper make a vast news gathering operation, that goes down to villages, viable? One solution was to do so by making it a participative effort where local people were encouraged to send news items about the community. As newspapers in Hindi-speaking states expanded their circulation base they invited circulation agents to send news about their areas so that the thrill of seeing their village and people figure in the daily pages would become an incentive for would-be subscribers to take the newspaper.

As the amount of space given to local news grew, the local news network also grew beyond the circulation agent to the advertising agent, as well as other interested individuals in the community. It was understood that this was a sort of altruistic unpaid activity, what was paid was a commission on the subscriptions or advertising brought in by the person who was also filing stories. In return many newspapers conferred a visiting card on the news filing individual, which gave him the status of a representative of the newspaper. When the paper involved was a large and influential one, a household name all over the state, the visiting card conferred status upon the local stringer. He became the local gentry's passport to figuring in the newspaper.

A significant agent of localisation was thus emerging. Together with a determined local marketing thrust which saw a culture of incentives to subscribe develop in rural, semi-rural and small town markets, these citizen-journalists (to use a term which had gained currency worldwide by 2005) spearheaded the penetration of newspapers into the rural hinterland. In more common parlance they were known as stringers (from an old international practice of paying part-time reporters by the column inch for the text that they produced, and the fact that the length was measured by a piece of string).

As local news pages expanded with the growth of printing centres and the multiplicity of editions, the dependence on this local stringer led newspapers to induct more of them, and pay them small amounts of money that would not by any reckoning qualify as a respectable journalistic salary. Some of them were reimbursed for the cost of faxing the news. What the newspapers were investing in setting up printing centres was saved in a unique approach to creating the editorial product. Without exception every localisation drive in India's Hindi heartland was riding on the willing backs of a host of largely unpaid stringers, filing quantities of miscellaneous news from their immediate neighbourhood. A large publication such as *Dainik Jagran* or *Hindustan* may have anywhere from 200 to 1,000 stringers in a state, depending on how many editions it publishes. They were responsible for transmitting news from *kasba*s and *mohalla*s (neighbourhoods) and for placing many villages and block headquarters irrevocably on India's news map.[2]



The southern part of the country had set the trend earlier. In the early 1990s *Eenadu* already claimed to have a stringer in every *mandal* (a unit of local government) in Andhra Pradesh. They were paid expenses and one rupee for every column centimetre of their copy that got into the newspaper. Other Telugu dailies also maintained hundreds of stringers to whom they paid rates varying from 75 paise a column centimetre at *Udayam* to Rs 1.25 at *Andhra Prabha* (Jeffrey 2000: 145).

Shortly after *Dainik Bhaskar* came to Rajasthan in December 1996 it decided to push ahead with district-level expansion and by 2002 both this newspaper and *Rajasthan Patrika* had built up networks of stringers though neither claimed that such information providers ('informants', as Rajeev Harsh, the resident editor of *Patrika* in Udaipur would later describe them)[3] were journalists. Babulal Sharma, the *Bhaskar*'s Jaipur editor at that point would say expansively that the *Punjab Kesari* may appoint shopkeepers, but their own stringers were more like to be a lawyer, teacher or social worker. 'If an MA or PhD comes to me and wants to help, we let him become our correspondent.' He would add in the same breath that they also let their circulation agents send news.[4] 'Anyone who is willing to take on an agency of circulating 50 copies can become a correspondent/stringer. Anyone who is willing to get advertisements can become a stringer. Thus, circulation and advertisements together determine who becomes a reporter.' This, from the bureau chief of *Dainik Jagran* in Nautanhwa, Gorakhpur district.[5]

In the early stages stringers helped to attain a newspaper's circulation objectives without expanding its area of editorial influence. Increasingly, some newspapers used them to collect advertising or publicise advertising rates. The news too was collected rather than written, when a circulation agent doubled as a stringer.

## *Abolishing Gatekeepers*

In the Kanker and Bastar districts of Chhattisgarh, the road which connects Raipur to Jagdalpur is dotted with small commercial establishments which announce a dealership for one or other of the region's

newspapers. Most of these dealers or agents also sent news. If insurgents attacked a village nearby, or an outbreak of an epidemic occurred, or the member of parliament or legislature from the area did something newsworthy, the shopkeeper cum circulation and advertising agent cum correspondent, would handwrite a little despatch, and hand it to the driver of a transport bus going to Jagdalpur where the local pages for the Bastar edition are made. One evening newspaper called *Highway Channel* in Jagdalpur even had a mailbox at the local bus stand, where such news despatches could be deposited.

Rural sales varied from 15 to 20 copies in a modest village to 50 or 100 in a *kasba*, Many roles get collapsed into one at this local level: at Farasgaon in Bastar, within a family one brother was the circulation agent as well as stringer for *Deshbandhu*, his younger brother who hadn't managed to finish school was gainfully employed as a hawker for the same newspaper. Circulation, editorial, advertising and distribution all under one little roof!

But more often than not, the news was collected rather than reported by this multi-purpose human being. A general store owner in a village called Bhanpuri on the Kanker–Jagdalpur highway had a sign up on his shop: 'Come and give your news here', it said in Hindi. At Kondagaon, a long distance telephone booth owner had a similar sign, he was the agent for *Nava Bharat*. He said people came and gave him press releases. The more you carry local news, the more local people buy newspapers, these stringers said. Their job was to collect the tiny, inconsequential items of self-publicity that filled local news columns and drew readers to these pages. Precisely the sort of news items that sharp-eyed news editors in self-respecting metropolitan newspapers would circle with a red pen and term a plant.

Localisation democratised media access and abolished gatekeepers. Since its logic was that local gentry should be able to read about themselves in the next day's papers it encouraged its stringers and circulation agents to forward all the local handouts they received. The citizen walked with his news to the place of receipt, it was stamped and forwarded with no alteration, and liable to appear on the next day's pages without much alteration either. It was received by a shopkeeper, transported by a road transport bus, free of charge, to a mailbox in a district town bus terminus. Sometimes, if the paper or an interested party paid the fax charges, it was faxed to a modem centre, scattered across districts. A modem centre was a district-level



newspaper bureau where local pages were made up and transmitted by modem to the town where the edition for the region would be produced. Even in a bigger place such as Jagdalpur the full-time reporters in the *Nava Bharat* bureau would happily accept handouts and thank the bearer for them.[6]

In a place like Chhattisgarh, those availing themselves of the proffered hospitality of a newspaper's columns ranged from organisers of local school events to the Naxalites (leftwing guerrillas) who terrorised government functionaries. Members of this extremist group had embarked in the summer of 2002 on an 'image-building strategy' which involved issuing press notes, sending letters to the editors of newspapers, and responding to articles that appear in the press. They sought to explain their position and apologise for excesses by gaining access to the local pages of the Hindi press, much as the rest of the citizenry was doing. The difference was that their handouts were not delivered personally to the newspaper bureau or to the stringer. They were handwritten, on the letterhead of the People's War group, and were mailed to newspaper officers or bureaus, since the group chose to remain underground. Their press releases were issued by different levels of the organisation, both the special zonal committees as well as the central committee. Like all other levels of press notes received by local newspapers, they were eagerly accepted and used.[7]

The-come-and-give-your-news principle applied in different parts of Rajasthan as well. In Banswara district where a great deal of religious news originated on account of pilgrimages and religious fairs, one way of ensuring coverage was to pay the fax charges of the local shopkeeper who functioned as a stringer cum circulation agent. It also helped if he belonged to your community. In Ganoda, 30 km from Banswara town the *Dainik Bhaskar*'s man also happened to be a Jain. 'We are Jains so when I send a story on a Jain event, the Digambhar Jain samaj of Ganoda pays the fax charges. People say, you send our news we will pay fax charges.'[8]

Those who facilitated media access in far-flung corners of the country would dignify their corner shop enterprises by calling themselves news agencies. The appellation was adopted because they were circulation agents for newspapers as well. They would solemnly stamp news items received with the name of their news agency before sending it on to the newspaper through a bus driver or over fax. Thus Vastupal Jain of Ganoda called himself Paras News Agency.

In Kothda, in Udaipur district, Ramesh Chandra Jain, a circulation agent who had been selling *Rajasthan Patrika* for 40 years, sat in a shop in the market square of Kothda, a largely Muslim *tehsil* headquarter town, and diligently stamped handouts brought to him. He kept file copies of these: a press note from a chief veterinary officer, a handout from a school principal, an item on a local Ganesh festival. News items on local problems were sent on to be delivered by a road transport driver to the mailbox *Patrika* had installed at the city bus stand in Udaipur, precisely for this purpose. He was also the distributor for the 120 copies of *Patrika* sold here.[9] Lately he had acquired competition, the *Patrika* appointed a shopkeeper who was the member of the local Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (a right wing Hindu nationalist organisation) to also collect news for the paper from that town and its surroundings. And *Dainik Bhaskar* appointed a local Muslim youth to be its circulation agent and collect the news that people chose to give. That included political handouts from the local Bharatiya Janata Party. He would put a 'Shahid News Agency' stamp on each item and send it on.[10] In addition to these three men, local people also gave news items directly to the bus driver who could be relied upon to put these as well into the *Rajasthan Patrika* mailbox at the Udaipur bus stand.

Why did newspapers want to make their pages quite so accessible to all and sundry? In Bihar Y.C. Agarwal, the vice president of *Hindustan Times* whose Hindi edition *Hindustan* was the leading newspaper here, said it was because the reader was smart and knew what he wanted. 'If he wants to know what is happening around his area, I fulfil that need.' But if you had to fill two pages of news for very small semi-urban areas, you would be able to do it only by being open to all kinds of news being fetched or delivered.[11]

At his competition, *Dainik Jagran*, they put it a little differently. It was as a matter of creating readership loyalty, they said.

> We cover a local Ram Lila because in producing it in a locality so many people are involved. Those who give donations to make it possible, those who make arrangments for the poles or act in it. They would all want to read their names in the paper.[12]

It was in a sense, the local community version of the 'Page 3' culture. *Jagran* was at this point also appointing students as stringers in local schools, who would inform the paper if there was a function in the school. They were creating a cadre of informants, they said. As the news base widened, Hindi newspapers encouraged information gathering of a highly democratised and decentralised kind.



## *Mirzapur's Media Men*

The quality of the public sphere being created in small town India had to do with the quality of news which found its way into the pages of the local press. But when stringers did the reporting themselves, many complexities coloured their output. Interviews with them and with citizenry at the local level highlight both the potential and limitations of stringers or citizen journalists as newspapermen. Whether in Uttar Pradesh or Jharkhand or Bihar, such a person tended to be upper caste, male, and a part-time scribe. The rest of the time he could be a farmer, small entrepreneur, politician, lawyer, teacher or shopkeeper. How well he reported had to do with whether or not he also collected advertising, what his caste and professional background was, why he had come into the profession and how much gumption he had as an individual. It also had to do with how keen his management was to have him display any journalistic derring-do.

Interviews done for this study in 2003 with stringers, correspondents, local government officials and readers drawn from various segments of society in Mirzapur district in eastern Uttar Pradesh shed some light on both the quality of journalism in these parts and on reader expectations from newspapers. The most widely circulated papers here were all in Hindi: *Aj*, *Hindustan*, *Dainik Jagran* and *Amar Ujala*. Covering nearly 5,000 sq km, the district is known largely for its carpet weaving and mining industries and the attendant negatives of child and bonded labour.

Several had been stringers for many years. A few were full-time journalists, bureau chiefs in charge of stringers. Several were conscious of the limitations of their journalistic potential, given their circumstances. R.N. Jayaswal, a 65-year-old graduate in political science, was the Mirzapur-based bureau chief of the Vindhyanchal division of the *Amrit Prabhat*, the Hindi edition of the Calcutta-based *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, and published from Allahabad. He was

also the local bureau chief for *The Pioneer,* published from Lucknow and Varanasi, and a social worker who had helped found the Bandhua Mukti Morcha, an organisation that worked to free bonded labour. Reporting in such areas often meant close interaction with agitations mounted by landless agricultural labour, with Naxalites and the non-literate population in the district. Given the international focus on issues of child labour as well as rescue and rehabilitation of bonded labour, he thought that local print media had a catalytic role to play.[13]

However, he said, such reporting was based on a personal commitment and unlikely to be rewarding. On the contrary, as a caste Hindu, he had faced social boycott from family, friends and acquaintances. Wealthy landlords as well as the erstwhile owners of large carpet-making units initially tried to buy him off, he said, but when that failed, *goondas* were sent to beat him up. In time, as attention and donor funds were channelised towards this issue, the local district and state-level functionaries were more supportive of the efforts of activists and journalists alike. According to Jayaswal the Hindi print media was significantly responsible for exposing cases of bonded labour, including child labour in the carpet industry, and for formulating the well-established proposition that the carpet industry produces an army of uneducated people.

Ram Murthy Pandey, a school graduate at Halliya in Mirzapur, reported for *Hindustan* which is published from Varanasi and has a bureau office at the Mirzapur district head quarters. He was 45 years old and between him and his two brothers they owned 15 *bighas* (measure of land varying from a third of an acre to an acre) of land. He had been a stringer for 11 years, working for *Prayag Darpan*, *Amar Ujala*, *Samay* and *Dainik Jagran* before he came to *Hindustan*. He had been a Congress party office bearer in Halliya and Lalgunj, and had also been a district-level secretary as well as organiser of the district unit for the party. That was when he began writing for newspapers on rural issues and problems.

Pandey earned Rs 500 a month irrespective of the number of stories he wrote, another Rs 105 with which he had to subscribe to the *Hindustan*, and got a commission on the advertisements he collected for the newspaper. He was aware that this commission which added to his income made him dependent on the block authorities and traders. 'That means I cannot take a stand against either the government or



the trading community.' But he seemed to think it was possible. 'The trick is to get past them all, and yet contribute to enhancing people's awareness.'[14] He used the term 'good story', like any regular journalist. A good story he said, was typically about problems facing rural people: handpumps that have fallen into disrepair, food stocks that have found their way out of the public distribution system and into the market, and other news of corruption involving local officials such as the BDO (Block Development Officer) using the government vehicle for private use. 'I have had to face boycott by him whenever I write such a piece.' Any more analysis than that, he thought, was unnecessary since readers tended to lose interest.[15] He had a useful source in the head clerk at the block office who got him all the local news on inside developments.

After the land reforms were enacted in this area the Patel community has become extremely powerful, Pandey said.

> They are more in number and have easily got control over the land here. We Brahmins have to fight to defend our honour and dignity which these fellows are bent on ravaging. They have been troubling us for quite some time now in this part of Halliya block. Being a correspondent allows me to contain their oppression.

Rajiv Ojha, with *Aj* for the last 20 years, started out with *Jagran*. A 39-year-old advocate, he was also a supplier of raw materials such as china clay and plaster of Paris for Chunar's crockery industry. He lived in Chunar. His law degree and his post graduate diploma in journalism helped him write news with a lot of analysis, he said. 'I think that was problem with the management in *Jagran*, but it is an asset in *Aj*.' He admitted that it was depressing to read some of the news that got published. According to him most news items tend to be events-centric, not processual or analytical. These are mostly of the *teen marey, terah ghayal** variety, which merely passes on information.

*Literally, three killed and thirteen injured, referring to the overwhelming focus on mishaps and single events, which do not always have any impact on the development outcomes of people's lives.

This was not only to do with the stringer's lack of formal training or of their backgrounds, he said.

> There is so much competition between newspapers themselves to be the first to report that often the quality of the news item itself is missed out. How can you expect the person to analyse any news when he is simultaneously pressured for advertisements and to send stories fast so that the particular issue of the newspaper can get published fast.[16] [Multi-edition papers sent by train to other parts of the state closed their pages fairly early in the evening.]

He was candid enough to say the income from advertising was an important incentive for becoming a stringer. 'Each advertisement means a commission of 5–10 per cent. That supplements the apparently low income of stringers.'

His fellow stringer for *Aj* at Lalganj in Mirzapur, Shashi Bhushan Dubey, had been working with the print media for the last 25 years. He was earlier with *Jagran*, *Amrit Prabhat* and *Rashtriya Swarup*. A 45-year-old post graduate in journalism from Mirzapur, he belonged to a family that owned 700 *bighas* of land. People become stringers he said because it brought them a lot of clout. If you were a contractor or transporter, being a stringer conferred respectability, and could be extremely beneficial. It gave them a cover to carry on their business, clout with the local administration and politicians, and brought them a respectability that distracted public opinion from their underhand dealings. They develop the right connections and contacts so they even got encouragement. 'You see, it is not only about officials not interfering with your work. It is also about them supporting what you do.' Of himself, he said that he was in this profession because he wanted to be. 'Inspired by ideals of social work, and by a willingness to expose corruption and injustice we have taken on these roles.' He was also the circulation agent for *Aj*, but was not responsible for collecting advertisements. While he was reimbursed for fuel expenses incurred while reporting, he only got an honorarium for the work he did. 'Let me tell you, in this profession and at this level, no one is salaried. Anyone who claims he is, is lying.'[17]



A stringer-transporter from the district of Gorakhpur confirmed this cynical assessment, dwelling on the advantages of this part-time calling.

> I am not into this trade for any altruistic reason. Rather, it is the press *ka billa* [clout] that interests me. I have a taxi and sumo service that operates between Sonauli border and Gorakhpur. Putting a press tag on them saves me from harassment by the police. They know that if they touch anything of mine, it will be a big story about the kind of activities they are into. That helps![18]

Nor were newspaper managements keen on any journalistic derring-do being displayed. Stringers were hired to increase the presence of local gentry on the paper's pages, not to embarrass them with revelations. This stringer-transporter did his reporting around the Nepal border.

> I did a story on the RAW–ISI nexus [India's Research and Analysis Wing and Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence]. A couple of RAW officials met up their ISI counterparts at Kathmandu. My management was appalled. I irritated them further by doing up a story on the involvement of the border police with smuggling. Each story I wrote was like a nail in the coffin. I was finally pulled up and told, '*chup chaap se pade raho*' [keep quiet]. I was instructed to report ordinary news. So that is what I do. Who killed whom, who got robbed, you know that kind of stuff.[19]

Many of the stringers in Mirzapur were older men with a fairly long innings in their second profession. Siddhanath Singh, a 52-year-old cultivator who owned 5 acres of land, was a stringer for *Jagran*, at Kalhat Bazaar when he was interviewed, and said he had been with the print media for the last 26 years. In 1977 when the Janata wave swept the north he was a member of the Jan Sangh (the precursor of the Bharatiya Janata Party), keen to be more actively associated with the process of building up a new society. He was a

graduate, and *Jagran* accepted his offer to cover news for them. He has had no formal training in journalism. Those were heady days he says, when everyone wanted to be part of something. He was looking for an identity, he said, which he found while reporting for *Jagran*. Since 1980, when he got the agency for this paper he has been its circulation agent for a radius of 5–7 km around Kalhat Bazaar. He also collected advertisements for the paper. He was paid a monthly remuneration, irrespective of the number of stories he did.

Like Ram Murthy Pandey, above, Singh saw his primary task to be that of bringing the attention of the bureaucracy to handpumps that were non-functional and to school buildings, roads and bridges that had fallen into disrepair. It was also essential to inform people through the newspapers about different welfare schemes that were announced and about news related to panchayati raj institutions. 'People are very keen to know about these. I think that is due to the new-found "power" that at least some people have got (after the 73rd Amendment), and everyone wants to know how to use it.'[20]

It is useful to contrast the perceptions of those who do the reporting with the views of those who were implementing the government's development schemes in these parts. Every one of them lamented the lack of context or analysis. Gyaneshwar Tiwari, a BDO at Pahadi thought that given the range of government programmes being implemented, ranging from development to welfare, the reporting he saw in the newspapers barely skimmed the surface of the activity going on, and was unsatisfactory in quality.

> There was this article the other day on how the wells have dried up. Just that—the number and the location. But is it not a responsibility of newspapers to also analyse why these wells have dried up? Surely the *sarkari karamchari* [government worker] has not gobbled up the water? Why is there no discussion on water-tables, on ground-water run-offs that happen because there are no trees? And who has cut away these trees? Unless the newspapers, especially the local papers explain these issues, how can they say they are doing responsible reporting?[21]

Shiv Kedar Singh, a former block *pramukh* (president) at Narayanpur, was more damning. To begin with, he said, his experience



with the media, especially the Hindi-speaking print media, had been such that he could never be sure that any news was factual.

> As far as possible, I have to corroborate what I read with my own eyes, which is possible only at the district block level. For example, recently *Hindustan* reported that the Pontoon bridge at Chunar had got damaged due to heavy rain and storm. When I went to the specified site I saw there was no problem, and the people there told me that there never had been any such problem. Any such news that is found to be inaccurate should be corrected by the concerned newspaper, and apologies issued.

Nor did stringers or reporters follow up on a news item. News for them is just a 'story', an event, which has neither context, nor a subsequent process. For instance, he said, there were regular stories about grains in the public distribution system being poor.

> But is that all there is to it? Did it not link up with corruption in the bureaucratic system? Does it not tell us that grain is rotting in our godowns? Those are the gaps in our knowledge that we would expect an honest and re-sponsible media to fill.[22]

Chandra Shekhar Shukla had been BDO at Rajgarh (Mirzapur) block for six months when he was interviewed. He was 35 years old and a keen reader of Hindi newspapers which gave him an opportunity to try and understand what was happening in his district and block. 'However, I often feel dissatisfied because I feel I am not able to lay my hands on any analysis,' he said. Not only did the local newspapers give only information, they focused entirely on negative aspects. He gave the example of a monitoring meeting for the Jawahar Rozagar Yojana which he had organised in his previous posting. *Gram sabha*s (village general bodies) are supposed to monitor this scheme in the presence of the BDO. At one village where the quorum of 10 per cent required for such meetings was not reached he opted to hold the meeting nevertheless, since many people had come. The next day it was all over the newspapers: that he had gone ahead with a *gram sabha* meeting without quorum and was encouraging despotism. The reporter had not tried to get his side of the story. His point was that if they had not gone ahead with the meeting that day,

the villagers who had made the effort to come would have been demotivated. What guarantee was there that they would turn up the next time?[23]

And he too thought that the frequent reports about tube wells were pointless without saying why they had gone dry:

> There are usually two reasons for this. One, that the pump has not been bored according to the standard set by the government, so instead of being 150 feet deep, the pump is only 120 feet deep. This indicates that the contractor has pocketed cash. The second reason could be—and this has longer-term implications—the level of ground water, and people's callousness towards the environment in general.

In Gorakhpur a BDO mourned the 'web of negativism' that local reporting spun.

> While I was in Chamoli, it was such a common sight to see little girls running uphill to their schools in so much excitement. But not once did I see newspapers there write a story or do an analysis of how and why communities and people there were so enthusiastic about school.

To Santosh Srivastav, the Press Trust of India (PTI) correspondent in Mirzapur, the fault lay with both reporters and ordinary citizens. He says most local reporters look at journalism as a means to get close to the government. For them, this is just a smart career move that brings them clout as well as respectability. As a consequence, serious coverage—especially coverage of development issues—suffers. And they and their newspapers get away with this because actually readers are quite uninterested. 'They are indifferent to issues of democracy, governance and development. Both feed into each other.'[24]

Srivastav and Shamshed Khan, Secretary of an NGO called CREDA in Mirzapur, also blamed stringer reporting for the perception of Naxalism that the newspapers perpetuated. Srivastav said:

> The identity of the Kol tribes in this locality, especially in Halliya, is getting sharper. This identity-formation is directly linked with Naxalism and its fury. However, police and the bureaucracy insist on referring to this problem as a 'law-and-order' issue. This is not a 'law-and-order' issue, it is a 'development' issue. But since the administration sees it as a law-and-order problem, the local media follows suit.



Shamshed Khan, has his own reading of what makes a stringer less independent than he could be.[25] They belong to a social strata and a given caste group that is involved in perpetuating poverty, exploitation and malfunctioning in both the bureaucracy as well as society. At the local level, it is difficult to report serious issues of development due to pressure from within the social or caste group that stringers belong to. Dalit (an untouchable, in the Indian caste system) issues, land issues and human rights issues are not covered at all he said, since the stringers and the exploiters belong to the same caste. Most stringers in Mirzapur belong to the Brahmin community. Most of the land mafia were also Brahmins.

The caste profile of stringers did not make them the voice of downtrodden anywhere in India's Hindi belt, though there were individual exceptions. By and large local editions had middle-class concerns: power supply, water, crime, development infrastructure. Not caste atrocities or exploitation of labour or subjugation of women. Injustice did not move the local news machine. In Varanasi Shekhar Tripathi, the resident editor of *Hindustan*, confirmed this: 'Upper caste stringers likhte hain police ke khilaf, afsaron ke khilaf. Social aur economic issue par nahin likhenge. Eastern UP mein crime ka samachar zyadatar'[26] (Upper caste stringers write against the police, against officers. They will not write on social and economic issues. In Eastern UP crime news dominates).

Readers in Mirzapur also proferred perceptions of what constituted local news and how much impact it could have. Tejbal Chaturvedi, a 52-year-old cultivator in Halliya educated up to high school, was a subscriber to *Dainik Jagran*. To him the local news pages were crime chronicles that did not even bother to investigate the crime stories they chronicled! From the conditions in the rural areas it would be difficult to believe that the bureaucracy has taken note of the negative daily reports, he felt. Roads continue to be bad, and hand pumps are never repaired. Yet he read the paper for the

crisp and easy-to-read format in which the news is presented, and because he was a particularly enterprising cultivator, he also headed a local NGO. 'Reading *Jagran* also helps me to know about government requiring NGOs to implement their projects. In fact that's the kind of news that I am most interested in these days.'[27]

Mohammed Karim Ansari, a private practitioner at Chaudahawan found the reporting on property disputes unsatisfactory because they never refer to the social causes that underline these disputes.[28] Readers were aware that stringers also collect advertisements and in the perception of some this role constricts their independence as journalists. Chandra Mohan Prasad, the son of a landless labourer, with a recent post graduation degree from Kanpur, was a keen readers of newspapers, with a preference for *Jagran*. He said there was practically nothing reported on wider issues that had widespread socio-economic implications. Reading the newspapers, one did not easily get a feel of the extent to which landlessness continues in this area. That meant there were no obvious references to child labour, bonded labour, agricultural labour as well as to discrimination against *chamars*, *musahars* and *kols*.*

He also rationalised as to why this was so.

> I don't blame reporters and managers of newspapers either. Such news is hardly interesting, especially for the landed and urban social groups who read the newspapers. It also embarrasses the government, which is something local reporters would not want to do. Think about it, reporters depend on BDOs for advertisements. They would also want to be on good terms with the sarkar.[29]

Representatives of the sarkar thought so too. Chandra Shekhar Shukla, referred to the the 'consumerism of the advertisements that propel their newspapers' which was why stringers they do not touch private traders, or for that matter even bureaucrats like himself.

*Chamars and *musahars* are scheduled caste communities, while *kols* are the most important scheduled tribe community in Mirzapur.



'They know they will have to come back to us for their advertisements, which they get a commission for. That perhaps accounts for the events-based negative news that we hear and read.'[30]

Sanju Agrahari, a businessman in Halliya town kept all important newspapers such as *Aj*, *Hindustan*, *Jagran* and *Ujala* at his cloth shop.

> I keep newspapers in my shop simply so that customers can read them. I do not have the time to read any, frankly, I find them most irrelevant. They are full of political news. In fact, that is another reason I keep newspapers here. My brother is an activist of the Samajwadi Party so he needs to know what is happening in the vicinity. These newspapers are for him.[31]

As local news proliferated, its consumers developed a sharp sense of its limitations, and the nexuses that coloured local citizen journalism. The most pointed comment on what local journalism lacked came from a shopkeeper in a village called Markundi in Chitrakoot district of Uttar Pradesh. '*Yeh log bhanda phod nahin karte*', he said of the correspondents of the big Hindi newspapers. *Bhanda phod* was the local term for an exposé. What he was saying was, such reporters never did exposés.

## *Positives of Local News Gathering*

In a village called Sabla in Rajasthan, bisected by the national highway in Dungarpur district, an uncle and nephew, serving the two rivals *Dainik Bhaskar* and *Rajasthan Patrika* between them, demonstrated an awareness of the pitfalls and possibilities of their avocation which transcended the stereotypical, commonly disparaged image of the rural informant. The uncle had, that day, booked eight obituary notices wearing the hat of a circulation and advertising agent. Then he donned his reporter's hat and described succinctly what a village offered by way of blackmail potential, to a canny scribe who might be so inclined.[32]

If a shop was selling medicine without the owner having the mandatory pharmaceutical degree he could be exposed unless he bribed the local stringer. He said he wrote about corruption at the level of the police and the local *patwari* (village land records officer) who

always demanded a bribe to issue a certificate, but didn't quite manage to expose them. The *Patrika* wanted proof to print his allegations, but how was he to provide proof? In that village there were indigenous medicine practitioners running clinics without a license, who needed to be exposed. And the road that ran through it had been routed differently from what was shown on paper. The *patwari* knew where the road should be but the public works department had built it differently to mollify people who would lose their house or land. People had taken compensation to surrender their land for the highway but still did not give up the land.

Down the road and inside a lane lived his nephew, son of a shopkeeper but a lad with well-honed journalistic instincts. Four years ago he has taken on the distribution agency for *Dainik Bhaskar.* Then he started sending stories. With a nose for news and rapidly acquired technological savvy, Dipak Patel demonstrated what a stringer could grow into. He acquired a digital camera, computer and modem, and kept the four-page district supplement supplied with stories and colour photographs as newsy as any city reporter might produce. He covered crime, tree felling, water logging and administrative neglect. He sent photographs of Adivasi children in school, all sporting school uniform trousers supplied by the government, which did not even reach their ankles. When he covered the annual fair held there, he did a feature on the pickpockets who operated there. He modestly described his news sense as God's gift.[33]

On Republic Day the local *tehsildar* or revenue officer bestowed state recognition on 22-year-old Dipak, for service to his district, the first time such an honour had been conferred in that area for journalism. He was still paid the princely sum of Rs 10 per column centimetre.

Thanks to localisation the village-level bureaucracy in the Hindi belt was rapidly becoming *au fait* with the media universe. In Jharkhand, Anil Kumar Singh, the circle officer of Patan in Palamau district was an unusual man who claimed to have been a newspaper reader for 30 years, but now he had more choice than ever before. He subscribed to three newspapers daily, *Hindustan*, *Hindustan Times* and *Prabhat Khabar*, as well as magazines like *India Today*. When he could, he also looked at *Rashtriya Navin Mail*, *Dainik Jagran* and *Ranchi Express*. He not only found them '100 per cent useful' but also valued the fact that you could rebut what appeared in the



press more than you could a sensational report on television. What he missed in his current posting was access to *Jansatta* which did not reach his division. He missed its language, news and coverage.[34]

He found newspapers a useful means of dissemination: 'Like today, 800 aged people have come to collect old age pension; I gave this information in newspaper ... in the village, people read newspaper and tell each other.' And he thought their coverage could be constructive: if the information they gave about people's problems was useful, it was easy to act on them. He had also learned to deal with the damage they could do. During his administrative tenure, he said, he had given rebuttals 17 or 18 times to the newspapers.

Overall, some members of civil society were beginning to acknowledge, a more aware population also helped them catalyse development. Newspapers were now being read for a variety of purposes.

> The additional page on Raisen that is brought out by *Nava Bharat* is useful for people as it gives them information on local issues. Information related to politics, the cost of food grains, news about various rallies and meeting organised in Bhopal and Raisen, all this.[35]

But resident editors of local editions in places as varied as Varanasi, Patna, Raipur and Udaipur, were clear-eyed and sometimes cynical about the stringers who filed for their editions. From the mid-1990s to mid-2000s, as the number of local pages grew, as four-page locally printed colour pull-outs began to be launched from districts, replacing the initial one or half page of news for each district, stringers went from being circulation agents with added responsibilities to something more potent. A resident editor described his stringer as 'not only our representative, he is the editor of that region. He sells 200 copies and he is a stringer for 10 years. No one is a bigger journalist there than him.'[36]

Editors concurred that the more newspapers were read, the more the local stringer mattered in the pocket from where he reported. They quickly developed clout. Sanjeev Kshitij, resident editor of *Amar Ujala* in Varanasi, observed:

> To become a stringer is to become a member of the existing power coterie. Every day you get three requests to move the

existing one. I have 400 stringers. I get 20–30 complaints about them every day. I have to verify if the complainant is an interested party or a genuine case. If there is a caste conflict between Yadavs and Thakurs I have to see what caste my stringer is and check his story accordingly. Caste complications make the appointment of a stringer more complicated than the appointment of an editor.[37]

In Bihar, the resident editor of *Hindustan* would say succinctly, 'I have an army of content providers. It is the content developers who are missing.'[38] And in Raipur the resident editor dismissed them as blackmailers.[39]

A few years down the line, across states, stringers continued to evoke a range of emotions from those with whom they came into contact. Government functionaries, social activists, politicians and resident editors presiding over these armies of stringers—everybody had their own perceptions of them, their abilities and usefulness, their motivations and their predisposition. Moreover, the self-perception of a stringer was often at odds with the perception that the resident editor of the edition he was filing for, had of him. He saw himself as an honest soul simply trying to put his village on the news map, and getting pilloried by local vested interests for exposing corruption and misgovernance.

## *Delocalisation*

After the initial flush of localisation a reaction set in to the indiscriminate flow of miscellaneous news. Newspapers were creating separate pages to cater to what circulation executives believed was a growing demand for local news, but editors were hard put to find news that could be dignified with a place on a news page. *Dainik Jagran*, which used to have three pages for Kumaon, now had nine after Uttaranchal became a state, and in a hill area with limited reporting staff, found filling them a major challenge. In Varanasi, Shashank Shekhar Tripathi, the resident editor of *Hindustan* observed about his own paper, 'We put out 11 editions, do blanket coverage. But there is a side effect to this. We give seven pages of city news, but



there simply is not so much news in a city like this. Substandard items get flashed, as a result.'[40] Moreover, every half an hour an edition was being released and quality control was difficult to achieve.

In a sense he was echoing what a resident editor in his own group, posted in Patna, had said two years earlier. According to Naveen Joshi:

> Stringers file any rubbish, like a cow has overturned an egg cart. The emphasis is on volume. The resident editor comes into office and counts: We have 110 news items, fewer by two compared to *Jagran*. The pressure comes from the circulation department. Carrying anywhere from 25 to 40 stories per page is our USP. Put three lines on page 1, and carry over. If the circulation manager says I cannot sell this paper, the resident editor is gone.[41]

It was a succinct summing up of what local news came to mean: keep it local and voluminous, never mind if it scarcely deserved to be termed as news.

The resident editor of *Hindustan* in Bhagalpur in Bihar described much of what was going into his paper as stuff that did not deserve to be called news.[42] The former said he was also forced to carry substandard news on days advertising fell short. He was beginning to come round to the view that even if people wanted to see their names in print, readers were also beginning to tire of the kind of news they were being fed. After experimenting with separate pages for Banka and Kalgaon, neighbourhood areas of Bhagalpur, this was stopped, said the editor, so that they 'did not have to take rubbish'.

At this point Bhagalpur was putting out seven editions covering 19 districts, six of them in Jharkhand. In four of these districts—Katihar, Purnea, Sahibgunj, Deogarh—there were full-fledged centres, where pages were made. Saharsa sent four pages. A chief subeditor was deployed to vet all the news that went in, both in the locally made pages and those that came from other centres. He screened what stringers sent and would say sagely, 'unless 10 or 15 people have died it is not news for Patna'.[43]

Fifty-three stringers fed the Bhagalpur news centre, 10 of them had the potential to become very good, as the editors put it. These were now told that if the district magistrate and policemen were

doing their job, that was not news. And that some adjectives were not necessary. If a professor was mentioned he did not have to be described as learned. The subjects which figured most frequently were crime, sex and education. Farm-related news was not a priority.

When you saw the problem from the perspective of one of the stringers who fed the Bhagalpur edition it became clear that for him this was a volume game. Amrendra Kumar Tiwari gave four items a day, a 100 a month, out of which he estimated about 70 got published. It was bad enough photocopying all the stories he said, but what was worse was that the paper then paid by cheque and the bank charged for clearance. But he was enamoured of his part-time profession nonetheless, he wanted more training in writing, and wanted to use fewer words and acquire a better style.[44]

At the end of a month-long review the chief subeditor concluded that localisation had led to a drop in standards. The language used had deteriorated and the paper had become crime-based with even small local brawls being reported. Planted news was frequent, and political parties wheedled their way on to news pages with what was often no more than internal party news.[45] He decided the paper would not use news of disputes in which both side were not quoted.

When *Hindustan* began to delocalise at Bhagalpur in 2003 it was the start of a process of introspection by the big multi-edition dailies. By 2005 *Dainik Jagran* in UP and *Dainik Bhaskar* in Jaipur were asserting that the stringers they employed to report were not required to book advertising any more, or function as circulation agents. Complaints of pressure from stringers to give advertisements if a politician wanted coverage-led proprietors to seek to remedy the situation. At *Jagran*, one of them asserted that separate people has begun to be employed to book advertising.[46] And when the paper set up a school of media management in Noida, it began to send out teams to train journalists at its small town and district editions.

By the end of 2005 at least in some areas of the local news universe there was enough introspection to lead to soul-searching in editorial offices about the quality of news being peddled as well as the negative consequences that were becoming apparent in the local edition approach. *Dainik Bhaskar* began to appoint state editors, one for Chandigarh, Punjab and Haryana, and another for Rajasthan. Their job was to focus more closely on editorial quality. The Rajasthan



appointment was spurred partly by the fact that *Rajasthan Patrika* had overtaken *Dainik Bhaskar* in 2004 to become No. 1 again in this state. When N.K. Singh moved from Bhopal to take on this job in mid-2005 he began a major exercise in quality control of district news and professed concern at the consequences of localisation that were becoming manifest. 'For me the issue is the fall in intellectual standards of newspapers because of localisation.' He also acknowledged that *Dainik Bhaskar* had a credibility problem in the state because of the kind of news it had been peddling.[47] There was at last recognition at the top that journalism in these parts had been led by the market with runaway consequences.

In September 2005 if you were to wander into the Jaipur office of *Dainik Bhaskar* at mid-morning you would see in a glass enclosure half a dozen men poring over newspapers at a long table. The paper had created a review cell comprised of senior subeditors to give feedback on the quality of news which had appeared in local editions across the state the previous day. What they would blue pencil was later collated into a power point presentation, prepared edition by edition to be presented at monthly meetings of resident editors. These dealt with missed stories, story structure, factual mistakes, blunders, repetition, and made comparisons with the same day's editions of *Rajasthan Patrika*. Competition first led to degradation of the editorial product, and subsequently to its improvement.

And in Ajmer in 2005 the *Bhaskar* resident editor undertook to try and improve qualitatively, the kind of journalism that came from the 80 plus stringers that this edition had. To take care of the allegations of blackmail frequently made about the professional functioning of stringers, this edition began to insist that only stories where the version of the person being written about had been obtained, would be used. Its resident editor, a young PhD from the city, held up copies of paper, with stories displayed to prominently give the version of the other side in quotes.

> We do not carry any story without the other person's version. We give both sides. If the version is not available I say stop the story. Where possible we give a credit line to the stringer for getting the version. He must also feel he is a part of the paper.[48]

The second thing he did was to start separating the advertising and reporting functions. Till a year back stringers did both, but that was ending. 'Once a stringer gets an advertisement from someone he will not write against them. For Rs 200 he sells the paper.' The practice of having circulation agents as stringers was also ended. And finally the paper began to be choosy about whom it appointed to provide news. 'We do not have shopkeepers any more, we want to weed out such stringers. Nor can I use *panwala*s (people who sell *pan*s) as stringers. He is my brand ambassador. Priority is a retired headmaster.'[49]

This weeding out was accompanied by an effort to strengthen the desk to turn the volume of news to advantage. Here as well as elsewhere localised newspapers were learning to collate inputs from different editions to organise them under issues. 'We can do it if we plan. Drought, water problems, midday meal, rural health system. Do the overall story properly, get the administration version, and display it. Then when we carry the whole thing we get terrific response, and instant action.'[50] Elsewhere too the scattered nature of local news coverage was being reorganised to become more purposeful. Whether it was *Prabhat Khabar* in Ranchi or *Hindustan* in Varanasi, increasingly the local news *fauj* (army) was being deployed to survey the state of governance region wide. As newspaper localisation evolved it began to develop its own strengths and the charge that local news was inconsequential and incapable of having impact began to lose its sting.

## *Conclusion*

As urban and rural local self-governance took root in India, as local communities become more vocal and more conscious of their rights, as local commercial interests came forward to make viable the publications that could engender such a space, the emergence of a local public sphere became inevitable. But once the paper began to reach smaller places, the news network also had to encompass these places, to deliver incident-based, problem-based reporting that would draw readers. As newspapers in Hindi-speaking states expanded their circulation base they invited circulation agents to send news about their areas.



As the amount of space given to local news grew, the local news network also grew beyond the circulation agent to the advertising agent, as well as other interested individuals in the community. When the paper involved was a large and influential one, a household name all over the state, the visiting card conferred status upon the local stringer. He became the local gentry's passport to figuring in the newspaper. An important agent of localisation was thus emerging.

Localisation democratised media access and abolished conventional gatekeepers of news as stringers, and circulation agents competed to forward to the page-making centres all the local handouts they received. In a place like Chhattisgarh, those availing themselves of the proffered hospitality of a newspaper's columns ranged from organisers of local school events to the Naxalites who terrorised government functionaries in these parts.

But when stringers did the reporting themselves, many complexities coloured their output. How well he reported had to do with whether or not he also collected advertising, what his caste and professional background was, why he had come into the profession, and how much gumption he had as an individual. It also had to do with how keen his management was to have him display any journalistic derring-do. It was plain to village level civil society that while newspapers were anxious to be local and to be read, they did not always have a sense of how to use their forum to provide purposeful coverage. Yet their stringers quickly developed clout and began to matter in the pocket from where they reported. They became a member of the existing power coterie, and their caste influenced their reporting.

As localisation evolved, local reporting came under the scanner, and a process of delocalisation was initiated so that newspapers stopped creating separate pages for localities which simply did not generate that much news. Basic news ethics was revived, planted stories eliminated, and circulation, reporting and advertising functions separated. Once there was recognition at the top that journalism in these parts had been led by the market with runaway consequences, newspapers moved to restore their own credibility. They became watchful of whom they appointed as stringers, and began to insist on basic reporting ethics being adhered to.

With the cleaning up and professionalising of local news collection, its advantages became evident to those who participated in the local public sphere. Those working in the training of panchayats in

rural areas sensed the change newspapers were bringing about was in the nature of politics. They brought transparency in the dynamics of political parties with the reporting they did. The army of local stringers was also being deployed to survey the state of governance regionwide. As newspaper localisation evolved it began to develop its own strengths and the charge that local news was inconsequential and incapable of having impact began to lose its sting.

## Notes

1. Yadvesh, general manager *Hindustan*, interviewed by author, Varanasi, 15 March 2005.
2. 'Mirzapur: Micro Media, Minimal Impact', 29 July 2003. http://www.thehoot.org/story.asp?storyid=Web61113226hoot52519%20PM865&pn=1&section=S13.
3. Rajeev Harsh, interviewed by author, Udaipur, 2 December 2004.
4. Babulal Sharma, interviewed by author, Jaipur, January–February 2002.
5. Satish Shukla, bureau chief and subeditor, *Dainik Jagran*, interviewed by Indrajit Roy, Nautanhwa, Gorakhpur, 20 June 2003.
6. Author's observation, Jagdalpur, May 2002.
7. Sevanti Ninan, 'The Naxals and the Press'. http://www.thehoot.org/story.asp?storyid=webhoothootL1K0914023&pn=1 (accessed 29 May 2005).
8. Vastupal Jain, Paras News Agency, interview with author, Ganoda, 1 December 2004.
9. Ramesh Chandra Jain, interviewed by author, Kothda, 28 November 2004.
10. Mohammad Shahid, interviewed by author, Kothda, 28 November 2004.
11. Y.C. Agarwal, interview with author, Patna, 3 June 2003.
12. Shailendra Dixit and Anand Tripathi, *Dainik Jagran*, interview with author, Patna, 4 June 2003.
13. R.N. Jayaswal, interviewed by Indrajit Roy, Mirzapur, 13 June 2003.
14. Ram Murthy Pandey, Halliya, interviewed by Indrajit Roy, Mirzapur, 14 June 2003.
15. Ibid.
16. Rajiv Ojha, stringer, *Aj*, interviewed by Indrajit Roy, Chunar (Mirzapur), 15 June 2003.
17. Shashi Bhushan Dubey, stringer, *Aj*, interviewed by Indrajit Roy, Lalganj (Mirzapur), 14 June 2003.



18. Stringer for *Rashtriya Sahara* who pleaded for anonymity, interviewed by Indrajit Roy, Sonauli, Maharajganj, 20 June 2003.
19. Ibid.
20. Siddhanath Singh, stringer, *Jagran*, Kalhat Bazaar (Mirzapur), 15 June 2003.
21. Gyaneshwar Tiwari, Block Development Officer, interviewed by Indrajit Roy at Pahadi (Mirzapur), 13 June 2003.
22. Shiv Kedar Singh, former block *pramukh*, Narayanpur (Mirzapur), interviewed by Indrajit Roy, 15 June 2003.
23. Chandra Shekhar Shukla, Block Development Officer, interviewed by Indrajit Roy, Rajgarh (Mirzapur), 13 June 2003.
24. Santosh Srivastav, interviewed by Indrajit Roy, Mirzapur, 13 June 2003.
25. Shamshed Khan, interviewed by Indrajit Roy, Mirzapur, 15 June 2003.
26. Shashank Shekhar Tripathi, interviewed by author, Varanasi, 15 March 2005.
27. Tejbal Chaturvedi, interviewed by Indrajit Roy, Mirzapur, 14 June 2003.
28. Mohammed Karim Ansari of Chaudahawan, interviewed by Indrajit Roy, Mirzapur, 14 June 2003.
29. Chandra Mohan Prasad, interviewed by Indrajit Roy, Devripurab, 14 June 2003.
30. Chandra Shekhar Shukla, Block Development Officer, interviewed by Indrajit Roy, Rajgarh (Mirzapur), 13 June 2003.
31. Sanju Agrahari, businessman, interviewed by Indrajit Roy, Halliya town (Mirzapur), 14 June 2003.
32. Tulsi Ram Patel, interviewed by author, Sabla, Dungarpur, 1 December 2004.
33. Dipak Patel, interviewed by author, Sabla, Dungarpur, 1 December 2004.
34. Anil Kumar Singh, interviewed by Vasavi, Patan, 24 April 2003.
35. Sudeepa, programme coordinator with Aarambh, interviewed by Sushmita Malaviya, Raisen, 3 April 2004.
36. Shashank Shekhar Tripathi, interviewed by author, Varanasi, 15 March 2005.
37. Sanjeev Kshitij, resident editor, *Amar Ujala*, Varanasi, interviewed by author, 17 March 2005.
38. Naveen Joshi, resident editor, *Hindustan*, interview with author, Patna, 1 June 2003.
39. Anal Shukla, resident editor, *Nava Bharat*, interviewed by author, Raipur, May 2002.
40. Shashank Shekhar Tripathi, interviewed by author, Varanasi, 15 March 2005.
41. Naveen Joshi, resident editor, *Hindustan*, interviewed by author, Patna, 2 June 2003.

42. Vijay Bhaskar, resident editor, *Hindustan*, interviewed by author, Bhagalpur, 5 June 2003.
43. Praveen Baghi, *Hindustan*, interviewed by author, Bhagalpur, 6 June 2003.
44. Amrendra Kumar Tiwari, stringer, *Hindustan*, interviewed by author, Bhagalpur, 6 June 2003.
45. Praveen Baghi, *Hindustan*, interviewed by author, Bhagalpur, 6 June 2003.
46. Mahendra Mohan and Sanjay Gupta, interviewed by author, Noida, 2 September 2005.
47. N.K. Singh, state editor, *Dainik Bhaskar*, interviewed by author, 16–17 September 2005.
48. Indu Shekhar Pancholi, resident editor, *Dainik Bhaskar*, interviewed by author, 15 September 2005.
49. Ibid.
50. Ibid.

# 6

# The Universe of Local News

*'We do not need to go hunting for news,*
*news finds its way to the paper.'*

On 10 June 2002 the Palamu edition of *Prabhat Khabar* reported that a herd of 12 wild elephants was causing havoc in villages in the Gopikandar division. It listed village by village the number of houses that had been destroyed. Two days later on 12 June there was another story. For a single column-story it was remarkably vivid. Fear of elephants was driving people to sleep in their fields, there was no help as yet from the government; forest officials were doing nothing. '*Van vibhag ke pad adhikariyon haath pe haath ghare baithe the*' ('the employees of the forest department were sitting at home'). Enraged tribals had, the previous day, beaten up a forest guard in the Dungarpur forest office. Now they were planning to block the Dungarpur–Dumka–Pakud road to draw attention to their plight.

The same day there was a background piece on the issue across four columns: '*Junglee hathiyon ke bekabu uthpat pe prashasan ka nazar nahin*' (the administration is not tracking the unrestrained destruction caused by wild elephants). It recalled earlier incidents in the year, with 17 people killed. For two years, said the story, elephants had created havoc in Palamu, destroying property, making people spend nights outside their houses in fear, until it became a political issue. Earlier in the year Chief Minister Babulal Marandi came to Dumka to distribute compensation among affected families.

When 11 people were killed in one night in January (*kuchal kar maar dala*—trampled to death) it led to statewide mayhem. A decision was taken to kill the elephants and a shooter was requisitioned, but nobody could decide who should give the orders to kill. The state of