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Dubious Practice

Registration of FIRs against journalists for doing their legitimate duty, invoking Section 152 of the BNS, a more potent remix of the colonial sedition law (Section 124A of the IPC), pronounced unlawful by the Supreme Court, in *Himanta Biswa Sarma's* Assam, is a crude attempt at muzzling independent media. The idea is to send a message aimed at creating a chilling effect on independent voices working on digital media platforms, carrying forward the work as watchdogs of democracy, against the backdrop of an increasingly pliable mainstream media.

Foisting criminal cases against persons who are critical of the dispensation at New Delhi on trumped-up charges and hauling them to the northeastern state in the name of investigation and even arresting them has become a practice for Assam Police. The Chief Minister, *Himanta Biswa Sarma*, has been acting with the zeal of a new convert, to use an Americanism.

Siddharth Varadarajan, Editor of the news portal *The Wire*, and Consulting Editor *Karan Thapar* had to approach the Supreme Court to get protection from arrest. The same was the case with *Abhisar Sharma*, another senior journalist and *YouTube*r. No sooner had the Court given protection to *The Wire* journalists than another dormant FIR by Assam Police was raked up to summon the duo to Guwahati. Again, the Supreme Court had to intervene.

The FIRs by Assam Police are a mockery of the rule of law. In the case of *The Wire's* editors, a story published in the news portal based on a presentation by an Indian Defence Attaché formed the basis for sedition charges. In the case of *Abhisar Sharma*, it was a video criticising *Himanta Biswa Sarma* that attracted the draconian provision. The message is loud and clear: we will not brook any criticism.

The political leadership, which identifies the voices to be silenced, and the police, who initiate the vindictive action, are well aware that the charges do not stand the scrutiny of law. But the process is punishment. The Assam Police deliberately use that weapon to chill media freedom. If allowed unquestioned, this practice will gain legitimacy.

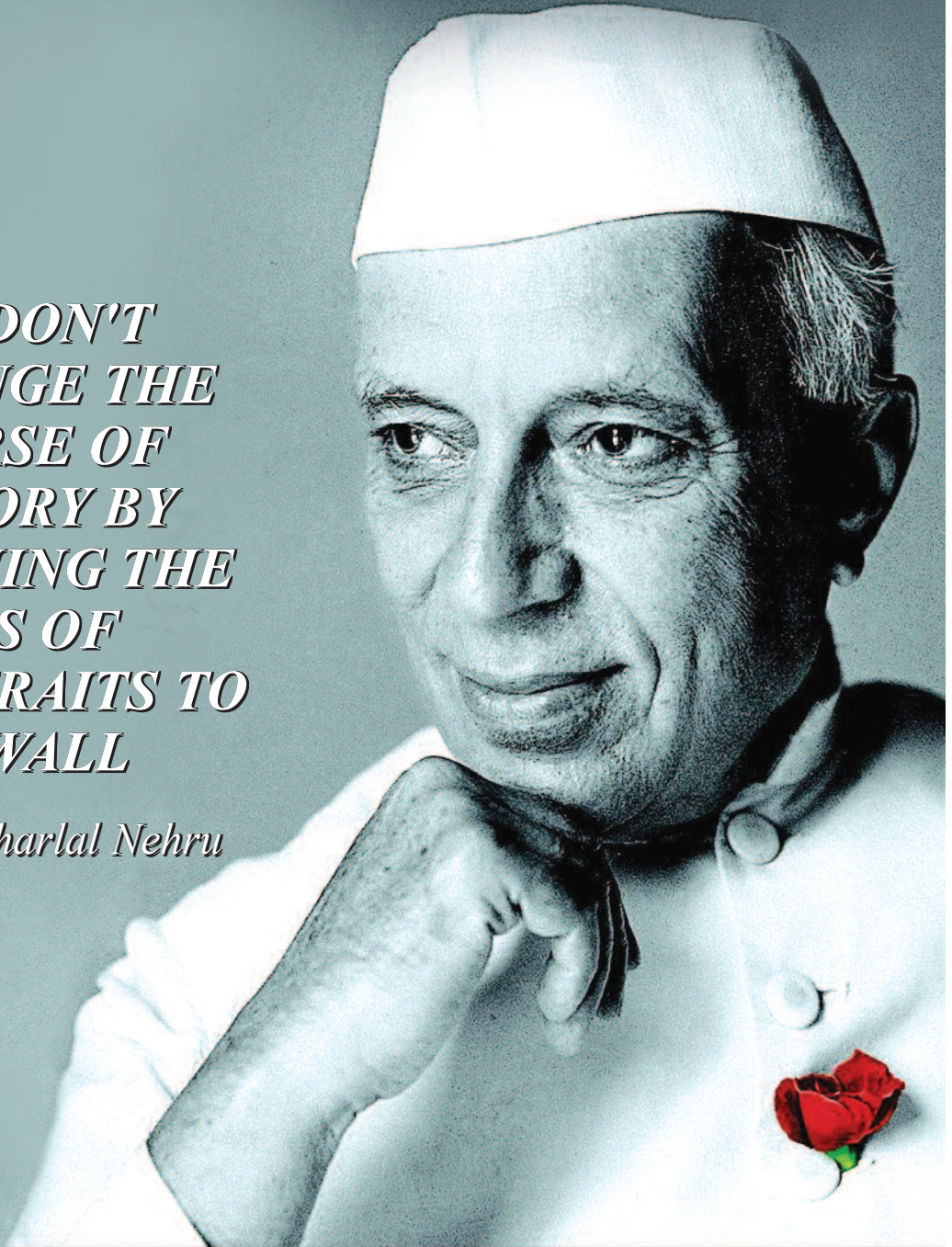
Fearless
Frank
Free



“

*YOU DON'T
CHANGE THE
COURSE OF
HISTORY BY
TURNING THE
FACES OF
PORTRAITS TO
THE WALL*

— Jawaharlal Nehru



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Indian Journalists Union Elects New Office Bearers

Balwinder Singh Jammu and D. Soma Sundar elected unopposed as IJU's President and Secretary General respectively

The Indian Journalists Union (IJU), the largest representative body of working journalists in the country has elected Balwinder Singh Jammu of Punjab as President and D. Soma Sundar of Andhra Pradesh as Secretary General for the new term. Both were elected unopposed after their nominations were found valid, and the Central Returning Officer (CRO) Mahesh Kumar Sinha announced the results on August 18. Their tenure will formally begin with the next plenary session of the IJU.

The elections began on June 30 with nominations from 14 states, but only one valid nomination each was received for the posts of President and Secretary General. Leaders from across the country, including IJU President K. Sreenivas Reddy, former President S.N. Sinha, Vice President Amar Mohan Prasad, APUWJ President IV Subba Rao, TUWJ President K. Virahat Ali, IJU NEC member Shivendra Narayan Singh, BWJU General Secretary Kamal Kant Sahay and other state leaders were present when the nominations were filed earlier in Patna. The election process for 150 National Council members will be completed by mid-September.

Balwinder Singh Jammu of Patiala district, Punjab, was a product of student politics. He joined the All India Students Federation (AISF) in the late 1977-1978 and rose to



**Balwinder
Singh Jammu**



**D. Soma
Sundar**

head its Patiala unit, later being elected Punjab State President in 1985. He was arrested during the AISF-AIYF "Job or Jail" agitation in Delhi and briefly spent time in Tihar Jail. He earned a Master's degree in Journalism and Mass Communication from Punjabi University, Patiala. His journalistic career began in 1990 with *Nawan Zamana*, and from 1993 he served *Punjabi Tribune* for 27 years in different roles, retiring as Principal Correspondent in 2020. An active trade unionist, he led the Tribune Employees Union as General Secretary thrice, was a founder of the Punjab & Chandigarh Journalists Union, and served as its State President. He also held leadership roles in the Chandigarh Press Club. Between 2018 and 2022, he was a member of the Press Council of India. Within the IJU, he was elected Secretary General in 2019 and again in 2022, before his elevation as President.

The new Secretary General, D. Soma Sundar, hails from Ravulaparru village in West Godavari district, Andhra Pradesh. His family's

roots are steeped in the freedom struggle. His father, Virata Raju, was jailed thrice as a freedom fighter, and his mother, Subbayamma, was also imprisoned for her activism. As a student leader in AISF, he rose through its ranks while simultaneously beginning his journalistic career with *Visalandhra* daily in 1976, where he worked for three decades. Since 2005, he has been Working Editor of *Jana Balam* and serves on the editorial boards of *Jatheeya Spoorthy* and *Daari Deepam*. His trade union journey began in 1987 in the Andhra Pradesh Union of Working Journalists (APUWJ), where he rose to become State President in 2007, serving two consecutive terms until the bifurcation of the state. He contributed to memoranda on the conditions of mofussil journalists and participated in wage board hearings, including those of the Manisana Singh and Majithia boards. He was also part of the team that presented evidence of paid news during the 2009 elections to the Press Council of India. In 2013, he represented journalists at the 46th Indian Labour Conference in New Delhi. An active member of IJU for decades, he has also been an NEC member, Secretary, and National Council member, and was associated with government advisory committees in Andhra Pradesh. Beyond journalism, he has worked on literacy and digital education projects in his native district and continues to lead several trade unions there.



The GST Council has slashed the GST rate for TVs from 28% to 18%, to stimulate greater consumption. But the Council has not seen it fit to allow a rate cut for broadcasters.



No GST Relief for Indian Media Industry

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he GST Rate rationalisation exercise saw rate cuts for over 400 products and services, but the GST rate for broadcasters remained the same at 18%. Ahead of the latest GST Council meeting, broadcasters had made a pitch for lowering the GST rate from 18% to 5%.

Interestingly, the GST Council has slashed the GST rate for TVs from 28% to 18%, to stimulate greater consumption. But the Council has not seen it fit to allow a rate cut for broadcasters.

Currently the services like DTH, IPTV and subscriptions to digital media services are facing an 18% GST burden. The pitch by the industry had sought to reduce it to 5% or exempt it entirely.

News broadcasters are quick to point out that printed newspapers are spared the GST burden and are exempt. Broadcasters also claimed financial pressures and reduced operating margins, putting to risk millions of jobs. They argue that a reduction in the GST rate will bolster the health of the sector at large.

The All India Digital Cable Federation (AIDCF) had written to the Finance

Ministry and the Ministry of I&B, seeking GST relief. In their submission, they had cited how Cable TV had a reach of over 6.4 crores and how it supported over 10-12 lakh direct jobs.

AIDCF's pitch was that putting it in the 5% slab would make Cable TV – the primary source of information, entertainment and education for crores – more affordable and accessible. The AIDCF letter had argued that MSOs and LCOs were made up of mostly MSMEs, and any GST relief would allow them to build wired broadband capacity – a stated objective of the Government.

In the letter, AIDCF Secretary General Manoj P. Chhangani had said, "Cable TV is not just entertainment, it is part of India's social fabric. Families in small towns and rural areas gather around it as a shared medium of education, information, and culture. A rationalisation of GST to 5% will not only ease the burden on consumers but also preserve lakhs of livelihoods and safeguard an industry that has been instrumental in bridging the digital divide." ❏

— Courtesy CNBC

Ashmit Kumar

For nearly two years after the takeover, the channel slipped into a dull phase, marked by heavy competition and the absence of its popular anchors.

NDTV

NDTV Goes on a Hiring Spree

Star anchors, journalists and strategists join the organisation

I

n the last few months, New Delhi Television Ltd (NDTV) has been buzzing with activity. The Prannoy Roy-founded organisation changed hands and the Adani group acquired it in 2022. In the immediate aftermath, NDTV's most recognisable faces and acclaimed journalists—Ravish Kumar, Nidhi Razdan, Sreenivasan Jain—quit the organisation along with many other old-timers.

For nearly two years after the takeover, the channel slipped into a dull phase, marked by heavy competition and the absence of its popular anchors. However, in recent weeks, the network has turned aggressive, absorbing some of the most well-known names in the Indian media industry and leaving a vacuum in rival channels. At least half a dozen high-profile journalists and strategists have been appointed to key posts.

The rejig began with the arrival of Rahul Kanwal, who spent 23 of his 26 years in journalism at the India Today group. Once the young face of Headlines Today, he rose to become Executive Director of the rebranded India Today TV before formally moving to NDTV as CEO and Editor-in-Chief in May this year. A little earlier, Shiv



Rahul Devulapalli
Editor, Scribes News



The appointments follow the exit of old-timers such as Sonia Singh and signal a renewed push to expand both the national and regional footprint.



Aroor, known for his defence reporting, joined as Managing Editor. His appointment came just before Operation

Sindoor, when India and Pakistan clashed briefly, giving NDTV an edge in coverage. Around the same time, Boria Majumdar, a controversial yet influential sports journalist and author, was roped in as Consulting Editor to build sports coverage. He was earlier with the India Today group before he was banned by the BCCI for intimidating an Indian player.

In the last week of August, NDTV appointed Aditya Raj Kaul as Senior Executive Editor. A journalist specialising in national security and strategic affairs, Kaul previously worked with the TV9 network. He was seen covering the recent Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit from China for NDTV.

With Group Executive Editor Vishnu Som already on board, the presence of Aroor and Kaul, all known for defence and national security reporting, is raising eyebrows. Why is NDTV loading up on journalists with similar portfolios at a time when the Adani group is deepening its investments in the defence sector?

The hiring spree has extended to business, digital and Hindi news as well. Vikram Oza, a veteran of ET Now and Bloomberg TV India, has joined as Consulting Anchor for NDTV Profit. Syed Suhail, who previously anchored on Republic Bharat, has joined NDTV India as Senior Executive Editor and Primetime Anchor. Munish Devgan, formerly

with Times Network, is now Head of Digital Video Strategy at NDTV Hindi, where he will strengthen its YouTube and digital news presence.

The English channel, NDTV 24x7, has hired Vedika Sud, former CNN International Bureau Lead, as Consulting Editor. Sud has reported across South Asia.

Other senior recruits include Prakaran Tiwari (Chief Executive Producer, NDTV Profit & Marathi), Subodh Singh (Senior Executive Editor, NDTV India), Padmaja Joshi (Managing Editor and Primetime Anchor, NDTV 24x7), Anupam Srivastava (Chief Executive Producer, NDTV India & Regional Channels) and Nazim Khan (Editor, NDTV Profit Digital).

The appointments follow the exit of old-timers such as Sonia Singh and signal a renewed push to expand both the national and regional footprint. NDTV has also begun strengthening its regional bureaus, as part of a larger organisational restructuring.



Northeast: Ethics, Focus Area, Discretion, etc.

I

s it logically correct for an editor of a daily newspaper to regularly write a column for another daily (where both competing dailies are published in the same language and from the same region)? Does the practice indirectly prove that the columnist-editor simply failed to increase the visibility of his/her newspaper and so went on exploiting space in the other daily, which seemingly enjoys a higher readership and credibility?

Such an issue was recently brought for discussions by professional journalists based in various parts of India, where it was largely agreed that if the respective newspaper managements agree, the issue of an editor writing columns in separate media outlets is out of any debate. However, if the editorial management of the recipient media house wants to discontinue the particular column, it should be acknowledged gracefully by the editor-columnist. Moreover, if the editor of a newspaper asks a columnist to concentrate on particular issues (or coverage areas) that should also be admitted as the concerned editor's prerogative and that should not be raised as a censorship on freedom of expression. Because, the editor-columnist may lose the space in that particular newspaper, but he/she has every right to highlight preferred issues



**Nava
Thakuria**



anywhere.

The intriguing debates kicked off following a social media post by a senior and award winning journalist of Meghalaya, where Patricia Mukhim (editor of The Shillong Times) alleged that management of The Assam Tribune had abruptly decided to stop her regular column. With the headline 'End of a journey with the Assam Tribune', Ms Mukhim narrated, 'Over a decade ago, much before 2014, I was asked by the then editor of Assam Tribune to write a bi-monthly column for the paper. I readily agreed knowing that The Assam Tribune was a newspaper that allowed free and independent expression of views.... I sent a write-up that critiqued the Assam chief minister (Himanta Biswa Sarma) and all his controversial acts vis-a-vis the eviction drive that targeted not just illegal migrants (which is fair if done according to law), but was particularly targeting the Muslim community. I received a message from the

editorial team saying, “The management says your article cannot be carried. You are to write only on issues pertaining to Meghalaya.” That was never told to me in the past and I commented on issues across the region. Then I realised that the inevitable had happened. Anything that runs contrary to the current regime will not be entertained by the mainstream media barring a few brave ones that continue to stand their ground and have refused to become lapdogs of the ruling regime. To be told what to write on and how to write are the marks of an authoritarian regime...’

Speaking to this writer from New Delhi, Paranjoy Guha Thakurta, an independent journalist, author, publisher, and documentary film & music video maker, stated, ‘Whether or not the editor of The Shillong Times should be writing a column for The Assam Tribune is a matter that is to be decided by the owners/publishers of the two publications. If both publishers agree, there would be nothing unethical for Patricia Mukhim to write for both publications. In the US, this happens from time to time. For instance, the head of The New York Times has written for its rival publication, The Washington Post. However, this practice is not common in India. Whereas it is the prerogative of the editor/publisher to accept or reject any article or column, my understanding is that Ms Mukhim is aggrieved by the manner in which her column was rejected and how the editorial decision of The Assam Tribune was communicated to her by a junior staff member. She is, in my opinion, rightfully aggrieved, and correctly chose to have her column published else-

where and decided to discontinue her more-than-decade-long association with The Assam Tribune.’

Gurbir Singh, former president of the Mumbai Press Club, while talking to this writer, however asserted that if a publication (newspaper) offers a writer to write a regular column, the particular editor should not dictate to the columnist about the content (what goes and what doesn't), which we can term as ‘pro establishment censorship’. However if there is an issue of a writer (belonging to Meghalaya) being crit-

the Assam information and public relations directorate to the tune of a few crores (against the published advertisements) that delayed the release of employees’ salaries and other benefits.

Lately, Dainik Assam, a sister publication of the group, has gone to another Guwahati-based media house, where it was reported that an Assamese satellite news channel ND24 acquired the ownership of the longest serving Assamese daily. ND24 owner Kishor Borah recently made a public declaration that his media house would start publishing the six decades old newspaper Dainik Assam from 18 September 2025 onward.

The media group, as a whole, used to maintain its credibility while disseminating information, editorial viewpoints and other pieces of articles. But in recent times the same principles were visibly compromised, as it openly supported the anti-CAA movement in Assam and provided a huge space to the movement against the centre’s citizenship initiative for non-Muslim nationals coming from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh prior to 2015. In another occasion, it made a series of unchecked reports on a local press club election just ahead of the Covid-19 pandemic. Those reports with an intention to malign the outgoing club secretary put its readers on surprise. When the pandemic devastated the group with shrinking circulation and advertising revenues, it was accumulated by a section of irresponsible employees (including the journalists), where the arrogant management went on looking helplessly on the disaster in making. ❏



ical of the ruling party of Assam (along with its leaders), but is relatively soft to his/her own state government (where the said Assam ruling party is also an ally), that is a different matter. It can be taken up for discussion on some other forums, he added.

The Assam Tribune management did not make any comment over the debate. Needless to mention that once a prestigious media group of newspapers now faces a severe financial crisis, even hampering regular salaries to the employees. Their employees’ union claimed that the salaries were backlogged for two consecutive months. The management cited the outstanding dues from

Media Memoirs

***Dr. Varadarajulu Naidu:
A pioneer of English journalism***

I

t was September 5, 1932. On that day, from Madras, a new English daily of 12 pages in dummy size was published. With a distinctive outlook and comprehensive content, it stood apart. Pages 3 and 4 carried regional news presented with a national perspective. The fifth page was dedicated to economic and commercial news, pages 7 and 8 to national and international news. The tenth page was for sports, while pages 1, 2 and 11 were reserved for advertisements. The sixth page was set aside for the editorial, editorial commentary and similar content.



**Dr. Nagasuri
Venugopal**

That newspaper was The Indian Express! The flying flag and ship in its masthead were symbols of the desire for freedom and the spirit of struggle. The man who launched the paper was Dr. P. Varadarajulu Naidu. By then, he already had experience managing Tamil dailies like Prapancha Mitran and Tamil Nadu, as well as the Telugu paper Andhra Praja. Though the English daily could not last beyond two months, the path it laid for English journalism in the South was remarkable. At a time when great men who created history in Telugu regions are being forgotten, who will remember this Telugu man from Salem and Coimbatore, who rose above caste lines and worked with the goal of public welfare? Telugu people may



say they do not know him, Tamils may dismiss him as not one of their own, and thus such a distinguished figure is at risk of being forgotten. Dr. P. Varadarajulu Naidu was a thinker who had friendships and differences alike with stalwarts such as Mahatma Gandhi, Veer Savarkar, Rajaji, Kattamanchi Ramalinga Reddy, Ambedkar, Shyama Prasad Mukherjee and Periyar Ramaswami Naicker.

Varadarajulu Naidu was born on June 4, 1887, at Rasipuram near Salem, to Perumal Naidu and Kuppamma. His ancestors had served in the army of Viswanatha Nayaka, who, under the orders of Krishnadevaraya, had attacked Madurai and won. Belonging to the Balija Naidu community, his forefathers first settled in Thanjavur and

later, during the time of Thirumala Nayaka, in the Salem region. Orphaned at the age of seven, Varadarajulu was raised by his aunt and grandmother.

His schooling began at the London Mission High School in Coimbatore but was interrupted by the partition of Bengal. Drawn towards the Swadeshi movement, he actively participated in the boycott of foreign goods. Attracted to extremist ideas, he joined Subramania Bharati in the struggle for Swaraj at Pondicherry in 1908. Thus began a public life that continued for nearly half a century. It is no exaggeration to say that no major movement in the Madras Presidency took place without his involvement.

Around 1906–07, he founded the Madras Progressive Association at Udumalaipet near Coimbatore, where he established a reading room and a library. In 1908, he studied Indian medicine at the Burma Medical School in Madras and later gained expertise in indigenous systems at the National Medical Institute in Calcutta. Returning, he began medical practice in Tiruppur of Coimbatore district. His practice flourished to the extent that he was said to earn two thousand rupees a month at that time. His preparation Minsara Rasam, a remedy for ailments of all ages, became widely popular.

A scholar of the Vedas and Indian epics, Varadarajulu was

also an eloquent speaker and fine journalist. His speeches would draw crowds of more than ten thousand. In 1911, he married Rukmini Ammal, who continued his activism when he went to jail, especially working for women's causes. Opposing caste-based discrimination, he achieved success in bringing reforms. On October 22, 1935, he debated with Ambedkar, explained his position, and convinced him on a point—an incident remembered as remarkable.

Although Telugu was his mother tongue, he had mastery over Tamil and English. Standing alongside G. Subramania Iyer, who ran Swadeshmitran and The Hindu, he was a formidable editor in Tamil and English journalism. In 1916, he started the paper Prapancha Mitran, criticized British rule and even paid a fine of one thousand rupees. Under British pressure, the paper had to close. In 1919, he ran another Tamil daily, Tamil Nadu, for a while. He also published a Telugu paper titled Andhra Praja, though no copies or records are available today.

At that time, newspapers usually came out in the evenings. Breaking this norm, Varadarajulu launched the morning daily The Indian Express. With R. Venkatarajulu Naidu as publisher and A. Ramaswamy Aiyar as joint editor, the paper was priced at one anna in its early days. Such was his influence that on the very

first day, two full pages (pages 9 and 10) carried congratulatory advertisements from leaders like P. Subbarayan, K. M. Panikkar, K. Natarajan, Rajaji, and K. Vijayaraghavachari, including then Madras Presidency Premier Munuswamy Naidu.

Varadarajulu Naidu was the first to recognize the importance of advertisements in journalism. In 1930, when the British government introduced a law against newspapers, he spearheaded the movement opposing it. A fearless journalist, he also joined the Congress Party, opposing the South Indian Liberal Federation of Dr. T. N. Nair and P. Thyagaraya Chetty, as well as Annie Besant's Home Rule movement. He entered journalism with the aim of fulfilling this mission. Varadarajulu Naidu also worked in Rajaji's ministry. He passed away on July 23, 1957.

On November 14, 1944, the noted editor Kundurthi Eswaradatt wrote to Dr. Varadarajulu Naidu from Jaipur, referring to his wish to run a newspaper from Delhi and warning that it might become too heavy a burden.

Dedicated to nationalism, social reform and workers' welfare, Varadarajulu Naidu insisted that only Telugu be spoken at home. His descendants fondly recall this. More people in the Telugu community should know about Dr. P. Varadarajulu Naidu. 

The Committee to Protect Journalists calls on Nepali authorities to ensure the safety of journalists covering protests in the Himalayan nation, following reports the offices of at least two media outlets were set on fire and four journalists were injured in the unrest.

Violent protests erupted in Kathmandu and other parts of the country on Monday after the government shut down access to social media platforms that had failed to heed an August 25 Cabinet directive requiring them to register and submit to official oversight. The ban was lifted on Tuesday and Prime Minister Khadga Prasad Oli resigned following the deaths of 19 demonstrators. But the unrest has continued, with protestors setting ablaze government buildings and assaulting ministers.

“The increasingly violent unrest in Nepal, which has damaged at least two media offices, is a reminder of the danger facing journalists covering events of national importance,” said CPJ Regional Director Beh Lih Yi. “Authorities should hold both security forces and demonstrators to account for all assaults on the media and ensure the press can work safely.” On September 9, protestors set fire to the offices of privately owned Kantipur Media Group — which houses its print, television, and radio divisions — and daily newspaper Annapurna Post.

Taranath Dahal, CEO of local advocacy group the Freedom Forum, said broadcasters including Kantipur TV, Avenues TV, ABC Television, and ITV Nepal have been forced off the air due to the unrest.

Thiralal Bhusal, news editor of English-language newspaper The



From left, Kantipur TV journalist Shyam Shrestha and Naya Patrika photographer Deependra Dhungana. Both men were hit by rubber bullets fired by police. (Photo: Courtesy of Freedom Forum)

Kathmandu Post, which is owned by Kantipur Media Group, said staff were working from home and the website was down.

Annapurna Post News Coordinator Ramkala Khadka said the arson attack on her office had disrupted print and online operations, and staff were also working from home. At least four journalists have been injured while covering the protests. Dipendra Dhungana, a photojournalist with news website Naya Patrika, was hit in the neck

with a rubber bullet fired by police. Nepal Press photographer Umesh Karki and video journalist Shyam Shrestha, from Kantipur TV, were also hit by rubber bullets. Barsha Shaha, photojournalist with news website Deshsanchar, was injured after being hit by stones.

Nepal Army Information Officer Rajaram Basnet and Nepal Police Spokesman Binod Ghimire did not respond to CPJ's emails and texts requesting comment. 

— Courtesy CPJ

Nepal

Sees 8,000% Spike in VPN Signups after Deadly Social Media Protests



Nepali student protestors clash with police over a recent social media ban in Kathmandu. Credit: Subaas Shrestha/NurPhoto via Getty Images

Joe Hindy

Protests erupted in Nepal on Monday after a controversial social media ban blocked people in the country from accessing most forms of social media. The youth-led "Gen Z" protests over the social media ban and government corruption triggered a violent reaction, and the BBC reported that 19 protesters have been killed. The New York Times also cited local media reports that said 400 people have been injured in the ongoing protests.

Amid the protests, a popular VPN provider reported an 8,000 percent spike in signups, ostensibly so Nepali users could get back online and use social media.

The trouble began when Nepal passed a ban that removed access to 26 social media platforms, including legacy platforms like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Reddit, along with newer platforms like Threads, Discord, and Mastodon.

Authorities in Nepal told the New York Times these platforms have not registered with the Nepali government.

TikTok was able to circumvent the ban by registering back in 2024, and Telegram is reportedly in the process of registering right now. In addition to official registration, each social media company has to have a local point of contact to help battle misinformation and abuse. Nepal's Ministry of Communication and Information Technology posted a notice that companies can get off the ban list by registering. While the ban has been enacted in full, many people are angry because the bill hasn't passed the country's parliament, sparking charges of government censorship. The social media ban reportedly caused lingering anger over government corruption and economic inequality to boil over, leading to the explosive Gen Z

protests that occurred Monday, as the Times reported. Meanwhile, many Nepali people are finding other ways to get online.

As the ban went into effect on Sept. 4, Proton VPN recorded an 8,000 percent increase in new users

for its VPN services, which can be used to circumvent georestrictions on specific websites or apps. Proton VPN posted a graph showing new users in Nepal joining en masse starting on Sept. 3, with the numbers skyrocketing after Sept. 4 when the ban went into full effect. Proton VPN is one of the most popular

VPN services, with a reputation for having some of the best privacy features of any VPN.

The company has reported similar spikes in signups following high-profile bans in other countries. For instance, after Pornhub was recently blocked in France, Proton VPN signups surged 1,000 percent. 

Young people in Nepal are leading protests against government corruption and a controversial social media ban.

SANKARSHAN THAKUR (63)

A Reporter Who Wrote
With a Poet's Pen

first met Sankarshan Thakur in Patna in the mid-eighties. He was then a handsome, young and enthusiastic reporter with Sunday, a magazine sold for just one rupee a copy. Though it was cheap in price, I rated the weekly high. I admired its editor M.J. Akbar's flair for reporting—his piece on the funeral of Lok Nayak Jayaprakash Narayan was one I must have read several times.

Akbar had an eye for spotting talent and nurturing it. He made many outstanding reporters and editors. One of them was undoubtedly Sankarshan Thakur. Journalism, after all, was in his blood like the red corpuscle. His father, Janardan Thakur, was a formidable figure in the profession. Sankarshan inherited not just the instincts but also the literary verve of his father.

What drew me most to Sankarshan was his flair for writing. He was not the conventional reporter who filled his copy with dull phrases like "he said, he observed, he concluded." He wrote instead with the heart of a storyteller and the brush of a painter. He could set a scene with the detail of a novelist: "As the sun set in the west and as the fisherman rowed his boat laden with only his net and no fish, Ramesh..."—that is the kind of opening line one

might see in his reports.

He never disappointed me as a reader. His journalism had rhythm, cadence, colour. He made politics and conflict human, and human beings political, weaving narratives that were both sharp and lyrical.

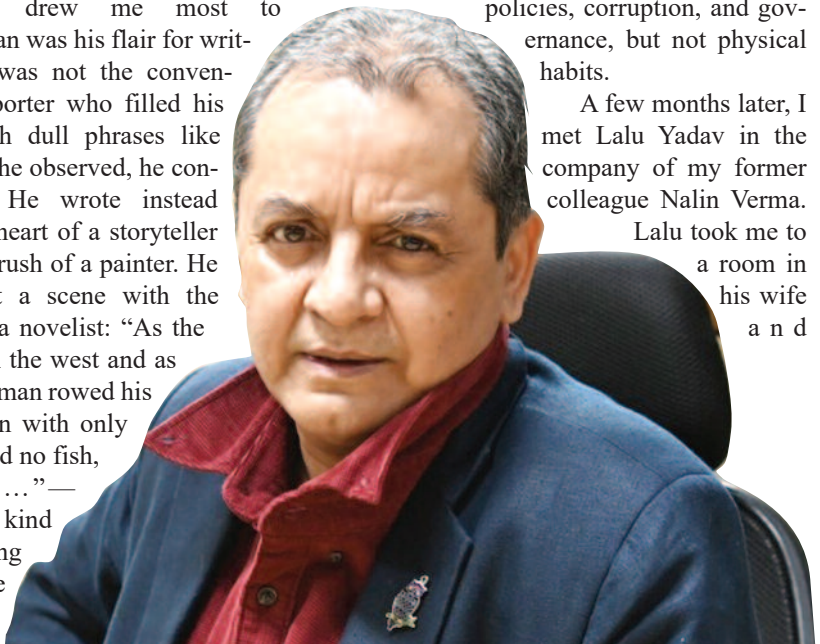
Of course, I once locked horns with him. When his maiden book, *The Making of Laloo and the Unmaking of Bihar*, appeared, I picked up an early copy and wrote a review article. I praised the book but pointed out what I considered a lapse of taste. He had mentioned that Laloo Prasad Yadav scratched his groins. I asked, in my review, if a man felt like itching, what else could he do? To me it was unbecoming of a journalist to mock a leader's mannerisms and pronouncement. He had every right to criticise policies, corruption, and governance, but not physical habits.

A few months later, I met Laloo Yadav in the company of my former colleague Nalin Verma.

Laloo took me to a room in his wife's and



A.J. Philip



Chief Minister Rabri Devi's official residence, stacked with books. "Don't think I read any of them," he said candidly. "These are books I receive. You can take any or all of them home." Among them I noticed Thakur's book. Lalu made some remarks about the author which are better kept in memory.

For years, I remained a regular reader of *The Telegraph*, where Sankarshan's long features and dispatches stood out for their richness. One thing I noticed about him was his willingness—almost an impatience—to report from the scene of activity. As one of his editors remarked, "Within two hours, he would board a car or train or plane to reach the spot."

He was holidaying in Goa when he heard about the "war" in Kargil. Without hesitation, he rushed there. His reports from the conflict zone were nuanced and riveting. Television reporters like Barkha Dutt became household names with their ground-zero coverage, but Sankarshan's words captured the complexity of the war with a depth that only print could provide.

It was during the Kargil war that tragedy struck him personally. His father passed away while he was at the front. Twenty years later, he remembered the moment in a tweet that revealed the tenderness beneath his journalistic toughness:

"It has been 20 years, and we lost him while I was reporting the war over Kargil. Nothing fades, or it fades and colours up again and again, like shades on olden photographs. A tribute to the man who made me. He was also my father."

Only a son with the soul of a writer could have composed such a tribute. Providence made us colleagues when he joined the *Indian Express* as Associate Editor. On a

few occasions, I requested him to write editorials, but he showed little interest. Perhaps because editorials carried no byline, and Sankarshan was a man who valued his signature on his work.

Yet he was generous in another way. He often wrote to the editor asking him to convey thanks to the sub-editors who improved his copy with subtle but effective editing. It was a rare acknowledgment in a profession where reporters often bristle at editorial changes.



He never disappointed me as a reader. His journalism had rhythm, cadence, colour. He made politics and conflict human, and human beings political, weaving narratives that were both sharp and lyrical.

Our relationship may have remained cool, but Sankarshan was known to be warm to his friends. He loved to host them with good food and conversation. Like some of my Maithil Brahmin friends, he was fond of cooking—especially mutton slow-cooked and served with litti, the baked wheat ball stuffed with roasted gram flour and dripping with ghee. His table, like his prose, had flavour and richness.

Journalism—and nothing but

journalism—was his passion. He began humbly as a trainee at the *Free Press Journal*. From there, through *Sunday*, *The Telegraph*, and *Indian Express*, he rose steadily to the very top. He eventually became Editor of *The Telegraph*, a position that marked the zenith of a career built on curiosity, integrity, and craft.

But the summit was shadowed by illness. Cancer—described by author Siddhartha Mukherjee as "The Emperor of All Maladies"—crept into his life. Diagnosed with lung cancer, he was admitted to a prominent hospital in Gurugram. For a time, he responded well to treatment. Family and friends began to believe he might rally. But the disease was relentless. His health deteriorated, and he was finally put on a ventilator. It could not save him.

Sankarshan Thakur died this morning, leaving behind his wife, a daughter who is a conservationist with INTACH, and a son who graduated in law from Jindal University, besides a large circle of relatives, friends, colleagues, and admirers.

In his death, Indian journalism has lost one of its great practitioners. Sankarshan was not merely a reporter but a writer who turned reportage into literature. He humanised Bihar politics for a national audience, gave texture to war reporting, and kept alive the belief that journalism could be at once factual and lyrical.

For those of us who knew him in person or through his prose, his passing is an irreplaceable loss. Journalism in India has grown noisier, shallower and more transient. Sankarshan Thakur reminded us, by his example, that words can still be precise, humane, and enduring. I join his family, friends, and countless readers in mourning his death and celebrating his life.





Chihuly Glass Sculptures



Fifteen large-scale works by one of the most famous glass artists, the US-based and globally renowned Dale Chihuly, are on display in Adelaide, Australia — only the third city outside the United States to host a Chihuly Garden Cycle exhibition. An intensive collaboration between Adelaide Botanic Garden and Chihuly has created a series of striking glass installations, including two brand new works curated to live in rhythm with the flora and fauna around them. Chihuly has been actively creating art for

six decades and remains engaged in his studio, focusing on designs for exhibitions and large-scale public installations.

Dale Chihuly continues to create exhibitions and public installations despite a career-altering 1976 car accident that caused permanent damage to his left eye and foot. While he had to step back from hands-on glassblowing due to these injuries and later health issues, including bipolar disorder, he now leads his Chihuly Studio as a coach. He produces drawings of his ideas and directs a well-coordinated team of skilled artisans to execute his artistic vision. Though a number of critics

charge him with being a craftsman rather than an artist, the majority praise his work for its visual impact and technical mastery, while acknowledging that it sometimes lacks restraint or purpose beyond art for art's sake. The Oklahoma City Museum of Art in the US houses the largest collection of Chihuly glass art in the world.

Experiencing the vibrant, large-scale glass sculptures in the botanical garden after sunset shows how changing light lends new dimensions to these sculptures.

— Photos & Text by
S. N. Sinha





The 'deep state' is back on TV

B

ack in the sixties and seventies, the government had a favourite bogeyman to divert national attention from pressing everyday problems: the “foreign hand”. Problems in the restive state of Jammu and Kashmir or in the Northeast? The “foreign hand”. The economy sputtering? The “foreign hand”, of course, and so on.

The “foreign hand” has staged a noisy comeback, especially on the TV news media. It is now called the “deep state”, meaning the Central Intelligence Agency of the US and assorted American organisations, including NGOs, think tanks and certain media outlets.

The “deep state” is now the designated patsy for the TV news media for the uprising in Nepal which toppled the KP Sharma Oli government. The uprising was led by young Nepalese citizens, including school children and teens, but the TV news media lost no time in blaming the “deep state” for the ouster of Oli.

While most channels, particularly those in Hindi, couched their manufactured outrage at the ouster in Nepal, using only the words “deep state”, Arnab Goswami of Republic TV named the CIA as the architect behind the regime change.

Not only did the channels apportion blame to the “deep state” for the happenings in Nepal, they brought in the uprisings in Sri Lanka (in 2022) and in Bangladesh (in 2024). There was no reporting from these countries by their own correspondents, because that would have meant spending cold, hard cash, which channels are clearly loath to do.

Instead, what the channels offered was unending “debates” on the uprising in Nepal, using footage provided by the wire services. The “debates” as usual were slanted towards blaming the “deep state”, without going into the nub of why thousands of young Nepalese took to the streets demanding change in governance.

The channels rounded up the usual suspects to buttress



Shaukat H. Mohammed

The writer is a senior journalist based at Hyderabad



their argument that Oli in Nepal, Sheikh Hasina in Bangladesh and Gotabaya Rajapaksa in Sri Lanka, were not deposed by an uprising of their citizens but by the machinations of the “deep state”. Three of the most egregious guests on such shows were Anand Ranganathan, a microbiologist by training, who comes on TV to bloviate on everything from the alleged weakness in Islamic jurisprudence to the “deep state”.

The second is Gagan Deep Bakshi, a former Indian Army general, who last saw action in the Kargil war, and the third is Deepak Vohra, a former diplomat who once said on TV that if Hamas terrorists kill one Israeli child, then the Israelis should kill “10,000 Palestinian children, because that is the only language that the Palestinians understand”. This brazen incitement to violence was not challenged by the news anchor, who smiled fondly, mentally hoping that the TRP of his show would rise.

The slapping and enforcement of 50% tariffs by the US on Indian imports also changed the villain of the TV news drama. Suddenly, it was US President Donald J. Trump and his senior Cabinet colleagues and advisors who were the designated “bad actors” in the imposition of the tariffs.

The channels were at pains to paint Trump and his cabinet as being “jealous” of the economic growth of India, so it was all hands on deck at the channels to portray the US administration in dark colours. They forgot that for them the re-election of



Trump to the presidency was the best thing that could have happened to India and Prime Minister Modi. “When the two leaders meet sparks will surely fly on the stage,” exulted Anjana Om Kashyap in January, in an obsequious display of sycophancy on air, while her cohort, Gaurav Sawant, chortled beside her.

The sycophancy quickly turned to disdain for Trump and his advisors and Cabinet colleagues like Peter Navarro, Howard Lutnick and Scott Bessent. They provided the red meat for the TV news anchors by saying outlandish things about India’s business practices and economic choices. Navarro said that “some families” in India were making windfall gains by buying Russian crude on the cheap, refining it and selling the refined products at market rates to Europe, in the process making huge profits.

One such family is that of Mukesh D. Ambani and his Reliance Industries. According to Kpler, a

data provider, India imported 231 million barrels of Russian (Urals) crude oil in 2025 (till 24 June), of which 45 per cent was imported by Reliance and Nayara, which is backed by Rosneft of Russia. Reliance alone is estimated to have posted a profit of USD 6 billion through the trade in Russian oil. The news media went on and on about the treachery of the West to stymie India’s “strategic autonomy” without grounding their reporting on confirmed facts.

The media also gave the meeting between Modi, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese leader Xi Jinping in Tianjin, China coverage bordering on myth. Modi had attended the meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and had spent some time with Putin, who invited Modi to travel with him in his limousine. The media went hysterical about the picture of Modi with Putin in the latter’s limousine and the fact that the two leaders spent over an hour in the car, with no interpreters present.

They should have asked what the two men spoke about, because while Modi’s command of the English language is reported to be limited, Putin’s knowledge of Hindi is unknown. But they didn’t. ❏

The channels rounded up the usual suspects to buttress their argument that Oli in Nepal, Sheikh Hasina in Bangladesh and Gotabaya Rajapaksa in Sri Lanka, were not deposed by an uprising of their citizens but by the machinations of the “deep state”.



HOW US MEDIA COVERED MODI-XI MEET

'Trump's Pointless Rupture will Change India and World'

I

Anwasha Mitra

India has found frequent mention in American news over the past few weeks as US President Donald Trump escalated his trade war. Multiple publications also covered the ongoing SCO Summit - often lambasting the POTUS for upending the world order. Most channels, newspapers and websites are running articles about the widening rift between Modi and Trump while others focused on the growing

influence of China.

'Trump's pointless rupture'

"President Donald Trump has undone 25 years of diplomacy by embracing Pakistan after its conflict with India in May, and is now singling out India for even higher tariffs than China. He cannot have thought through how the world's most populous country and fifth-largest economy would react...His pointless

rupture will change India-and the world," the Economist wrote earlier this week.

The consensus appeared to be echoed by most publications on Sunday as the SCO Summit began with Modi-Xi bilateral talks. The Indian leader is also slated to hold talks with Vladimir Putin during the two-day trip to Tianjin. And according to most American media outlets, the 'nascent rapprochement' between these countries can be linked back to diplomatic gaffes by the US. Even the conservative-leaning Fox News has voiced alarm about the recent developments - noting that China and Russia were 'natural partners' who "shared the same enemy" in the USA.

What did the US media say?

The front page of the New York Times also highlighted "the striking split between Trump and Modi" on Sunday - adding that India was fast "losing patience" with the POTUS. It kept overage of the SCO Summit rather China-centric and somewhat separate from its continued focus on India-US ties. The NYT website noted on Sunday afternoon that Xi Jinping was using the event and an upcoming parade to 'flaunt China's global pull'.

"With the leaders of Russia and India visiting, Xi Jinping will show how he can use statecraft, military might and history to push for global influence," added the blurb on the NYT homepage.

It also laid heavy emphasis on Trump's continued quest for a Nobel Peace Prize and a recently unearthed phone call to PM Modi that had left the US President outraged. The publication also published a guest essay on Sunday morning highlighting the dismal state of US-India ties.



During his first visit to China in seven years, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi took the hands of his counterparts – Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping – and pulled them closer.

"The US wooed India for 30 years. Trump blew that up in a few months," the headline began.

India-US ties also dominated coverage for The Economist on Sunday - with their main story on the website focusing on the massive "ramifications" as India 're-thought' its relationship with America. The article was written three days ago and highlights the SCO Summit as a "striking example of the improving ties between India and China".

Other articles written over the past few days also made repeated mention of the "giant test for India" following the 'humiliation' meted out by Trump. The article noted that the historically non-aligned country now felt "vindicated by the events of the past few months". In this context, the visit to China signals that India has

many options beyond dependence on America. Popular American news website CNN focused extensively on the ongoing Summit with its lead story noting the way in which China was "rolling out the red carpet for Vladimir Putin and Narendra Modi". It also touched upon the new 'world order' seemingly put forward by Xi Jinping and criticised Trump for "Trump upending global relationships".

Meanwhile, Fox News has struck a cautionary note about the Summit - noting that it Chinese President Xi Jinping was hosting Russia, North Korea and India from Sunday. The right-leaning TV channel and website has provided only limited coverage of the SCO Summit over the past few days.

— Courtesy
Financial Express

FROM MISSION TO MODEL

How Euromaidan Press Found its Sustainability Model

What happens when mission meets market? For Euromaidan Press, the answer was a bold strategic pivot



**Gena
Traykova**

Euromaidan Press is an independent online media outlet launched by Ukrainian volunteers in 2014. What started as a grassroots initiative now focuses on reporting Ukrainian news to a global, English-speaking audience. Using solid journalism, the outlet clearly explains complex events in a complicated geopolitical region. This small independent outlet emerged as a David in the media landscape, bravely standing against the Goliath of Russian disinformation.

Euromaidan joined the Validation Booster programme to help it transition into a sustainable media business. The goal was to diversify revenue and secure new income streams while still effectively reaching its target audience. They hoped to launch a commercial department and create a sustainable

revenue stream from business partnerships. Their biggest hurdles were financial constraints and a lack of specialised talent. They knew they had to scale, but they were stuck in an organisational bottleneck: big ideas without enough resources for their execution.

Initially, they thought they knew what they were doing.

They planned to simply create content for businesses that would pay for it, believing the biggest challenge would be finding those businesses. The Editor-in-Chief, Alya Shandra, explained that making money or getting anything done requires a great idea. She realised their original idea wouldn't work as planned during the early stages of interviews when she wasn't getting the answers she wanted. This was disappointing, but also relieving.

As she put it, *"Our hypothesis was purely theoretical, and it did not survive the first encounter with reality - but the bitter truth is better than sweet lies, as we say in Ukraine"*. This realisation allowed them to develop a larger, better and ultimately more useful concept.

Without the massive resources of its powerful opponent, Euromaidan Press relies on its journalistic integrity, a clear voice and the power of its community to share the Ukrainian perspective with the world.



After they got closer to finding their real idea, it mobilised supporters and began developing in directions they never envisioned, because they were focusing on the good they could create, not the money they could make. At the same time, they started seeing more realistic monetisation models. They struggled with feedback they didn't want to hear but knew was true.

This undermined their original core idea that they could serve as a bridge between investors and businesses, facilitating Ukraine's economic development.

The breakthrough happened when they stopped thinking about how to sell content and started focusing on creating a truly great idea that would be valuable to businesses. Alya Shandra said the breakthrough came when she was speaking to Technology United for Ukraine.

They pivoted the initial idea and decided to create a defence blog - a unique and

valuable platform for both their audience and the defence sector that would build trust and establish them as a reliable expert voice. Alya's advice to other media outlets joining the program is, "Don't be afraid to conclude that your original idea won't work. Be creative, be flexible, and be out there in the world".

The pivot in the original strategy - focusing on a dedicated defence blog - created a new model that will hopefully allow Euromaidan Press to secure a stable revenue stream. By providing high-quality information and analysis on a topic of critical importance, they can attract both a dedicated audience and business partners. In this way, our little "David" found a sustainable stone to throw, one that supports their core mission of providing excellent journalism for the long term. 

— Courtesy IPI



"A Danish investor told me they had no reason to read us, and a Danish commercial chamber told me that the companies don't want any promo because they fear Russian missile strikes", Alya Shandra shared.

Do Indian Authors need to be Social Media Influencers to Sell Books?



**Sabah
Gurmat**

It couldn't be a worse time to be a long-form print journalist. Everywhere I go now, it feels as if people aren't reading much or are reading only when a book comes highly recommended by reviewers and digital tastemakers. The latest Sally Rooney or Dolly Alderton makes for trendy book club material, even as the rest of the wider, complex and coloured world of literature struggles to make a minor ripple in the literary world.

It's no longer just enough to write a book and send it out into the world, knowing that you poured everything into it and it's now in the hands of readers to make of it what they will. In the age of social media, writing a book is only the first step. Once freshly bound copies arrive from the publisher, an author must transform into a nine-headed Hydra—a marketer, a PR rep, a hot-take machine, a personal essayist, an influencer—to give their work the boost it needs to rise above other authors vying for the same readers, which in itself is a steadily shrinking pool.

It's little wonder then that the hype around a book often reads like fiction itself. Case in point? A Business Standard headline from February proclaimed: Prajakta Koli's debut novel, *Too Good To Be True*, becomes a publishing sensation with 1,50,000 copies

sold within a month of its release. Koli, better known to her combined 18 million Instagram and YouTube followers as 'MostlySane', didn't just wake up one fine day and release her debut novel. One month before its release, the frothy romance climbed to the number one spot within hours of going on pre-order on Amazon and was followed by multiple magazine covers, lit fest appearances and collaborations with Blinkit and Spotify. The YouTube star's vast digital audience made her book impossible to ignore, turning it into a bestseller even before it hit stands. This is not an isolated incident. In June this year, Sukhniidh Kaur, who goes by (@pavemented) on Instagram, posted a reel asking her audience to help her cross 100K followers so she could secure a book deal. 24 hours later, she had thousands of new followers. Within a week, all the big publishing houses were knocking on her virtual door—her inbox. One might deduce that if Kaur were to bag a deal, it could be credited to an internet audience that doubled overnight. The publishing industry has always operated on a combination of sharp art and smart commerce. But with traditional media shrinking and marketing budgets being allocated elsewhere, a writer's follower count is now as crucial as their manu-

script.

Literary agent Kanishka Gupta, whose clients include International Booker prize winners Geetanjali Shree and Banu Mushtaq, admits that this shift has made it convenient for publishers to land their next cash cow. “Many influencer-writers are offered contracts based on their social media following alone,” he shrugs. But given the current publishing climate, Gupta also acknowledges the upside. He points out how social media has allowed authors to bypass literary gatekeepers, giving space to voices that have traditionally been refused entry. “Dalit and anti-caste creators like Anurag Minus Verma and Siddhesh Gautam (@bakeryprasad), and political cartoonist Rachita Taneja (@sanitary-panels) built audiences online before attracting publishers’ attention.”

Despite these merits, there’s no denying that the blame for authors having to chase virality lies with the once-dedicated reader, who has fallen prey to the attention economy and is unable to read more than a couple of pages without reaching for their phone. It’s only natural that writers, therefore, feel compelled to appear where readers spend most of their time: on social media.

In the not-so-distant past, landing a book deal meant the publisher handled your publicity from start to end. This included pitching to bookstores, lining up reviews and author panels, and submitting the work to award juries. Those departments are now leaner. As resources grow scarcer, authors are expected to function as their own PR machines. Constitutional lawyer and science-fiction novelist Gautam Bhatia, who has 143K followers on X, has seen the shift occur in real time. “Earlier, when you had a book deal, the publishers would work on getting your



book in the right places, in mailers, in newsletters and so on,” he recalls. “That work was done by the publicity department at the publishers. It still exists but has been significantly downsized.”

Penguin Random House India’s executive editor, Deepthi Talwar, echoes his sentiment. “Knowing the author can support marketing through their own social media does help. We have many books to promote, so if an author can amplify the push, it’s a win,” she says.

But if more followers = more sales, why did Billie Eilish’s photo memoir released in 2021 fail to create a splash? The total number of copies sold came nowhere close to covering the \$1M advance offered to the pop star by her publishers. “Advertising a book on X may move a few copies, but not many,” Bhatia clarifies. “Social media gets you eyeballs, but sales? That’s less certain, unless you’re a breakout case.”

Journalist Saurabh Sharma is the exception Bhatia speaks of. In 2023,

he spent 17 days at the Silkyara tunnel in Uttarakhand, reporting on the dramatic rescue of 41 trapped workers. His in-depth coverage for Reuters captured national attention and led to a book deal, despite his 1,300 followers on Instagram and 6,679 followers on X. Sharma’s experience is heartening proof that a story still speaks for itself. That someone with 2,000 genuinely engaged followers might have the upper hand over someone with 1 million followers. A digital following can open doors, but it isn’t an all-access pass. The ideal balance is achieved when the work—and the audience—are equally real.

“You may get a deal with 100K followers,” Gupta says, “but sell only 10,000 copies. Meanwhile, Avirook Sen’s book on the Aarushi Talwar case sold up to 70,000 copies with almost no online presence—simply because the subject was that compelling.” After all, aren’t we all just suckers for a good story? 

Courtesy Vogue

Manish Gaekwad returns once more to his childhood home and his mother, Rekha Bai, in his memoir 'Nautch Boy', a journey from the courtesan quarters of Kolkata to the world of cinema and writing



Author Manish Gaekwad Photo credit: Assad Dadan

Bowbazar, 17 years Later

W

**Pankil
Jhahria**

riting was breaking the shackles. Truth loitered over to hear me out,” writes Manish Gaekwad in his new book *Nautch Boy: A Memoir of My Life in the Kothas* (Harper Collins). Gaekwad grew up in Kolkata’s crowded Bowbazar, an area that used to be known for its courtesans. Most of his childhood was spent surrounded by dancers, patrons, radios playing old Bollywood songs, and the heady scent of betel nuts. “Once a year, I returned home to the kotha in Bowbazar. An unpainted, neglected house, it stands as a cul-de-sac in Bandook Gully. Gun Lane — what a violent name for a place that fired sweet melodies,” he writes. He recalls returning home during vacations from his school in Darjeeling. The book mainly revolves around Gaekwad’s life in the kotha, and his mother. His mother, to whom the

book is dedicated, was a distinguished performer in the city. “Mother was introduced to patrons as Kalkatta ki mashoor dancer Rekha Bai,” one of the chapters reads. “Calcutta’s famous dancer. That helped build curiosity around her, even if no one had seen or heard of her.”

An accidental memoir

According to the author, the book was born out of an unexpected turn in his thinking and writing about the book. “The book was an accident. When I wrote my mother’s memoir *The Last Courtesan* (2023), the idea was to put a chapter in the book about my years in the kotha. But during the writing process, I realised my voice was unlike hers and was also not matching the book’s overall tone. She was an unlettered woman. So, in capturing

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her authentic voice, I wasn't interrupting her with my hot takes. I continued to write her story exactly as she spoke," Gaekwad tells TMS.

On meeting his editor, Swati Chopra, he asked her if the two distinct voices in the book could be split into two separate books. The idea was instantly approved. "That's how Nautch Boy was conceived," he adds. Bollywood films and songs have been essentially mentioned in the book. And not to much surprise, the author, himself, was nicknamed after Rishi Kapoor's character, Monty ("with some variation: Montu, Mantu"), in the film *Karz* (1980). "My mother was in the audience during the filming of *Om Shanti Om* [song], where she worked as an extra. That is how she got the idea for my nickname," Gaekwad mentions in the book.

Books over snacks

Reading at the kotha was uncommon. "It was not the ideal place to read because of the steady stream of interruptions." What he couldn't do at home, he did around Bندوق Gully. Here, he'd devour comics and magazines "like fast food". The pocket money would be saved to buy discarded books and newspapers from the "raddi shop", instead of buying snacks. Such was his love for reading! "It's not difficult for me to revisit my past," the author remarks. "I think of it as an archaeologist visiting an excavation site, trying to piece the past together from broken shards of clay and soil, and coming up with the best possible understanding of it." "For me, writing is the glue that fixes things," Gaekwad says, before noting that he did not face any difficulty picking what to reveal and what not to, despite the very personal nature of the story-telling.

From kotha to screen

Alongside his books, Gaekwad has worked as a journalist and scriptwriter; he calls his career "a happy accident" too. He never studied journalism, nor did he attend a film school. "I didn't even attend college for years...just showed up once a year for exams. All I wanted was to read fiction, poetry, watch movies, and write. My training was writing my daily diary," he recalls. He later pitched an article to a magazine, and took up the role of feature writer at a daily. After



Manish Gaekwad with his mother

his first novel *Lean Days* (2018) was published, Gaekwad met director Imtiaz Ali. He collaborated with Ali, and wrote the script for popular Netflix series, *She* (2020). Gaekwad is quite critical, however, of the way courtesans are portrayed in mainstream media. "Mainstream media is entertainment, no?," he expresses. "And cinema exaggerates for effect. Escapism is fine as long as it doesn't turn into caricature. But too often courtesans are reduced to clichés. Instead of misrepresenting them, how about giving the culture its due?" The book's structure is interesting. Why does one chapter close with April 2002, followed by one that suddenly leaps to 2019? "That's the interval point of the book, like in a film," he explains. "I was in the kotha till 2002. I returned in 2019. So I placed one stark page in the middle with just three words: 'Seventeen years later'. It was to show the passage of time, but also remind readers that this memoir is about my life in the kotha," Gaekwad points out, adding, "Those years outside can perhaps become another book." — Courtesy *The New Indian Express*

Mother was introduced to patrons as Kalkatta ki mashoor dancer Rekha Bai," one of the chapters reads. "Calcutta's famous dancer. That helped build curiosity around her, even if no one had seen or heard of her."

Pratik Gandhi's Espionage Drama Is Lost In Translation



J

Rahul Desai

The six-episode spy thriller is compromised by its own mixed identity

ust like the Bhagat Singh story became a first-come-first-serve race for Bollywood historicals in the early 2000s, the Bangladesh Liberation War became the medium to stage Indian patriotism a few years ago. This month marks the beginning of a new period device for Hindi productions: the spymaster story. The recent *Salaakar* did its clumsiest best to fictionalise the career of India's National Security Advisor (NSA) Ajit Doval. The role of an intelligence agent who sabotages Pakistan's covert mission to go nuclear in the 1970s is reduced to a series of tacky espionage clichés and cultural stereotypes. It even uses two timelines to double the sense of victory.

Saare Jahan Se Accha is a six-episode thriller (with one timeline only, thankfully) cut from the same narrative cloth. The source material is similar, but the scope is wider. The Indian spy in Islamabad, Vishnu (Pratik Gandhi), finds himself up against his sharp counterpart, ISI boss Murtaza Malik (Sunny Hinduja). Vishnu struggles

to secure his marriage with wife Mohini (Tillotama Shome) as well as his network of undercover R&AW moles across Pakistan — including ISI agent Shoaib (Anup Soni) and Karachi stock exchange trader Rafiq (Suhail Nayyar). Murtaza gets as much screen-time if not more; he battles to hunt down traitors and lead the secret tradecraft of nuclear material so that President Bhutto (Hemant Kher) can realise his ambition of being a South Asian superpower. If Bhutto succeeds, as R&AW chief Kao (Rajat Kapoor) tells PM Indira Gandhi, the Middle East will get access to the reactor and “it will be the last World War”.

In terms of genre and production value, the series is far more competent and grown-up than *Salaakar*. There is an effort to touch upon the stakes on both sides of the border. Sunny Hinduja delivers a standout Jaideep Ahlawat-coded performance as Murtaza Malik — he plays a traditional villain through the lens of a conflicted anti-hero. It's almost as if Malik is so committed to being a

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nationalist that he resents himself for feeling any disappointment or empathy; he's afraid of not being the man his country demands. So he believes he is the only protagonist, irrespective of what the series thinks.

Yet, *Saare Jahan Se Accha* falls well short of being a solid watch. Somewhere in its six episodes, there's a nuanced and balanced drama about the emotional toll of war, duty, double lives and lost identities; there is a long-form Raazi — where someone wins but nobody wins — for the taking. But every time this drama threatens to show up, it seems to be compromised by an equal and opposite reaction. In other words, it has that reworked and patched-up vibe; you can tell that there are contradicting versions jostling for focus. For instance, I like that the series opens with the Homi Bhabha plane crash being the origin tale of R&AW. Vishnu is often portrayed as someone who carries the guilt and burden of the intelligence failure; he always feels for the sacrifices of his spies, unlike his bosses. Bit by bit, it chips away at his soul. He has his own strong opinion — of cross-border peace and infrastructure — about politics too. But his conscience is diluted to a point where he suddenly becomes a slick patriot during a terribly detached climax. The trajectory makes little sense, even if he is a spy pretending to be different people at once. The confusing tug of war — the push and pull between who Vishnu should be — makes him an opaque figure.

There are several other examples. Murtaza, too, is beset by contrasts. You feel for him when he discovers that an old friend is a mole, but despite Hinduja's turn, the character transforms into a more conventional and 'ruthless' antagonist. It looks like more of a modification



A still from 'Saare Jahan Se Accha'

than an organic change of personality. Nayyar's depiction of trader Rafiq — who is actually a former Indian crook named Sukhir — is complex, particularly when his potential brother-in-law starts to suspect he's a spy. The better moments revolve around Pakistani people feeling betrayal and trauma like regular folks, but there's also a sense that the series is reluctant to commit. Even Sukhir's arc becomes unnaturally loud in the finale, where he sounds like he's been brainwashed by another kind of loyalty. It's like the 1970s character has been tweaked by the future to be more relatable. Even the R&AW chief's philosophy is 'softened' so that Murtaza comes across as a sociopath. These holes in the social fabric of the show distract the viewer from more mundane mistakes, like Henry Kissinger (or any white character) sounding like he's voiced by an Indian putting on a European-American accent. Or Tillotama Shome being wasted as a needy partner whose memo keeps changing. Or a spy's voice-over again borrowing from an *Argo* (2012) exchange between a no-nonsense boss and his officer. Or various shots of the Hungarian parliament building serving as a stand-in for different countries and a globe-trotting plot. Or even a honey-trapping Mossad agent

allying with an Indian team that's torn between loving their country and hating Pakistan.

The idea of a brave Pakistani journalist (Kamra) whose criticism of her government makes her a prime enemy recruit is fine. The subtext — that she could be any dissenter in any democracy today — is not lost on the viewer, especially in a scene where her 'dialogue' to a high-ranking officer ("If a leader threatens reporters, Pakistan is better off without an atomic bomb") is heard by chuckling Indian spies through a pen microphone. They applaud her courage in silence, an image laced with an irony that echoes through the next few generations. Perhaps her arc escapes the scrutiny of the show's too-many-cooks-spoil-the-broth syndrome, because the bottom line is that she deflects for the love of her country and the heartbreak for what it's become. It's a fleeting glimpse of how the phrase "*Saare Jahan Se Accha*" alludes to beating hearts on both sides. It provides a snapshot of what the series could have been, had it been made (or remade) in more porous circumstances. What we get instead is a spy-multiverse entry trying to tone down its own vulnerability. And a hero proudly declaring — rather than sadly confessing — that "the war never ends".



Criminalising Journalism



Does an independent nation with the world's largest democracy need a repackaged colonial sedition law to control its media?

For decades, Section 124A of the IPC was a convenient weapon to target journalists. In May 2022, a Supreme Court bench headed by then Chief Justice N. V. Ramana suspended its operation, halting fresh cases and staying all pending investigations and trials. The bench noted: "We expect that, till the re-examination of the provision is complete, it will be appropriate not to continue the usage of the aforesaid provision of law (Section 124A) by governments."

Yet the uncertainty persisted. In April 2023, a bench led by Chief Justice D. Y. Chandrachud referred the matter to a five-judge bench to decide its validity, rejecting the government's plea to pause judicial scrutiny and await Parliament's new penal code, the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS).

Last month, the Assam Police lodged a case against senior journalist Siddharth Varadarajan, editor of *The Wire*, and its consulting editor Karan Thapar under Section 152 of the BNS, which refers to "acts endangering sovereignty, unity and integrity of India." The FIR, filed by Morigaon Police Station, cited a June 29 article titled "IAF lost fighter jets to Pak because of political leadership's constraints": Indian defence attaché.

The Supreme Court granted interim protection. A bench of Justices Surya Kant and Joymalya Bagchi observed: "For writing articles or preparing news videos, should journalists get entangled in cases? Should it require arrests?" When the Solicitor General argued that the petition was a camouflage to avoid accountability, Justice Kant countered: "We are not classifying journalists as a separate class. However, does an article pose an imminent threat to the unity and integrity of the country? It is an article, not like someone is smuggling illegal arms and ammunition into India." He added: "How can it be stati-

cally defined what will be an act of endangering sovereignty? For instance, one can argue that political dissent cannot endanger sovereignty.... Inviting the legislature to define 'endangering sovereignty' is a big danger." Justice Bagchi concurred: "Acts that come within Section 124A and Section 152, by way of comparative interpretation, would be covered by the ratio of the Kedar Nath Singh verdict that unless there is a clear threat to unity and sovereignty, the offence (of sedition) need not be attracted."

On the very day the Court granted protection, the Assam Police's Crime Branch issued fresh summons to Varadarajan and Thapar under Section 152 and other provisions, including promoting enmity between different groups, publishing misleading information, and criminal conspiracy. The FIR even named former J&K Governor Satya Pal Malik and Pakistani journalist Najam Sethi, who had appeared in Thapar's interview. In this case too, the Court directed that no coercive action be taken against the journalists.

Another FIR was registered by the Assam Police against Delhi-based independent journalist Abhisar Sharma under Sections 152, 196 and 197 of the BNS. A local resident alleged Sharma's YouTube video accused Assam's Chief Minister of pursuing communal politics, mocked the principle of Ram Rajya, and claimed the government "survives on Hindu-Muslim polarization."

What emerges is deeply troubling: a pattern of weaponising Section 152 of the BNS in the same way Section 124A of the IPC was once misused. These provisions have become tools not of justice but of intimidation, criminalising and controlling an independent media.

Governments may succeed in temporarily muzzling uncomfortable questions and shutting down independent voices, but this will ultimately kill the democratic spirit of our great nation.

THE LAST PAGE



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