

Hindi newspapers: on the cusp of a media revolution

Hindi newspapers catering to local needs are creating new audiences and 'a different kind of public sphere' in towns and districts in the Hindi belt, media critic Sevanti Ninan says.

'These changes have both positive and negative aspects,' the New Delhi-based Ninan told IANS in an interview.

Her latest book, 'Headlines from the Heartland: Reinventing the Hindi Public Sphere', has been described by author and critic Robin Jeffery as a 'remarkable ... draws readers deep into the media revolution that is changing India'.

Ninan said that in the 1990s, a 'newspaper revolution began blowing across northern and central India'.

Ninan, a columnist on media, is founder-editor of the journalism centric site TheHoot.org. She began her career at the Hindustan Times and worked for several years at the Indian Express.

'I don't think the quality of journalism in this age of booming media gets anywhere near the kind of attention it deserves. But television localization has been getting some attention,' said Ninan.

Ninan feels her book completely supports the view that localising helps readership. In her book, she said that Hindi journalism flowered in 'unexpected and unorthodox' ways.

'I encountered village store-keepers both on the road to Jagdalpur (in Chhattisgarh) as well as in Udaipur and Banswara districts in Rajasthan who called themselves news agencies,' she explained.

They would solicit handouts from the local populace about functions, felicitations and events, solemnly stamp these handouts with the name of their news agency and send the items onward to the newspaper which had asked them to supply such news, she explained.

The common mode of sending the news was to give the items to the local state transport driver who would drop them into mailboxes, which the newspapers had installed at major transport depots.

'This is an example of how localisation democratised access. Anyone could give news about themselves, from even a far flung corner of the state, and it would find its way into the paper, more or less unchanged,' Ninan told IANS.

She noted that in Chitrakoot and Banda districts of Uttar Pradesh there are a group of women, some of them Dalits, who bring out a newspaper called 'Khabar Lahariya' -- which focuses on village level news of all kinds.

This includes articles about 'ration shops without rations, about wells drying up, about a man who thought he was buying a pregnant cow but found that it had a tumour and he had been duped'.

In her view, these women manage to corner local government functionaries and quiz them if there are public complaints against them. 'It is sterling grassroots journalism of the unexpected kind,' she added.

Another unexpected example of handout journalism came from Chhattisgarh where, in 2002, Maoists embarked upon a public relations exercise and would have handouts delivered to newspaper offices.

'These would be used in a matter of fact manner. Occasionally, they would take a journalist whom they trusted on a field visit to areas which they controlled,' said Ninan.

She believes her work 'looks at a particular language, in a particular part of the country, and I focus quite a lot on the socio economic basis for the spread of newspapers as well as the linkages between political awareness and newspaper growth'.

Ninan sees her work as being a 'content analysis based on chunks of monitoring done in Madhya Pradesh and Jharkhand, to write about the content of local news'.

Others have written on this issue too, though with a differing emphasis. Francesca Orsini wrote 'The Hindi Public Sphere, 1920-1940', from a scholarly take, focused on language and literature. In his 1999 book 'Apne Gireban Mein', Yashwant Vyas of Dainik Bhaskar looked at some of the changes coming in with localisation in the Hindi press.

Robin Jeffrey looked at the newspaper revolution in the regional press throughout the country in his book 'India's Newspaper Revolution: Capitalism, Politics and the Indian-Language Press'.

'The south Indian newspapers led the way. Robin Jeffrey begins his book with an anecdote about the impact of Eenadu on local crime. Both Eenadu in Andhra Pradesh and Malayalam Manorama in Kerala used local editions to expand starting from the 1980s,' said Ninan.

'The Times of India, I think, led the way in English-language localisation by having different editions for the suburbs of Mumbai. But in the English-language press localisation remains confined to metropolitan cities and their suburbs. Both Hindustan Times and the Times of India have separate pullouts for Gurgaon,' she noted.

Ninan's earlier books include 'Through the Magic Window', 'Television and Change in India' (Penguin India, 1995), 'Plain Speaking with Chandrababu Naidu' (Viking, 2000) and 'Rajasthan' (Roli Books 1980).

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