

**Press System In India**

**By**

**J S Yadava**

**PRESS SYSTEM IN INDIA**

by

**DR. J.S. Yadava**  
Director  
Indian Institute of Mass Communication  
New Delhi  
(India)

**Consultation on "Press Systems in SAARC"**  
April 2 - 5, 1991  
Kathmandu, Nepal

## Press System in India

\*Dr J.S. Yadava

The history and growth of the Press in India coincided with early reformation and liberation struggle of modern times. The first newspaper in India was published in 1780. It was in English. Since then, despite inhibiting factors like low literacy and poor purchasing power, the press in India has come a long way.

The total number of newspapers and journals at the end of 1988 was 25,536 published in 92 languages. Of these 2281 were dailies. The combined circulation was 64.1 million in 1986 which declined to 56.8 million in 1987, and 54.8 million in 1988 (table 1). Newspapers published in Hindi had the highest circulation of 15.8 million followed by English at 9.9 million (table 2). Statistically speaking nearly two thirds of these newspapers are owned by individuals (table 3). However, newspapers owned by industrial houses though comparatively small in number are large in circulation. Nearly 67.4 per cent of the total newspaper circulation in the country is accounted by 106 such common units of industrial houses through multi-centre editions and a plurality of newspapers and magazines. Further, 17 such units published 81 dailies and 29 weeklies with a total circulation of 71.4 per cent of the total circulation of all news interest papers, both dailies and periodicals. Though it is far from a situation of monopoly, it does indicate a certain degree of concentration of Indian Press in the hands of a few industrial houses.

The metropolitan cities of Delhi, Bombay, Calcutta and Madras and the state capitals are the main centres of newspaper publication. Nearly 93 per cent of the total sale of dailies is confined to the large urban areas with a population over 1 lakh which account for only about 10 per cent of the country's population. It is true that the newspapers published in bigger cities on a limited scale. The reach of newspapers in rural areas and among poor especially among women is extremely limited. Many systematic studies have brought home this point. This is mainly due to four mutually reinforcing factors: (1) low literacy, (2) low purchasing power (3) poor means of transportation for timely delivery of newspapers and (4) lack of relevant information from the stand point of rural people, poor and women.

In spite of low circulation and limited reach in rural areas, where majority of India's population lives, the press in India plays an important role in political administration and social makers and other elites who serve as reference groups for the masses. Further, printed words in newspaper have tremendous credibility and hence influence even today. As such the press is an important arbiters of reality. It shapes in significant ways the opinion and outlook of its readers and indirectly of others as well.

### **The Beginning**

It was the arrival of the British with the printing press that marked the beginning of the newspaper in India. The first abortive attempt to start a newspaper was made in 1776 by William Bolts. It

was on January 29, 1780 that James Augustus Hickey made history by starting the Bengal Gazette. The journal described itself as "A Weekly Political and Commercial paper open to all parties, but influenced by None" and the publisher claimed it as a venture "to purchase freedom for my mind and soul". Although freedom of expression was the motivating force behind the very first Indian newspaper, Hickey used it more to slander, the East India Company, especially the Governor-General, Warren Hastings.

Soon some more newspapers were started at Calcutta, Madras and Bombay. In Madras the first newspaper, Madras Courier appeared in 1785 and four years later Bombay's first newspaper, Bombay Herald was published. The newspapers in Calcutta were generally critical, while those in Bombay and Madras were pro-government. Even today, two hundred years later, this trend is noticeable at least in the case of English newspapers.

The newspapers of the late eighteenth century were of interest to the British residents only. They reported news about the developments in England and the East India Company. Thus they were largely a whiteman's affairs. Their circulation did not exceed a few hundred.

There were no press laws and hardly any freedom during those days. Even so, the pioneers ventured for freedom however limited that was. It is interesting to note that the first newspapers were started by the former employees of the Company often having grievances against it.

Beginnings were also made in reporting on social issues, letters to the editors, advertisements and fashion notes. Thus, the Hickeys were pioneers in both press freedom and scurrilous writing.

The first half of the nineteenth century was marked by strict government regulations and the fight against them and the multiplication of newspapers especially in Indian languages. Besides the Englishmen, who were mostly former employees of the East India Company and had grudges against the Company, there were a few who were genuinely interested in journalism and concerned about freedom of the Press. More importantly many of the Indian elite became editors and publishers. The number of newspapers increased not only in Calcutta, Bombay and Madras, but in other parts of the country as well. However, their circulation was still small not exceeding three thousand. Even so, these newspapers became vehicles of social reforms, information and contacts. Their significance in the affairs of society was recognised by Rev. Long in his report in 1859 following the rebellion of 1857, the first war of independence. the Press contributed little to the outbreak of the rebellion. However, according to Rev. Long had the East India Company kept a watch on the writing in the language newspapers they would have got advance warning about the rebellion and may perhaps had taken appropriate measures.

#### **The Nationalists' Vehicle**

The post-1857 period witnessed more strict regulations especially for the vernacular press. Despite this, during the last quarter of the 19th century, what come to be known as a nationalist press expanded

phenomenally. Bal Gangadhar Tilak, one of the great leaders of national awakening, started two weeklies in 1880, Kesari in Marathi and Mahratta in English. In a leading article in Kesari on January 4, 1881 Tilak compared the newspapers with night watchmen keeping the executive officers in fear of public opinion. Further, he expected the newspapers to help bring about improvement in social conditions of the people by exposing what was evil and harmful. Alongside the social and economic reforms Tilak emphasised political emancipation. There were many other nationalist journalists like Gopal Krishan Gokhale who championed the cause of social and political awakening.

From the early part of the 20th century till independence in 1947 Mahatma Gandhi influenced developments in the country including the evolution of the press. His two weeklies, Young India and Harijan became the powerful vehicle of the freedom movement. He wrote with passion. His writings were simple, clear and powerful. According to Gandhiji the newspapers have three main objectives:

1. to understand the popular feelings and give them expression,
2. to arouse among the people certain desirable sentiments, and
3. to fearlessly expose defects in public life.

Gandhi was a great journalist and his weeklies were probably the greatest weeklies the world has known.

Gandhi sustained his weeklies on subscriptions as no advertisements were published. Their circulations was at no stage impressive, but their readership was large and the impact was

phenomenal. Through massline of the followers within the Congress party and of those engaged in constructive works, the weeklies propagated widely Gandhi's ideas and philosophy among the masses. His weeklies served as the vehicle for his views on various developments in the country and his line of approach to the struggle for national liberation. Nationalism and the demand for independence were not new, but Gandhi provided a new impetus to the freedom struggle. A large number of other prominent leaders engaged in the freedom struggle were also eminent journalists and they derived inspiration from Gandhi. During this period journalism, especially the nationalist press, was more of a mission, rather than being merely an avocation, and the role of the press was to awaken the masses socially and politically.

#### **Towards a Free Press**

In the free India Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister and a leading personality of the freedom struggle, contributed substantially in shaping the press. An ardent votary of the freedom of the press he fully appreciated the role of a free press in a democratic government based upon universal adult franchise. After Independence the restrictive regulations were either done away with or suitably modified and codified to meet the urges of a free press in a free country. The Indian Constitution guarantees the 'freedom of thoughts and expression' to all its citizens which means freedom to publish newspapers, Article 19(1) (a). However, certain restraints are imperative in the very exercise of the freedom. The Constitution, Article 19(2), provides for only such restrictions as are reasonable and are in the interest of sovereignty and integrity of the country, friendly relations with foreign

States, public order, decency or morality or in relation to contempt of court, defamation or incitement to offence. "Freedom of thoughts and expression" is part of the Preamble to the Constitution thereby guaranteeing this to all citizens as a fundamental right. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru was of the view that, "I would rather have a completely free Press, with all dangers involved in the wrong use of that freedom than a suppressed or regulated Press".

Although there is no special provision in the Constitution specially dealing with the press, the interpretation of the Constitution have been so as to give right to citizens to publish what he chooses without obtaining any prior permission from any authority subject only to the responsibility before the law of the land for what he choose to publish. The important Acts relevant to the freedom of the press are: (i) Registration of Books Act 1867; (ii) Defence of India Act 1962; Sections 124A, 505 and 295 (A) of Indian Penal Code; and Section 5 of the Indian Telegraph Act 1855 and Section 26 of the Indian Post Act, 1885; and Harmful Publication Act 1956.

Be that as it may, the Press in India not only champion the cause of freedom of expression and speech it also in the process jealously guards its own freedom. India can claim a proud history of free press except a brief period of national emergency 1975-77. Any attempt to curb the freedom of press is strongly resisted as would be evident from the massive protest against the attempt to make reasonable restrictions provided under the law more stringent in 1982 and again in 1986. The public at large also actively supports journalists in their struggle for freedom of press.

### **Salience to Politics**

It is true that in India the Press was at once a product and a stimulant of processes of national regeneration which led to its freedom from colonial rule and the journalists functioned more as missionaries and social reformers than mere professionals. However, with the passage of time in free India the Press has slowly but increasingly become an industry and journalism as profession. The press instead of remaining stimulant of social awakening has increasingly become largely a source of news about political events and politician. The salience to politics to the extent of being obsessed is the dominant feature of Indian press today.

In the early period of free India, Press was largely supportive of the government. The 'honeymoon' period between rulers and the press during Nehru's period lasted for long. This was natural in a way because the leaders, many of whom were journalists in their own right, and journalists shared common values and experiences of working in close association as partners in freedom struggle. This was not the case during the period of Mrs. Gandhi who dominated the Indian political scene for nearly 18 years. Her period was full of strife and stress. Her disposition towards the Press was, if not hostile, not friendly either. During her regime the Press increasingly took upon itself the role of adversary. Subsequently the press has pursued its adversary role to the government even more vigorously to the extent at times taking upon itself the role of an 'opposition' political party. From performing a watch-dog function the press tended to practice a sort of

campaign journalism to the extent of claiming responsibility for making or breaking governments and political leadership.

The press on the whole today is more concerned with political developments, events and personalities, than economic, social and cultural issues. Scanning of any newspaper would testify such an observation. Many systematic studies have also confirmed this notion. The Coverage of socio-economic and development issues are usually not more than 5-10 per cent of the total news space.

#### **Development Journalism**

Along with the dominant stream of journalism obsessed with politics and concerned with urban issues and developments, there have been some other strains in Indian Journalism as well. The Hindustan Times can claim some credit in starting development reporting. In 1950s, extensive reporting about the functioning and the problems of various public sector projects in India was undertaken by the Hindustan Times.

In the 70s, village Chhatera became a familiar column in the Hindustan Times. For months the problems faced and perceived by the residents of the Chhatera village, infrastructural facilities, development inputs and their impact and reactions of the residents were reported. In the process a team of correspondents associated with this column articulated the popular feelings of the rural India. The column informed and motivated various functionaries to undertake development activities and solved the problems faced by the villagers. It was a unique

experiment of a daily newspaper playing the role of a catalyst in the process of rural development.

This inspired and prompted some others to take up development reporting seriously. Bharat Dogra has been doing this for years. There are others in the field. Many issues of a development nature have been taken up. The campaign by media person against the Silent Valley project on the grounds of danger to the environment, built up strong public opinion, of course, in close association with the environment activists, so much so, that the project had to be abandoned.

The other function of the press of understanding problems of common concern and giving them expression is in some ways similar to development reporting. But it is a different cup of tea as well. It has two dimensions. One is to investigate and extensively report on a problem of a particular region or community. In other words, it is indepth reporting on social problems. Some examples of such reporting are the disabilities caused by eating Kesari dal in the Chhatisgarh area of Madhya Pradesh and drinking floride-rich water in certain districts of Rajasthan. The purpose is to arouse public conscience. In this area also weeklies have done better than dailies.

The second dimension of this strain of journalism is to understand popular feelings and give them expression. In addition to the usual journalistic techniques and methods there has been a growing interest in using more systematic and scientific methods to gauge precisely the public feelings on specific issues. India Today, is the

pioneer in using the services of public opinion experts and commissioning surveys to scientifically understand public feelings and opinion as a part of their reporting.

### Role of the Press

Thus, the press though gives salience to politics and investigative journalism, the new glamorous darling of the profession, development reporting and indepth discussions of issues of public interest by the Press have also made some contribution, not to the extent they could, to the social awakening of the masses.

Be that as it may, the coverage of political events and developments seem to have significantly contributed to the political education of newspaper readers and others too indirectly. A newspaper coverage in no small way influences the fortunes of the main actors on the political scene. It seems to facilitate voters to make "informed choices" at the time of elections.

The press in India is basically and avowedly a political institution. It plays active part in the political processes. As a consequence, all those associated with the newspapers, among other considerations like money, are often motivated by the influence they can command in the society. Many of the young persons who join journalism profession make no bones about it and frankly admit that the main attraction to the profession is the power and influence it bestows on the practitioners of this profession and not necessarily money. Same may be the reasons for many businessmen, politicians and others venturing into

starting their own newspaper or magazines.

Exposing the failures of the Government and those in public life is age-old and well recognised function of the press. It is true of the Indian press as well. However, with the exposure of Bhagalpur Blinding case by Sunday, an English weekly in 1979 resulting in the public uproar started a new phase in Indian journalism. Some public-spirited lawyers took upon the case with the Supreme Court giving a new turn to the watchdog function of the press. Since then the investigative journalism in India has covered many mile stones and in the process many misdeeds of individuals and the governments have come to the public light.

Investigative journalism have been inspiring many journalists all over the world. But since there is a close association between the persons and parties in office or seeking power and the press, investigative journalism at times may lead to misdemeanour. The protection provided by the journalistic code not to reveal the source is also at times misused by some journalists for fame or favour as it happened in the infamous case of "Little Jim" reported in Washington Post by a young lady reporter.

At times in the name of investigation, some journalists including in India tend to exaggerate facts and figures trying to authenticate their story and cross the limits of decency by poking their nose into other's personal lives. In many investigative stories, 'according to highly placed sources not to be identified' are found in galore in the news items.

Though most of it may be true, in some cases the reporter or correspondent fall into temptation of expressing their own opinion into quotes under the cover of 'unidentified sources' or 'according to highly placed sources'. Even a few such cases might give the individual reporter the instant fame but may ultimately damage the newspapers' credibility on which stand the effectiveness of the role newspapers perform in the society.

If the purpose of an investigative reporting is not go get at the truth but to get at a person, then it is a bad journalism.

In addition, commercial interests tend to dominate the press. The anxiety to increase circulation and increase commercial revenues at times leads to some compromises in terms of quality and nature of contents in newspapers. To an extent social and education functions of the Press have been relegated in the background, if not totally ignoring them.

Finally, in the context of revolutionary changes in communication technologies which are making the concept of global village a reality, the question of objectives, values and the role of Press acquires even greater significance as the potentials for both doing 'good' as well as 'harm' are now enormous. As such, the question of development, peace and the role of journalists there in need careful examination.

It is the concern for the truth and the larger purposes of

national development and moral well-being of the people that marks out a great newspaper from the ordinary ones. Too much focus upon negative happenings in the society creates despair among the readers. I for one would like all events - good, bad and others - to be reported. The press instead of building a hysteria for despair should aim at giving the readers a balanced picture of the environment in which they live. I would say that the 'journalism of despair' should be balanced with 'journalism of hope'.

Further, the cardinal objective of newspapers as envisaged by Mahatma Gandhi are still relevant to the healthy functioning and operation of the Press today. Although the Press in India has been fearlessly exposing defects in public life, it has not paid sufficient attention to the other two objectives of the press envisaged by Gandhiji. The role of press in understanding popular feeling and giving them expression and arousing among people certain desirable sentiments remain largely the dormant function of the press in the post independent India.

### Conclusion

To conclude, the Western model of Free Press need careful and critical examination in context of SAARC countries. The concept of freedom and objectivity are relative and derive meaning from the context in which these are practised. The Press in India and other developing countries faces a peculiar policy dilemma. The conflict between western liberatarian view of press and social responsibility of the press is becoming sharper in many Asian nations. With this comes the question of whether we are to practice 'journalism of despair' exclusively or

'journalism of hope' as well which covers both positive and negative happenings in our societies. In fact, press should cover all - good, bad and others - news worthy of coverage. The Press in ultimate analysis, along with exposing defects in public life should strive to understand the popular feeling and give them expression. More importantly as Gandhiji said, the Press should strive to arouse among the people certain desirable sentiments. Thus, in Asian nations, the Press is evolving its own peculiar blend of western model and eastern concepts and requirements. The issues of 'development' and vision of future are important considerations which should provide peculiar flavour to the Press in the region.

Table no.1

## Growth of Press

Year	Total No. of Newspapers	Circulation (in thousand)
1965	7,906	21,676
1970	11,036	29,303
1975	12,423	33,922
1980	18,140	50,921
1981	19,144	51,102
1982	19,937	50,094
1983	20,758	55,391
1984	21,784	61,147
1985	22,648	61,981
1986	23,616	64,051
1987	24,269	56,830
1988	25,536	54,873

Source: India 1990

Table no.2

## Language-wise Growth of Press in India

Circulation in 00

Language	1970		1980		1988	
	No.	Cir.	No.	Cir.	No.	Cir.
Hindi	2247	7173	4946	13709	8222	15899
English	2694	5852	3440	10532	4458	9951
Assamese	38	1.6	64	251	111	485
Bengali	707	1388	1376	3304	1628	3461
Gujarati	577	1924	686	2645	630	2633
Kannada	247	844	572	1843	828	1635
Kashmiri	-	-	1	-	1	-
Malayalam	432	2295	719	6960	990	6150
Marathi	680	1920	1047	2896	1273	2751
Oriya	103	224	240	451	372	919
Punjabi	236	369	366	946	545	1228
Sanskrit	27	13	29	13	35	7
Sindhi	72	129	62	85	79	79
Tamil	521	3383	771	4939	1036	4092
Telugu	361	1051	520	1478	678	1946
Urdu	698	1455	1234	2076	1728	2536
Bi-lingual	863	894	1428	1291	1815	527
Multi-lingual	199	190	339	202	374	73
Other Languages	134	87	260	200	333	101
Total	11036	29303	18140	50921	25536	54873

Table no.3

**Ownership Pattern of Newspapers**

Form of Ownership	Number of Newspapers	Percentage	Percentage share in total circulation
Individuals	17,587	68.9	33.8
Societies/ Association	3,769	14.8	3.7
Firm/Partnership	1,180	4.6	11.5
Joint Stock Companies	1,152	4.4	43.0
Government (Central/State)	655	2.6	0.4
Others	1,193	4.7	7.6
Total	25,536	100.00	100.00

Source: Mass Media India 1989-90

## References

1. **Annual Report 1989-90, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting Government of India.**
2. **Mass Media in India 1989-90, R&R Division, Ministry of I&B, Government of India.**
3. **Media in South Asia, A Draft prepared for UNESCO's World Communication Report, I.I.M.C.**
4. **India 1990, Publications Division, Ministry of I&B Government of India.**
5. **Yadava J.S., Changing Social Role of the Indian Press, Media Asia, AMIC Publication, Vol. 12 No.3, 1985 p. 131-136 & 176.**
6. **Yadava J.S., The Public Sector in the field of Communications in Developing Countries, paper UNESCO/IIMC, 23 pages.**