

A succinct saga

Mrinal Pande's 'From Raj to Swaraj and Beyond' — announced by Valley of Words as the best book in the genre of English Non-Fiction writing for 2023 — concisely chronicles and analyses the history of Hindi-language journalism in India

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In Mrinal Pande's short but concise and brilliant analysis of Hindi-language journalism in India, *'From Raj to Swaraj and Beyond'*, we get a glimpse of two centuries of Hindi media in India; starting with the 1826 initiative of Jugal Kishore Shukla who set up the first Hindi (weekly) newspaper in the country in the Nagari script using the lithographic technique in Calcutta. On February 9, 1826, he wrote to C Lushington, the Chief Secretary to the Government, stating that he was "desirous of publishing a weekly newspaper in the Hindee language and the Deo Nagree characters, to be entitled, *'Oodunt Martand'* (The Rising Sun)". Shukla, who belonged to Kanpur, had begun his professional career in the city as a clerk in the Calcutta court before he became a lawyer. The paper could bring out only 79 issues before it closed down – both on account of financial pressure and a series of defamation suits. Pande also tells us that contrary to popular perception, Hindi, in the Nagari script, was first crafted as a formal language in the early 19th century at the behest of the EIC officials at the Fort William college where the covenanted officials of the company were trained. Various known till then as Hindustani, Hindavi or Indostani, the hybridized mass language was closer to Urdu than Sanskrit from which the grammar and script were drawn. Two decades later, Raja Shiv Prasad (*Sitara e Hind*), brought out the monthly *'Banaras Akhbar'* with the financial backing of the Maharaja of Nepal. However, this newspaper preferred the colloquial Hindi understood in the large hinterland from Lahore to Varanasi. It featured local news, serialised the translation of Sanskrit texts in popular idioms. It had a better run than *'Oodant Martand'* – it survived for nine years before it shut shop, again on account of financial reasons.

After a brief lull, another bilingual paper in Hindi and Urdu came up in Agra in 1861. This was Raja Laxman Prasad's *'Praja Hitaishi'*. Then there was the comet from the sky, Bharatendu Harishchandra, a brilliant maverick and the scion of the prominent Agarwal family of Varanasi, who launched a self-edited periodical *'Kavi Vachan Sudha'* on August 15 1867. In his short life of 32 years, he demolished many linguistic and cultural shibboleths, and left behind a memorable collection of magazines (*'Harishchandra'*, *'Bala Bodhini'*) and several anthologies of plays, essays, satires and a body of poems on the hitherto forbidden 'carnal love'. A few years later, in 1883, Madan Mohan Malviya began to edit *'Hindustan'*, and within princely India, the Maharaja of Rewa began the publication of *'Bharat Bhrata'*.

In 1893, three young students of Banaras — Shyam Sundar das, Banarath Mishra and Thakur Shiv Kumar Singh — founded the *'Nagari Pracharini Sabha'* with the twin objectives of promoting Hindi literature and the Devanagari script. The real boost to Hindi came with the government notification of 1900, giving Hindi equivalent status as that of Urdu in law courts and government proceedings – thereby giving a big push to text books, law books and newspapers in Hindi. As the national movement grew

stronger, leaders like Tilak, Bipin Chandra Pal and Lajpat Rai encouraged the writings in Indian languages. But the real filip to Hindi and Bhashas of India came with the advent of Mahatma Gandhi on the national scene. As he wrote in the *'Navjivan'*: *But how could the general public be trained in Satyagraha through the medium of English?* This is how the Hindi and Gujarati editions of his paper became the principal organ of the Civil disobedience and all other movements launched by the Congress?

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Post the Independence, Hindi had to fight a different kind of battle. Purists like PD Tandon, Sampurnanand, Alagu Rai Shastri and Dr Raghuvir wanted to purge Hindi of 'foreign words' and develop it as a Sanskritised language for the entire nation — an experiment which was not very successful, and which also led to a lot of opposition from the non-Hindi-speaking states. The one nation, one language, one script, one culture did not find adherents even in Punjab, Gujarat, Bengal and Maharashtra, where the spoken language was quite closely aligned to Hindustani, rather than its sensitised version.

In the decades following Independence, many journalists and creative writers considered writing in Hindi as a political act, but as English became the language of power, the elite sent their kids to English medium schools, and the government schools stopped teaching English till the middle school – thereby widening the gulf between those who knew English, and those who did not. So, while vernacular literacy increased, the old class/caste divide was further accentuated on account of fluency in English. By the mid-seventies, Hindi language periodicals like *'Dharam Yug'*, *'Saptahik Hindustan'*, *'Ravivar'* and *'Dinman'* gave space not just to Hindi writers but also to the best writings in Bangla, Punjabi, Kannada, Marathi, Malayalam and so on. The eminent Hindi

editors of those days included Ageya, Dharamvir Bharati, Shrikant Verma, Manohar Joshi and Sachidanand Vatsayana.

One consequence of the liberalisation of the 1990s was the fall of the editor and the rise of the corporate honchos, who regarded the newspaper as a 'product' like any other, with bottom-line being far more important than headlines. Starting with the Times Group, which prioritised ad revenue over anything else, newspapers were soon directed by advertisement managers, and the biography *'Hawker se Haakim Tak'* makes it clear that the battle for circulation and advertisements was fought like that for any other commodity. The thin line between editorial content, news, infotainment, paid news, propaganda and advertisement was blurred in the race for readership. Given the inherent biases of the upper class/caste males in leadership positions, women, Dalits, minorities hardly got their legitimate space in either the editorial or the board rooms of papers. She laments that even the Hindi and regional papers which drew their advertising revenues and political clout from their circulation have not invested in strengthening the editorial and news content of their newspapers. They have not hired any bureau chiefs globally, and other than in the state capitals, they depend on their 'stringers' for their news, who also double up as their advertising-cum-circulation managers as well as their liaison officers with the local politicians, revenue and police officials.

The new challenge for the Hindi papers comes from the Internet, websites, citizen journalism and Jio: all of which have made access to news and opinions far more democratic than ever before. With AI and ChatGPT gaining ground, the day is not far when Hindi editions of the top newspapers and journals – from *'The Economist'* to the *'Fair Observer'*, and *'Foreign Affairs'* will launch their Hindi editions. What this augurs for Hindi, and by extension all the major non-European languages, is something only time will tell!

In fine, this is an excellent offering by Pande, a veteran journalist, television personality and author. She broke new ground as the first woman editor of the multi-edition *'Hindustan Times'*, the first woman to helm the Editors Guild of India as well as the Prasar Bharti, besides being the founder president of the Indian women's press corps. VoW is delighted to announce her book as the best in the genre of English Non-Fiction writing for the year 2023.

The writer, a former Director of LBS National Academy of Administration, is currently a historian, policy analyst and columnist, and serves as the Festival Director of Valley of Words — a festival of arts and literature.

