10

The Development Discourse

'When a government official retires,
he becomes civil society.'

> More newspapers are now being read by ordinary people in small towns and villages, where the written word and its power has been a weapon of the privileged. However, the growing avid readership is now caught, between the desire to seek information and news beyond their immediate confines, and the limited often narrow interpretation of facts, passed off as the truth itself. The alternatives offered in the mainstream Hindi press also miserably fail to reflect the plurality of opinion and the depth of democratic debate that actually exists in the country. As a result, most often only one point of view reflecting the dominant rural middle class positions is presented.[1]

Activist Aruna Roy of the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) was essentially saying in the above extract that the newsprint-enabled local public sphere which was being created in small town and rural India did not adequately reflect the grassroots discourse, rather it created its own shallow priorities. She was speaking on the subject of public discourse in contemporary India to graduating journalism students. Habermas emphasized the role of the public sphere as a way for civil society to articulate its interests. This chapter explores the implications of newspaper localisation for the development agendas of civil society and the state, and for the nature of the development discourse that was emerging in India's districts and in the regional press.

Development in 21st India century was no longer primarily the province of the state machinery which ran local and state governments and controlled administrative budgets. The last quarter of the

20th century had seen the rise and enormous growth of civil society in India as agents of governance, campaigners, watchdogs. Their presence at the district and village level was visible, some categories of government funds were disbursed through them, and their role in deepening democracy and strengthening governance was constantly being assessed. The term civil society is used to encompass non-governmental organisations, members of panchayats, new social groups that have entered the political arena, activists who began to form broad-based social movements, trade unions, new political categories such as scheduled castes, women and environmentalists.

When newspapers began to localise one of the issues which emerged had to do with how this level of media served the agenda of development workers and social activists. And when three new states of the Indian Union were created out of Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, and there was a rush of media to the new state capitals, the question that arose was about the manner in which the new entrants might be able to serve the development agendas of the new state.

Civil society actors at the district level were not indifferent to newspaper localisation. Just as at the national level the non-governmental sector expects media support for its various struggles, so also local activists and social workers look for force multipliers while tackling intractable rural problems. In terms of increasing the volume of coverage, therefore, localisation was a godsend. Who would have expected the media to be present in strength at the district level? With competition growing there were in some places as many as three newspapers offering extremely localised coverage.

Their pages were accessible to village-level catalysts who said they now had plenty of space to highlight their issues (Figure 10.1).[2] Even if the local media discourse had severe limitations, issues were being raised and debated. For those working in a 'rights' mode, it helped to generate reaction and pressure. The 'come and give your news' policy of district editions with 90 per cent such news being printed made it possible for a variety of petitions and press releases to find their way into the newspaper. Several activists made the point that because many kinds of small news found their way into these local editions and circulated in the area, local newspapers began to serve as an important conduit of information for development agents at the village level.

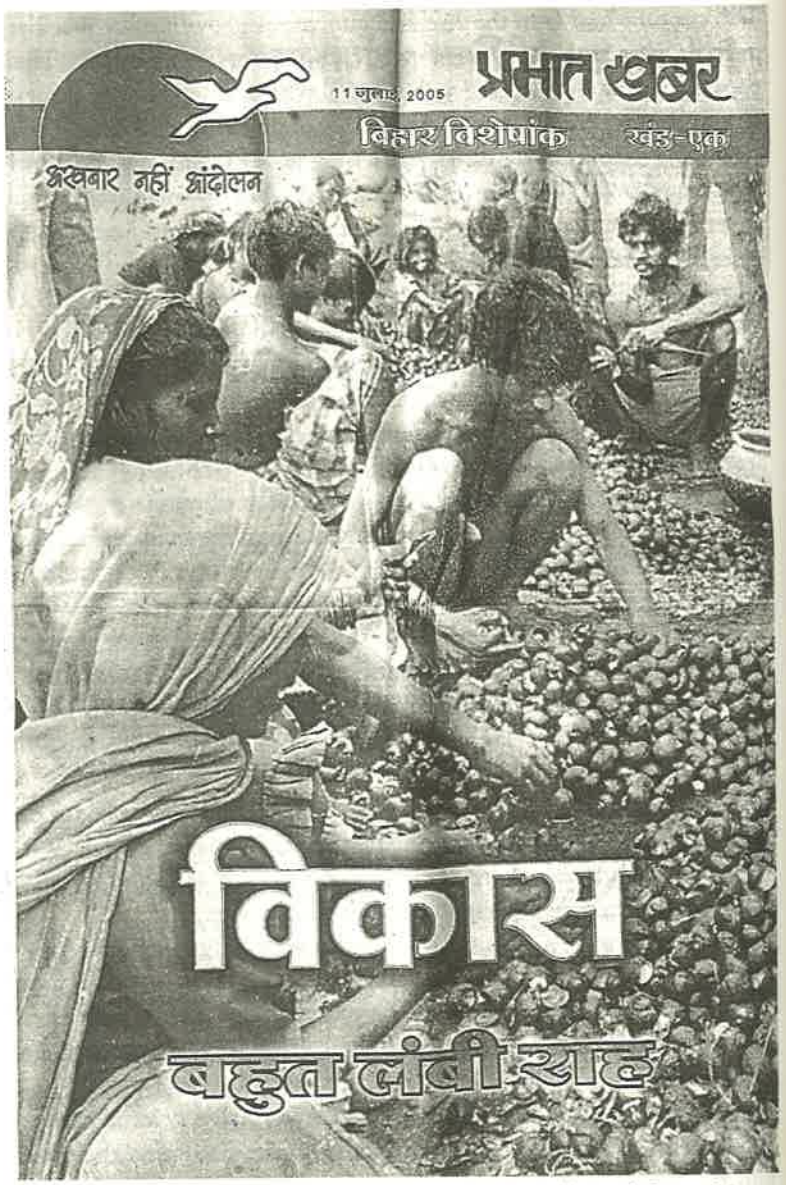

FIGURE 10.1 *Vikas* (development), is the title of *Prabhat Khabar*'s 84-page special edition on Bihar, 11 July 2005—an exhaustive survey over seven sections of Bihar's backwardness and the development issues confronting the state

Said, Suresh Diwan of the Gramin Sevak Samiti in Hoshangabad 'The advantage for our organisation has been that we have been getting news about farmers, small and marginal farmers, women, *Adivasi*s, *panchayat*s, *sarpanch*s and *panch*s. We have also publicly raised issues regarding the above at the regional level, the state level and the all India level.'[3] For Rajendra Sail of the Indian Social Action Forum the benefit was that political, social and women-related news was documented thanks to these newspapers.[4] Another development worker said:

> We benefit. People like to read about social developments in their region. For example, when I was working in Sehore a few years ago, a woman sarpanch got a very big pond deepened in her village. Her endeavour was highlighted in a very positive manner by the media. Because of this, people in surrounding areas were inspired to follow her example.[5]

And at a round table at Seva Mandir in Udaipur the point was made that if you paid attention to the pattern emerging from scattered little items, it was here that you could spot the early indications of a drought building up.[6]

If the hospitable local pages were useful for civil society to find out what was going on, it was also useful for putting out information on what concerned them. Gopal Rati of Eklavya said that it had it had become a tradition that if you gave something in writing to these newspapers it appeared—sometimes word for word.[7] He and others like him said they preferred it that way because whenever a reporter or stringer came to do the reporting, it resulted in a distortion of news.

Also, aside from the documentation they provided, the considered view of village-level civil society was that while newspapers were anxious to be local and to be read, they had no sense of how to use their forum to provide purposeful coverage. If the big city press was obsessed with celebrities, the rural press was obsessed with crime, usually petty crime, which found an inordinate amount of space in the local pages. Your cause might get space, but not in a sufficiently sustained measure to exert pressure on the administration. 'In 2002, we organised a hunger strike to protest power cuts in the State. It made news only on the first day and after that newspapers forgot that we were still on fast.'[8]

But for those working in the training of panchayats in rural areas of Betul in Madhya Pradesh, and Bastar and Dhantewada in neighbouring Chhattisgarh, it was apparent that the change newspapers were bringing about was in the nature of politics.

> They brought transparency in the dynamics of political parties, discussion on why parties follow a certain policy. In Chhattisgarh, it has been a trend for newspapers to carry interviews with Naxalites and analysis about them prior to elections. It has been felt that the Congress party has always assumed that the party's victory depended on fear that would be created by the Naxal activities. In its own way the *Highway Channel* boldly focused on this issue to bring to light several nexus that are at work behind these tactics.[9]

Local news, especially news about block politics, panchayat politics and politics of panchayat leaders, was read with great interest by people, and because of increased awareness village-level dynamics have changed. 'This is reflected in the interaction in the Gram Sabha too especially in the kind of questions that people have begun to ask. Also people who read and hear things from other people bring these up at the discussions and they often get frustrated when what they have heard is not realized at the Gram Sabha.'[10]

Though it was useful conduit for information, the local media did not seem very well equipped to report on social problems and the agenda of rural activism. Organisations or individuals working at the district level frequently differentiated between local and national media, and learned to recognise the limits of the effectiveness of each.

Aruna Roy's Right to Information (RTI) movement has been propelled forward in in no small measure by the media support it has received—local, regional and national. She was quick to acknowledge that the relationship has been both enriching and problematic.

> It is not as if everything is rosy. But from the first public hearing we had in 1994 December, the press has come to us without much reluctance. We are very far away, nevertheless people have come. But we have also worked at communicating with the press at a level at which we have laid ourselves open to questions, answered questions, have been ready to discuss positions on which we do not agree, even argue sometimes. And accepted that the relationship with the press is important.[11]

And in some ways the relationship over the last few decades has become increasingly problematic. NGOs have grown in numbers and diversified, and a lot of polarisation has taken place. Government officers have taken to opening up NGOs in the manner of shops, just before retirement. As an older journalist in Jaipur said wryly, when a government official retires he becomes civil society. Rajendra Singh, a Magsaysay Award winner in Rajasthan observed:

> Many voluntary organisations have become corporatised, hiring professionals and paying them decent salaries, whereas much of the media remains fossilised in its notion of what a voluntary agency should behave and look like. The sympathy that the media had for NGOs is fading. They have preconceived notions about NGOs. That we should be poorly clad, eat only once a day. We are expected to conform to those notions.[12]

The MKSS recognised that correspondents had their limitations and learned to work within those, interacting with a wide span of media. They developed a relationship with Ramprasad Kumawat who edited a daily newspaper called *Nirantar* in Beawar.

> We have interacted with all the other local newspapers as well, but with him in particular because he edits and prints his own newspaper. And his differences, his support, his continuing interest in the issue has been quite remarkable. He's got a very good mind. And that mind has been able to critique us as well as report on us. He has been a part of raising pubic awareness about many issues in Beawar.[13]

This group also resisted the tendency of many activists to seek support only from those of their own ideological persuasion. They interacted with the local representative of the *Rajasthan Patrika* whose political affiliation was to the RSS. 'We've argued with him on our various political issues. Nevertheless he has reported on us. The thing is, you must enter into a debate ... a public debate with the

people with whom you do not agree.'[14] In Jaipur senior journalists asserted that they supported Roy and the movement she leads because they saw her as intelligent, honest and committed. That was not the case with every individual social worker or voluntary agency or movement leader.[15] Local journalists would frequently cite reasons why non-governmental organisations should be treated with at least some of the scepticism usually reserved for government and politicians. At the field level this related to substantial grants given to such bodies by government agencies and their visible utilisation. Grants were made by the Government's Ministry of Environment to NGOs to implement awareness-generation projects on environment.

> NGOs form *pariyavaran gosthi*s (environmental groups) at the community-level, but we see no impact of these. On World Environment Day, 365 such *gosthi*s (interactive sessions) were organized on the outskirts of Gorakhpur itself. But you talk to people about the environment and sustainable development, and you will find the same apathy.[16]

This journalist from *Jagran* had more examples to give. 'At least 56 NGOs received grants from a Delhi-based organisation to promote communal harmony. On 2 March communal rioting broke out in this city over something as silly as Pakistan's defeat in the Indo-Pak cricket match. Where were these NGOs then?' He had a relatively straightforward description of how he thought the press must function at the grassroots.

> Development reporting for us journalists includes analysing how development projects and welfare schemes contribute to progress of the people. Where we find loopholes we attempt to expose these so that concerned parties can perform their respective roles better. We are not here to demonstrate one-upmanship.[17]

To some within civil society the above was precisely the problem with media representation of the non-governmental sector: the media has no time or interest or categories by which they could look at something more complex than success stories or disaster stories, or

individuals who they labelled as good or useless or corrupt. Even national newspapers like *The Hindu* had not learned to problematise sufficiently issues involved in discussing development initiatives or community organising. As long as it was led by Aruna Roy the assessment of the right to information movement she led was non-judgemental. The instrument that the MKSS devised to crystallise the RTI movement was *jan sunvai*s (public hearings) and these got enormous media play. But how often did journalists go back to see how many people were utilising the right, and how much was continuing to change at the ground level? Did the movement acquire a momentum of its own separate from the leadership Roy and others provided?[18]

What it boiled down to, thought Ajay S. Mehta, executive director of the National Foundation for India which funded development initiatives, was a matter of the quality of media discourse. While at the local level it might reflect the limitations of the untrained stringers who did the reporting, at the national level too it remained stuck on facile assumptions: such as tribals as victim and governments as villains. What of one organisation's experience with tribal communities which showed that they prefered to encroach rather than be given forest land to manage? (Khetan 2004) There was a complexity in issues such as these unfolding in contemporary India which did not emerge in media discourses. The fourth estate had no recognition of the texture of many such problems. Journalists had not learned to figure out nuanced ways to evaluate the NGO sector, or the problems they were tackling. In the name of being critical they would trash. What was needed, though, was writing that was not pejorative, but served as a corrective.[19] This was the reflection of an observer at the grant-making level, removed from the practicalities of running a movement or a project. These who did so, even when they were perceptive individuals, often demanded a little more than publicity for their cause.

Developing journalist networks and using them to highlight problems was a skill social workers and activists everywhere were learning to acquire. In Udaipur an activist would profer clippings of the number of stories on the backward block of Kothda that he had helped engender. His local workers would ring him up if an atrocity

concerning Advasis, or a starvation death occurred, and he would relay the news to a journalist who would then rush there.[20] Media, he said, was crucial to changing the status of a place like Kothda. At the same it became clear from his accounts of how the delivery system did not respond even after the district magistrate issued orders in response to a media report, that media exposes had their limitations.

Development Reporting in the New States

The media is always relevant in a democracy, but its role varies according to the circumstances in the region where it operates. When there is an agitation for the creation of a new state the media will play a role, the nature of that role will change substantially once a state is formed. The emergence of three new states in the Indian Union in November 2000 created a whole new dynamics for the media. Chhattisgarh was carved out of Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand from Bihar and Uttaranchal from Uttar Pradesh. The press had played a role in the movements which preceded the birth of these states. There were specific emotive issues such as forest land ownership in Jharkhand, and environment, water and employment in Uttaranchal, which had shaped the public debate on the agitation for a new state. Once the states were formed, however, a media race began which was quickly overtaken by economic imperatives: the need to capitalise on the investment and expansion opportunities that emerged.

The new states came into existence with new budgets, the economy of the region got a boost, investors came flocking in, with advertising budgets to disburse. Newspapers were drawn to the new state capitals (Figure 10.2). Before the second anniversary of statehood dawned the number of newspapers publishing from Chhattisgarh had doubled from three to six. Two out of the three new ones were national dailies, *Hindustan Times* and *Jansatta*, and the third was *Hari Bhoomi*.[21] Where media owners were concerned all expansion was for a combination of clout , business reach and circulation revenue. The owners of *Jansatta* in Raipur were local businessmen who acquired the franchise to publish the paper from there. Like the owners of *Hari Bhoomi* (a Haryana newspaper owned by a political family) they were looking for a source of influence. In the new state of Chhattisgarh the owners

FIGURE 10.2 *Nava Bharat*'s special issue on the first anniversary of the creation of Chhattisgarh, 1 November 2001

of *Hari Bhoomi* owned land, coal washeries and a coal transportation business. It was an old principle of regional media expansion in India: when you have major economic interests to nurture or safeguard, having a newspaper helps.[22]

In commenting on the media boom in Chhattisgarh less than two years after the state came into existence, the then Chief Minister Ajit Jogi would say that the purpose of some of the new entrants such as *Hari Bhoomi* and the backers of the franchise edition of *Jansatta* was to earn respectability, after having earned money. 'If he was invited to a function earlier he would be seated at the rear, now he is in the first few rows. It is not so much to protect their business as to earn social status.'[23]

Once the new state capitals acquired state legislatures, they generated more political news than before. Where being a journalist in Raipur had meant being in the *mofussil* press, now newspapers were delighted to be publishing from the capital city. They also softened their coverage in the process. Though two years down the line he would become embroiled in controversy and be brought into disrepute by a national newspaper's sting, in 2002 Ajit Jogi had no complaints about the state's journalists. 'As I unfold my agenda they understand it,' he said expansively, adding that newspapers were playing a very positive role in building the new state's identity. Lalit Surjan, the editor of *Deshbandhu*, published from Raipur, was fulsome in his praise for the dynamism of the chief minister. The leader of the Opposition meanwhile was asserting that journalists were doing the state a disservice by not following up on issues raised by the Opposition in the state assembly.[24]

All three states saw rapid newspaper expansion through localisation. These were above-average states, in terms of literacy, and the increase in rural literacy made it possible to carve out a sustainable circulation base in the districts. Localisation quickly became the defining characteristic of the media in these new states.

Uttaranchal makes a good case study of how the media in the region conducted itself, before and after the state's formation, and to what extent it defined for itself what its role should be. It was created by carving out the hill regions of Uttar Pradesh into a separate state. Girish Ranjan Tiwari, the bureau chief of *Amar Ujala*, based in Nainital for the last 10 years, felt that the media in fact over-reached itself in hyping up the movement. 'In 1994, the movement for Uttarakhand was being run by the newspapers.'[25]

A senior bureaucrat contested the view that journalists were running the movement. The media had no role in it except to report it, he said.[26] But the first chief minister of Uttaranchal, Nityanand Swami, makes the point that the way they reported it was to give importance to every individual who took part in the agitation. 'One thing these two papers [*Dainik Jagran* and *Amar Ujala*] have done is taken care of agitations. Mention name of every lady and gent in the procession. Everybody's name they will write. Therefore these papers are popular.' Rajiv Lochan Sah, hotelier–journalist–activist, publisher of the fortnightly *Nainital Samachar*, took the point further by

asserting that during the agitation for the new state the papers were mechanically covering rallies, making sure that the names of leaders appeared in print. But there was not enough attempt to highlight the issues for which the new state had become so necessary.[27]

Once the state was created, the media was no longer required to hype the demand for a separate state. It was required to pay a rather vital role in defining the agenda for the development of the state, highlighting long-neglected areas of activity, penetrating the rural hinterland and reporting tirelessly. But what it did instead was to seize commercial opportunity, expand editions to increase circulation, and make a pitch for the increased flow of advertising into the state. Subsequently this meant publishing 'given' news such as handouts from various parties with alacrity, looking for small scoops to provide excitement at the local level, keeping a hawk's eye on the new government, in a narrow rather than broad sense, and striving for conventional journalistic norms such as closing the edition late to accommodate the latest news. It deployed taxis to the furthest corners of the state to bring people newspapers at their doorstep. It was for instance, a point of pride with *Amar Ujala* that it was able to carry the news of the two major earthquakes that have occurred in this region, in the morning paper, though they occurred after midnight. And that the paper's copies reach pilgrims in Rishikesh and all along the pilgrim route before they start their trek at dawn.

Both *AmarUjala* and *Dainik Jagran* opened up employment opportunities in Uttaranchal by appointing a correspondent for every single district headquarter, and a stringer at the *tehsil* level. They had big networks and enough space to fill, but these tended to generate miscellaneous local news. *Dainik Jagran*, which used to have three pages for Kumaon increased them to nine. And much the same happened between *Prabhat Khabar* and *Hindustan* in Jharkhand, and between *Nava Bharat* and *Dainik Bhaskar* in Chhattisgarh. Competitiveness led to new editions opening up, penetrating the hinterland, and increasing circulation. *Jagran* doubled the number of staff it had in the region which became Uttaranchal; *Nava Bharat* similarly doubled the staff it had in Bastar.

The major allegations that civil society in Uttaranchal made about the role of the media after the state's formation was that it was clueless about how to be constructive: it did not sense major issues and

then do grassroots as well as policy reporting on them. The head of the Rural Litigation Entitlement Kendra in Dehradun cited an example of what he considered gross incompetence on the part of the press in the state. Panchayat elections were due in 2001, at the end of the five-year term. When the five-year period was ending the new government brought an ordinance to extend the term of the panchayats by six months. Then it brought a second ordinance which amazingly, the press in the region never got to hear of and never reported. So nobody in the state knew it had been passed. Not a single journalist knew of the second ordinance, he said.

In both Jharkhand and Uttaranchal civil society groups and activists were discovering that between increased attention to political news emanating from the capital cities and small local news, issues that could focus on the region's development fall by the wayside. Civil society in Uttaranchal maintained that the role of the media after the state's formation fell far short of any purposeful agenda setting. It did not sense major issues, and then do grassroots or policy reporting on them. It was inclined to report the promises made by a political representative on tour, but not whether these were fulfilled.[28] It had no concept of reporting on human rights, or women's rights, or of seeing the latter in context. Environmental issues affect the quality of life for women in the hills but this was beyond the ken of the largely male force of stringers. Other women's issues in the hills such as violence against women, or the struggle for prohibition, eluded media understanding.[29]

There were many reasons why the media was not able to play a pivotal role. One was that news initiatives and priorities did not originate in the hills. Correspondents would remain correspondents all their lives, not graduate to writing edits or to positions of control in headquarters—in fact, they wouldn't want to, as they regard with horror the heat and dust of the plains. They would continue to report the statements of politicians with little discernment. The press was not fulfilling the challenge of playing a genuinely important role as catalyst, because its footsoldiers were extremely limited in their understanding of major issues.

A secretary in the state government, a bureaucrat respected for his integrity and commitment, explained with considerable exasperation why he had no use for local journalists in his state. 'They have only one mantra, to criticise, to be negative, to damn.' It was not their job,

he said, to attempt to understand issues and project them, adding that a good example of this is how they function in the newly created states. 'The media will say, *naya state ban gaya, kuch nahi ho raha hai* [A new state has been formed, but nothing is happening]. So? Milk and honey will flow?' He thought that it was foolish to expect dramatic change without understanding the processes required. Did bureaucrats explain the issues sufficiently to journalists?

> If I am to spend time educating them I have to know that it is worth it. It isn't. They only want to write stories such as 'officers misusing air conditioners'. Not enough time is spent on a subject to understand it. Such local, itsy-bitsy reporting does not serve any purpose. I have media savvy colleagues but I prefer to stay away from the *Dainik Jagran* type of journalist.[30]

Another bureaucrat, the state's finance secretary, said that a realistic time frame in which change could be expected to be discernable in a newly created state was perhaps five years. 'It takes one year just to settle down. In one to one-and-a-half years [since the state's formation in November 2000] enough has been done. Five years is one plan period, that is a realistic period in which to judge performance.' A local journalist was unlikely to be moved by that reasoning. He was looking for 'here and now' stories to fill his local pages, to entertain and provoke his readers with. The allegation that the media is only there to be negative is borne out by a pithy statement that the seniormost journalist of *Amar Ujala* made in Dehradun about the tenor of reporting on governance: '*khinchai to karni hai*' (we have to find fault, after all), he said.[31]

Conclusion

Localisation affected the development discourse in the states of the Hindi belt. Because many kinds of small news found their way into these local editions and circulated in the area, local newspapers began to serve as an important conduit of information for development agents at the village level. Those working in the training of panchayats in rural areas sensed that 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. Moreover developing journalist networks and using them to highlight problems was a skill social workers and activists everywhere were learning to acquire.

However, though the local pages created an expanded forum, development workers felt that the media was clueless about how to be constructive. It did not sense major issues and then do grassroots as well as policy reporting on them. While at the local level the reporting might reflect the limitations of the untrained stringers who did the reporting, at the national level too it remained stuck on facile assumptions.

In the new states media outlets burgeoned, but an army of journalists looking for 'here and now' stories to fill its pages with, was not always able to do justice to the development agenda emerging in each of these states.

Notes

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4. Rajendra Sail, organising secretary, Indian Social Action Forum, interviewed by Vasavi, Raipur, 18 February 2004.
5. Manish Mehra at Nitya, interviewed by Sushmita Malaviya, Hoshangabad, 25 March 2004.
6. Discussion at Seva Mandir, Rajasthan, 2 December 2004.
7. Gopal Rati, Eklavya, interviewed by Sushmita Malaviya, Pipariya, 25 March 2004.
8. Ibid.
9. Amitabh Singh, Debate, interviewed by Sushmita Malaviya, Bhopal, 31 January 2004.
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11. Aruna Roy, MKSS, quoted in Sevanti Ninan, 'NGOs and the Local Press', www.thehoot.org, http://www.thehoot.org/story.asp?section=&lang=L1&storyid=w2khootL1k0613023&pn=1 (accessed 18 June 2005).

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22. Sevanti Ninan, 'Media thrives in Chhattisgarh—or does it?', thehoot.org, posted 24 May 2002.
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