

# Paid News, Ads and the Question of Priorities in Non-English Indian Journalism

Media and the socio-economic setting in which it operates are two different things. While no one has denied the need for better ad revenue, consumers of vernacular dailies have been robbed of the benefits of adherence to inviolable guidelines.



'Towards the end of the 1990s, it was amply clear that the health of the Hindi media, as we hurtled towards the new century, needed an urgent balancing of priorities.' Photo: Adam Cohn/Flickr (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)



## Mrinal Pande

### BOOKS

### MEDIA

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*The following is an extract from Mrinal Pande's book The Journey of Hindi Language Journalism in India: From Raj to Swaraj and Beyond, published by Orient BlackSwan in 2022.*

Since the beginning of the 2010s, as disposable incomes in smalltown India have risen, the great Chinese Wall between English and vernacular publications has begun to crumble.

After almost all editors of English dailies, like the Hindi media barons before them, have turned owner-editors, many have quickly sensed the advantage in forming protective guilds across regions. Unbelievable new bands of brothers are now being formed by the marketing managers for formulating new strategies, signing 'no poaching' pacts and sharing information about the best clients and the cleverest (often the most unprofessional) practices.

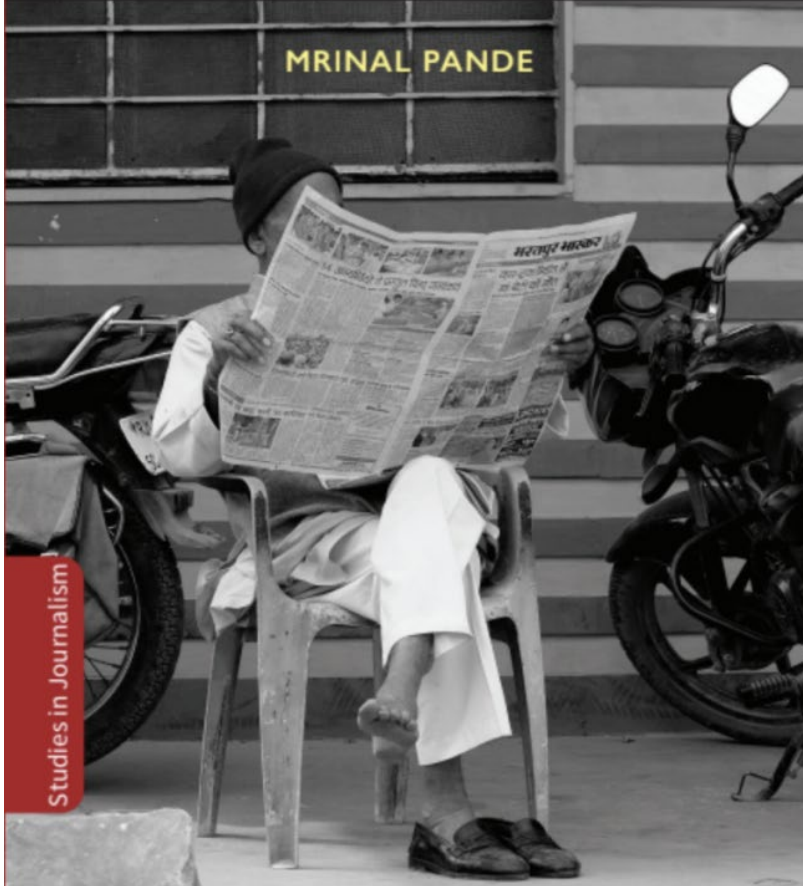


Orient BlackSwan

# The Journey of Hindi Language Journalism in India

*From Raj to Swaraj and Beyond*

MRINAL PANDE



'The Journey of Hindi Language Journalism in India: From Raj to Swaraj and Beyond',  
Mrinal Pande, Orient BlackSwan, 2022.

Media barons are no longer dismissive of their vernacular publications, and the Hindi owner-editors are also coming out of their small, simple and static worlds and sending their sons to well-known business schools and putting them through media courses abroad for hands-on training. The vernacular readers may have grown up on a diet of only language papers, but they too are now sending their children to English-medium schools. The new bilingual households

of the future are the new focus area, where the action is around India's vernaculars.

By now, it is clear that the media and the socio-economic setting in which it operates are two different things. A certain adversarial relationship between the media, and political parties and corporate was once seen by media practitioners as a basic rule of their turf, and one was expected to verify everything handed to us by sources other than our own. But as the media business has proliferated, this particular cold war has lost its intensity.

It would be too deterministic to say that we Indians are programmed to initiate systemic corruption, but there is ample historical evidence to show that secretive understandings to scratch each other's backs between many of our politicians and media owners are not too rare.

The violent revival of age-old caste, communal, and most recently, gender-based divides would surely qualify as the sociological equivalent of a tectonic upheaval in a supposedly modern socialist republic. Today, most major media houses are happily inviting outside capital, owners have become editors and many editors have opted for partnerships. With this, relations between media practitioners and their erstwhile adversaries have begun to assume the character of a great game, enjoyable but non-life threatening.

Even the language of reporting reflects it: editorials on coalition politics talk of falling dominoes, theorists frequently build Test cricket models of party politics, observers of caste-based coalitions talk almost admiringly of the intricate games of chess being played at state capitals. Implicit in all this, however, is the assumption that the playing field will always remain level, and no matter how intense the mutual suspicion between the press and the ruling parties, neither side will ever think of hurling the chess pieces out of the window and walking away after ripping up the board.

It has taken the seismic jolts and the ugly eruption of paid news to bring the media world to the realisation that we can no longer take the stability of our time-tested journalistic systems for granted.

The paid news syndrome has a long subterranean past. It originated along old and deep fault lines that run under our entire media system between the twin tectonic plates of economic globalisation and political fragmentation. The pressures generated by frequent friction between the two have been building for decades and ultimately threaten just about every branch of the media. As the least secure among them, the infrastructure of the vernacular media is simply the first to crack. Restraining corruption, like unleashing it, requires both capability and resolve.

This was hard during the days of one-party rule with a protected mixed economy. In the age of liberalisation, with so many groups competing for the fast-opening Indian market, regional media houses that have, or are about to go public, will face a catch-22. Should they stay small and risk being pushed out by the multi-edition T-Rexes from the Hindi belt? Or should they also mutate and multiply and join the gang? If they survive as regional players, some day they may be in the position to counter the decline in journalistic morals ushered in by the mega media houses, but like the old Soviet Union, even then they will accomplish this only by ceasing to be what they are.

Towards the end of the 1990s, it was amply clear that the health of the Hindi media, as we hurtled towards the new century, needed an urgent balancing of priorities. The prerequisite for this was to develop a perception of the whole, and a greater feel for the actual dynamics of the media industry: the essential relationships between the editorials and the marketing teams, between the editor and the professional CEO, between the lowly rural stringer and the modem operator, between the field and the desk.

Deliberations about censorship and the code of ethics for journalists reveal that political behaviour towards the media has been changing. Digital media ensures that there will be a gradual but irreversible trend towards self-governance, away from authority by imposition.

Since the early 1990s, no one denied the need for better ad revenue. However, it should also be conceded that this need was sharpened to a large extent by the artificially lowered cover price of newspapers and the hefty commissions paid to agents, vendors and stringers who were, in many cases, the one and the

same as the big publishing houses with deep pockets who tilted the media field in their favour to drive out smaller local players.

Since the consumers of the dailies in vernacular were paying more money than the readers of English-language papers and still getting fewer pages, the media establishments should have created and enforced inviolable ad-to-edit ratios, ideally around 70% editorial matter to 30% ads. The key at the top of each ad, the fonts used and the general layout of the page were expected to follow government mandates and reveal to readers that the item was a sponsored ad, not a part of editorial matter.

These vital details continued to be overlooked.