

## The Indian press : a status report

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**The Indian Press : A Status Report**

**By**

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[Judged by most yardsticks, the nineteen-month state of Emergency which was declared on 25th June 1975 was a long night for most of the institutions that lend substance to India's claim to be the world's largest democracy. [During that interregnum, the fundamental rights of citizens which guarantee the so-called seven freedoms of speech, assembly, right to travel to and reside in any part of the country, the right to earn a living, the right to property, to form unions etc. were suspended and leaders of the opposition arrested and imprisoned. Fortunately the Emergency was lifted on 5th January 1977, elections were called and the rest is recent history.

[But though for most of the institutions which constitute the pillars of the Indian political system [Parliament, the judiciary, the all India services and the press, the Emergency was a traumatic period, in retrospect it is clear that one institution that emerged stronger after the nineteen-month ordeal is the Indian press. [The post-Emergency period ushered in the era of the magazine boom which is still with us in India and which has had a tremendous stimulant effect on the coming of age of the Indian press.

[The major daily newspapers in India have been around for over a century and are based on the models of the Statesman and the Times of India in the English language press, and on the model of the Ananda Bazar Patrika in the so-called language press. [And it would be substantially true to say that prior to 1977, the English language newspapers were written by westernised intellectuals for western intellectuals. Indian language dailies on the other hand tended to be more down-to-earth and more market-oriented but were -- and are -- handicapped by geographically restricted markets which also

offer the disadvantage of relatively poor purchasing power which restricts the flow of advertising.

The flowering of the post-Emergency magazine boom has shaken up the somnolent world of the dailies. Suddenly newspaper layouts, quality of printing and news, rather than editorial analyses, have assumed an urgent importance while at the same time government interference — of which more later — has tended to squeeze profit margins in the newspaper publishing industry.

There are many magazines that have appeared ~~on scene~~ during the last decade. Yet of these, a handful <sup>has</sup> ~~have~~ revolutionised the Indian media scene. Perhaps the first among these is India Today which currently has a circulation estimated by me at 1 lakh per fortnight and a massive gross advertising revenue estimated at Rs. 9 lakhs per issue. Unoriginal in concept and unabashedly designed on the <sup>model of</sup> ~~Time, model~~ the magazine was launched as a glossy during the Emergency with the active support of the late Sanjay Gandhi — the architect of the Emergency — to project the repressive new India in a favourable light abroad.

While the fortnightly uneasily went through its teething troubles during the Emergency, to its credit it broke free of its shackles with a brilliant and graphic expose of the use of torture by the police and the state apparatus in general during the Emergency. Since then India Today has not looked back and its contribution to Indian journalism is the magazine's unparalleled emphasis (i.e. in India) on production values particularly its emphasis on photographs, layout and on-the-spot reactive reportage of which the daily press is only slowly getting the hang.

Whoever said that whatever is true of India, the opposite is equally true, must be commended for his or her perception. The very qualities which have made India Today an unprecedented success in Indian journalism are negated by a somewhat shabby,

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left-of-centre weekly emanating from Calcutta which in the seven years it has been in existence has emerged as India's largest selling magazine: Sunday. [A novel marketing concept, in that its primary objective was to build up a mass circulation by subsidising the reader who had to pay a mere Re. 1 for the weekly when it was launched, Sunday's strategy was to make up the loss sustained on account of the difference between cost of production and market price by attracting advertising on the strength of its circulation. [This is obviously a long haul process and only relatively recently has Sunday begun to show a profit.

[The emergence of Sunday as the country's most widely read weekly — it overtook the 100-year-old Illustrated Weekly of India last year— deserves further analysis for the tremendous impact that the magazine has made on Indian journalism. [The qualities that it lacks in terms of gloss, layout and visual appeal it makes up <sup>for</sup> by passion and righteous anger at the manner in which democratic institutions and processes are being subverted by the very establishment figures who are employed to uphold and protect <sup>c</sup> them. Unlike India Today, Sunday does not set much store on objectivity, though like the fortnightly, it places a great emphasis on human interest on-the-spot reporting which has come as a boon to an information hungry public, fed for three decades on a bland diet of news agency reports and the outpourings of editorial pundits who exhibit all the symptoms of analysis paralysis. [The secret of Sunday's success spearheaded by its young editor, M.J. Akbar, is that it takes a strong and often emotional stand on major issues— presenting a packaged opinion— and the reader loves it.

[ But while India Today and Sunday are essentially political reportage magazines, at the other end of the journalistic



political spectrum in the seventies <sup>e</sup> there emerged a magazine of little political but profound sociological significance which has made a tremendous impact on the collective sub-conscious of the Indian fourth estate: Stardust. [A monthly film journal published by Nari Hira, an entrepreneur with no publishing experience, Stardust under its first editor Shobha Khilachand evolved a new genre of Indian writing in English which has encouraged Indian journalism to break out of the self-imposed strait-jacket of home countries English-- or what is perceived to be home countries English-- to communicate in an indigenous English. [Stardust's refreshingly uninhibited Indian English struck a responsive chord in the post-Independence generation in particular. Suddenly in the seventies, getting the message across has become more important than the literary flourishes that were hitherto more important than the message itself.

227. [An as a last example of the flowering of magazine journalism which has made a profound impact on Indian journalism permit me-- even at the risk of being accused of immodesty-- to cite the instance of the growth of the Indian business magazines which have introduced the era of specialised interest journalism in India. [Until Business-India hit the newsstands in March 1978, business reporting tended to be a minor part of the product-mix of the mainline dailies, and was indifferently reported in the magazines. This despite the fact that in terms of gross value of industrial output in the world [Until Business India and later Businessworld changed the rules of the game, very little was known about the firms and the individuals who contributed this industrial output.

[The success of the business magazines is significant for another reason: it introduced the concept of consumer marketing into the newspaper publishing business. Prior to the advent of specialised journalism, advertising revenue invariably depended upon circulation. [Along came the business magazines with relatively pitiful circulations-- Business India has an estimated net circulation of 25,000 and Businessworld of about 17,000. Yet both

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these magazines attract advertising valued at over Rs. 1.25 lakhs per issue. Suddenly the newspaper publishing business <sup>became</sup> ~~is~~ aware of <sup>the</sup> importance of the obvious truth that for the advertiser, advertising has to be <sup>cost</sup> effective : it's not how many that the advertising message reaches but how many of those with purchasing power.

To return from the particular to the general, another change of profound significance for the future of Indian journalism that the magazine boom has ushered into the indigenous newspaper publishing industry is that it has resulted in the upgradation <sup>ing</sup> of the status of the reporter. [Until very recently the newspaper had an umbrella phrase covering magazines - had been dominated by the editorial pundit who seldom if ever stepped out of the editorial page - which was and is devoted to learned analyses of current socio-economic and political events. Not that there was anything intrinsically wrong with this division of labour except that the reporter who did the foot-slogging while chasing up news stories was relatively very poorly paid and generally accorded little importance in newspaper establishments.

The ~~bloom of the~~ magazine boom has changed this particular rule of the game. Low on overheads and lean - if not skimpy - in terms of staffing patterns, the new crop of magazines cannot afford to encourage this distinction between editors and reporters. Those of us designated editors have to be reporters and vice versa. This sanskritisation of the reporter and introducing a new egalitarianism into the newspaper industry is another change that the magazine boom has wrought on the Indian media scene.

Yet inspite, ~~nor~~ perhaps because, of this general energisation of the Indian printed-media scene in the wake of the magazine boom of the seventies, there is a fundamental weakness in the Indian press in that the development of supportive management

structures and systems has not kept pace with the aspirations of the new genre of publications that have been launched on the market. Consequently product standardisation has been a casualty.

Though there are a few exceptions such as Aroon Iurie, the editor and publisher of India Today, who combines editorial flair with managerial expertise which prevents a dysfunctionality between editorial aspirations and supportive infrastructural system, yet it would true to say that the larger newspaper chains are handicapped by obsolete rules, regulations and systems which prevent a journalist from optimising his output in terms of quality and quantity. This managerial infirmity of the larger newspaper publishing groups in particular is perhaps the major stumbling block in the way of further qualitative improvement in the Indian fourth estate as a whole. Until such time as those on the management side of the newspaper publishing business overhaul and rationalise structures and systems, a further qualitative improvement of Indian news and features publications is likely to be slower than it should be. ~~On~~ On the other hand the emergence of new publishing groups which are strong on the management side of the business is very much on the cards.

Yet, perhaps inevitably, the danger of the fourth estate in India collapsing under the weight of its managerial inefficiency is less immediate than the threat to its freedom and economic viability posed by a Central and several state level governments, which to say the least, see few advantages in the growth of a free and healthy press. While it would be substantially true to say that since 1977 when the Emergency was lifted there has been no overt censorship of the press, there are many covert threats to its freedom.

But one of the many crosses that developing nations of the third world, in which public office provides the easiest access to private profit, have to bear, is the ruling establishment's fear of a free and economically independent press. And



regrettably the men and women who control the strings of political power in India have acquired an enviable degree of sophistication in making their hostility to the press. [The new strategy seems to be to cripple the press financially. Thus one of the first acts of the Mrs Gandhi's government which was re-elected to power after the collapse of the Janta coalition was to impose a 15% ad valorem duty import duty on newsprint in the 1981-82 budget which jacked up the industry <sup>costs</sup> ~~costs~~ by Rs 50 crores. An this import on the industry came hard on the heels of the award of a judge of the Supreme Court who jacked up journalists' wages by another Rs. 50 crore (Rs. 1 crore = 10,000,000) — not small impositions on an industry whose gross, however, is less than Rs. 600 crores <sup>for years</sup>.

[In the 1982-83 budget the import duty on newsprint was raised further though the ad valorem stipulation, which could cause fluctuating prices of newsprint, was <sup>abolished</sup> ~~abolished~~. And now in the budget for 1983-84 presented to Parliament on 28th February the Finance Minister has added 20% of all expenditure incurred by industry, <sup>on</sup> advertising, travel and sales promotion to taxable income on the grounds that advertising and sales promotions expenditure is "lavish and wasteful".] This proposal will hit the press in two ways. Firstly, there is a powerful incentive for advertisers to cut advertising expenditure. Secondly newspaper managements are likely to <sup>trim</sup> ~~train~~ their travelling expenses which should be good news for the petty satraps who wreak terror in the rural hinterland and recently have had the mortification of being exposed by metropolitan dailies and magazines.

[If one takes the sequence of events as given here <sup>and</sup> ~~into~~ into consideration and bears in mind that the latest budgetary blow to the economic viability of the newspaper publishing industry follows <sup>hard</sup> ~~hard~~ on the heels of the Bihar Press Bill, a notorious piece of pilot legislation which sought to impose heavy penalties including imprisonment upon those who authored published or disseminated vaguely defined "scurrilous writing", it is difficult not to see a method in this apparent madness.

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A great national outcry has resulted in the Bihar Press Bill in being shelved. But there are other roads that lead to home and these roads are being vigorously pursued. And even if these impositions do not quite cripple the press, they will serve to circumscribe its influence. As newspapers and magazines become increasingly more expensive, the growth rate of circulation will <sup>again</sup> ~~gained~~ to a halt even as advertisers with government encouragement become increasingly unwilling to pay higher rates.

It is not appropriate for me to call upon this assembly to help us to solve our problems. This we must do in our way. That apart, the problems which confront the press in most of the countries - particularly in relation to the growth of state power and its encroachment upon the freedom of the press - are far more trying. Nonetheless, the growth of a healthy new crop of magazine which survive because of the mass support that they receive indicates that in the final analysis the survival of news publications is dependent upon their ability to establish direct linkages with their readership over the heads of usually hostile governments. And these enduring links can <sup>be built</sup> ~~be built~~ only by injecting the disciplines of market research and market segmentation, product development and product consistency backed up by modern marketing.

In the developing countries of the Third World one hears all too often homilies about the social responsibilities of the press, while the individual who delivered these homilies openly flouts the norms of political behaviour. In India, though politicians of all parties don't know it, the freedom of the press has become part of our political tradition. This is a change they will ultimately have to accept. And the best way for the press in the Third World to accelerate this process of change is to provide the people with credibility and excellence. So that the freedom of the press is not a valuable right only for the journalist but for the citizen.

In India I believe this bridge between the press and people has been built in the wake of the magazine boom of the seventies.

Third World  
CAPS.

Indian media scene: dailies

	Language	Circulation
Indian Express (10 editions)	English	5,63,259
The Times of India (3 editions)	English	5,12,801
Malayala Manorama (3 editions)	Malayalam	5,00,140
Ananda Bazar Patrika	Bengali	4,08,010
Hindu (5 editions)	English	3,25,378
Bugantar	Bengali	3,07,173
Hindustan Times	English	2,52,554
Daily Thanthi (3 editions)	Tamil	2,65,082
The Statesman	English	2,23,331
Eenadu (3 editions)	Telugu	2,08,135

English printing  
figures:

563,259.

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## Indian media scene: magazines

	<u>Periodicity</u>	<u>Language</u>	<u>Circulation</u>
Malayala Manorama	Weekly	Malayalam	5,84,973
Kumudam	Weekly	Tamil	5,44,409
Kani Muthu	Fortnightly	Tamil	3,81,154
Manohar Kahaniyan	Fortnightly	Hindi	3,45,060
Ananda Vikatan	Weekly	Tamil	2,54,355
Vanitha	Fortnightly	Malayalam	2,34,645
Competition Success	Fortnightly	English	2,14,313
Manorajyam	Weekly	Malayalam	2,09,490
Sunday	Weekly	English	2,04,590
Illustrated Weekly	Weekly	English	2,03,909
of India Today	Fortnightly	English	1,10,000 (est)
Standard	Monthly	English	1,20,000 (est)
Business India	Fortnightly	English	20,000 (est)
Business World	Fortnightly	English	17,000

Fig. 5.1. Indian media scene: magazines

Figure 584,973.