THE STORY OF OUR NEWSPAPERS

Chanchal Sarkar
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A dull thud awakes you early in the morning. The newspaperboy has pushed a roll of the daily news through the slit for letters in the door or flung it into your third floor balcony. It is usually the first excitement of the day. You try to snatch a glance at the Wimbledon results or the details of the Rover’s Cup play before your parents hustle you off to get ready for the school-bus. They, meanwhile, are immersed in matters like the Prime Minister’s speech in Parliament or a daring dacoity in Bundelkhand. Everyone is quite put out if the newspaper doesn’t come some morning.

But by the next day the newspaper lies sad and ignored. The cook will probably take it to line her shelves or wrap vegetables. A newspaper has a life of only one day.

Most of India’s daily papers come out in the morning. In some cities, Bombay, Delhi and Calcutta, for instance, some
evening papers still survive but by and large India is a morning-papers country and its papers are printed at dead of night.

If you live in a small town you may get your local paper in the morning and the 'dak' edition of a 'national' newspaper later in the day. The dak edition usually has yesterday's news, which normally should not be news at all. But people like to read the details of what may have happened in Delhi, Bombay, Madras or any other city.

Have you ever wondered how hard some people must have worked—all night, every day of the week, even Sunday—to get your newspaper ready so early in the morning? But imagine how much harder the newspaper men would have had to work if newspapers were entirely handwritten? Yet that's how newspapers began.

Beginnings

If we are looking for the origins of today's newspapers we should go back to the Romans under Julius Caesar. He started issuing handwritten public announcements called the Acta Diurna which means 'Daily Events' and in 59 B.C. the Acta Senatus which were a summary of the debates in the Senate. These were posted up on walls at convenient places for the people to read. But soon some government officials objected to the people knowing too much about them and the news bulletins were discontinued. This was perhaps one of the earliest acts of censorship.

In the fifteenth century in Europe printing presses came into use, though the Chinese had invented printing much earlier. The printed word now became one of the most important means of communication. News-sheets could now be produced much
quicker and more easily. After this, it was but a short step to newspapers.

The first newspapers appeared in the sixteenth century and contained mainly commercial news. Later they included political news, since the decisions of the government had a direct impact on commerce and trade.

One of the first ‘war stories’ came out in 1513 in a newsbook’ called “The Trewe Encounter of the Battle of Flodden Field”. Here at last we had the beginning of today’s newspaper which carried not only commercial and political news but the germ of what we now call ‘current affairs’. Finally, the first newspaper of general interest the Avisa Relation oder Zeitung was published in 1609 in German.

2 HISTORY OF INDIAN NEWSPAPERS

Printing and distribution in India don't have roots that go back very far. True, the seals of Mohenjodaro, the edicts of Ashoka carved on rock, did carry the seeds and idea of communication other than by the spoken word but we never developed anything like the printing press. And although printing with blocks on cloth has an old history, somehow the link between communication and printing remained unexplored in India. Urgent news was conveyed by relays of runners while roving minstrels spread ideas over the great area of the country. Under the Mughals
newswriters, who were considered important officials, kept the emperor informed of conditions in distant parts of the empire.

The technology of printing came to India when Portuguese Jesuit priests imported the first printing press in 1550, a little more than a hundred years after its discovery in Europe. They used the press to publish religious books and leaflets to help them spread Christianity. The first news-sheets came out much later when the British had set up their Presidency administrations in Calcutta and Madras. These news-sheets were meant to keep the two distant outposts informed about what was happening to their fellow countrymen.

The days of the East India Company were the days of adventure and men came to India in search of a fortune. One of these, James Augustus Hicky, brought out the Bengal Gazette or the Calcutta General Advertiser in 1780, which cheekily described itself as “a weekly political and commercial paper, open to all parties but influenced by none”. But Hicky’s mixture of advertisements, commercial news and government or party gossip didn’t go down too well with the government and two years later Hicky found himself in jail. Other newspapers sprang up but they were carefully watched and often censored by the government; all this, when the newspapers were run only by Europeans, for Europeans only.

The first Indian newspaper was started by Gangadhar Bhattancharjea. He published the Vangal Gazette in 1816 in Bengali. He was soon followed by Raja Ram Mohan Roy, whose ideas had influenced many including Bhattancharjea. Ram Mohan Roy used his Persian and English publications to spread ideas of social change, to appeal against evil practices like sati, to criticize the government and also to bring to the people of
Bengal the culture and political ideas of the West. Modern Indian journalism had arrived and even though the 1857 mutiny did bring a temporary setback to the growth of newspapers, the course had been set.

Strict laws about the press were passed by the government as a result of the mutiny. These were criticized by several Englishmen too. They felt that a free press could act as a safety-valve as well as help keep the government informed.

Despite very harsh censorship laws, papers like Dadabhai Naoroji’s Rast Goftar and Surendranath Banerjee’s Bengali continued to publish their views on social evils. Among these was also a weekly Young India, started in 1919. Its editor was Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. The Mahatma was not content to be a lawyer; as a social and political worker he clearly

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understood the power of the press and used it to write hundreds of articles to spread his ideas till he was jailed in 1922. He told newspapermen not to be discouraged even if their printing presses were shut down—they should copy articles by hand. Somehow the press had to keep the people informed of injustices and the need for self-government. Yet another person who used newspapers as a weapon against foreign rule was Bal Gangadhar Tilak who published the Kesari and the Maharatta in Marathi. The Kesari, started in 1881, was specially aimed at the ordinary people. Tilak acknowledged Sisir Kumar Ghose as his guru, and used his style of attack.

Apart from such newspapers which were nationalistic in purpose and outlook there were others established about the middle and end of the nineteenth century. Some of these have survived and grown bigger and stronger to become the large newspaper chains of today. You know their names well, but perhaps you do not know of their colourful beginnings. One of these, The Hindu, was started in Madras in 1878 over a hundred years ago. The men who published and edited these newspapers were men not only of ideas but of great courage. Some of them were English and they, too, used their newspaper to fight for the freedom of the Press and of the country.

One of the most remarkable stories is that of the Amrita Bazar Patrika. In 1868 Sisir Kumar Ghose and his eight brothers bought a second-hand printing press for Rs. 32 in Calcutta and set it up in their village, Amrita Bazar, in Jessore district (now in Bangladesh). Their paper did not use very polite language to describe what they considered injustices against the people of India. Very soon they ran into trouble, at times they had to close their press. In 1869 they began publishing columns in English as well, and when the Anglo-Vernacular Press Laws were about to be passed against language papers, they brought out the paper in English overnight, thus evading the Press censor!

The Bombay Times, which was to later become one of the four newspapers which formed The Times of India, was edited by Robert Knight. In 1861 The Times of India was born and under Thomas Bennett continued the tradition of Robert Knight. The Times of India soon became firmly established with very independent-minded editors and even in its early days had a comprehensive news service reflecting different points of view.
Although Benjamin Guy Horniman, the formidable editor of theBombay Chronicle called The Times of India “the old woman of Bori Bunder”, he couldn’t quite compete against this paper. A paper which is not as old as these but has some historical significance is the National Herald which was started in 1938 with Jawaharlal Nehru as the Chairman of the Board of Directors. It is a party newspaper, one of the few to survive so long.

Many courageous and talented people were attracted to journalism in those days. Benjamin Guy Horniman was a supporter of the Indian cause. In a demonstration against the partition of Bengal in 1905 he walked barefoot through the streets wearing a dhoti. He led a campaign against the erection of a memorial for Willingdon. During the great influenza epidemic in 1918 he went from house to house helping people. He offered satyagraha against the Rowlatt Acts and when he wrote against the Amritsar massacre he was dragged from his sickbed and deported in 1919. In 1921 he returned without permission.

There was Rudyard Kipling (the author of Kim, The Jungle Book and Barrack Room Ballads) too. He was on the editorial staff of the Civil and Military Gazette in Lahore and spent his time reading proofs of dull government reports. Naturally he began satirizing the government. His poems, later published as “Departmental Ditties”, first appeared in the Civil and Military Gazette. But much of his satire irritated his seniors, so he was transferred to The Pioneer in Allahabad, where he continued his light verse and satirical writings. But newspapers took themselves seriously and Kipling was not much appreciated. Later those editions of The Pioneer sold in the United States for several hundred dollars. The Civil and Military Gazette, it is said, still keeps a room in his memory.

Thus you discover that Indian newspapers, edited and published by Indians, of course, but also some Britisheers, were directly linked with the stirring story of India’s fight for independence. You should know some of the colourful names of these newspapers: Kesari, Maharatta, Indian Review, Bombay Chronicle, Liberty, Forward, Advance, Servant of India, Justice, Bengali, Bande Mataram, Al Hilal, Swarajya, Hituada.
A few of them are still alive but most have passed into history. The history of newspapers all over the world and through the centuries will show that the most tyrannical government cannot keep down the people's urge for free expression. Newspapers are a splendid way of keeping ideas alive and of upholding the peoples' right to know. Today as many newspapers die as are born. India has many newspapers and magazines. This apparently large number is misleading. Take the daily papers. Their total circulation is nine million only. This against a count of six hundred and eighty-five million people and nearly two hundred and fifty million literate people is ridiculously small, hardly enough to keep the people informed.

3 THE NEWSROOM AND THE EDITOR

The heart of a newspaper is the newsroom. This is where news from the city, from the country and from the world is collected. From it reporters go out to gather material for their stories and it is here that they bring or telephone their despatches in. Here, too, the teleprinter machines chatter all day and night with news from the major centres in India and the world. Districts connected by teleprinters also send in their news. Teleprinter machines are like typewriters linked by electric wire or by radio waves. When an operator types out a message from an office, say in Delhi, it is simultaneously received in all the interconnected newspaper offices not only in India but all over the world.

News also comes in from Press releases, that is, announcements made by government, industry or trade. Another source of news is news agencies. These are
organizations that employ correspondents and reporters who send their news to a central office. Indian news agencies are the UNI and PTI which transmit news in English and Samachar Bharati and Hindustan Samachar which transmit news in Hindi. Some well-known foreign news agencies are AP (American) and Reuters (British). So when you see these names in your newspaper it means that the paper has used the account of that particular agency.

It is the work of skilled people to scan this vast sea of words, make a selection, cut down what is selected to size and then serve it up attractively to its readers. There has to be selection because no matter how large the paper the amount of material that a newspaper receives every day may be more than twice as much as it has room to print. That is where direction and editorial leadership count.

Since a newspaper is a mixture of many items—'hot' news, feature articles, opinion columns, editorials, sports news, financial news, photographs, advertisements, etc.—there has to be a system by which to decide broadly the contents of the next day's paper. This is usually done through a series of meetings. The editor has meetings with several different groups. The news editor, the chief sub-editors, and the chief reporter, for instance, discuss what news is expected to flow in and what developments are to be followed up, what stories the paper is to dig into and investigate, deciding broadly what is to be covered and by whom.

The editor also meets his colleagues who write the 'editorials' which comment on topics of current interest and decides with them the subjects to be covered for the next day. He then discusses other items to be included with specialists on
his staff which could comprise an art editor, sports editor and an advertisement manager. The art editor decides on the photographs and illustrations and the advertising manager deals with the advertisements and informs the editor how much space has been booked. By now a picture of how the next day's paper will look will have emerged. It can, of course, be changed by events and everyone must be ready for alterations if important news comes in.

The Newsroom

To get to know the people who work on the editorial side of a newspaper let's put them all into one large room. In fact, that is how a modern newspaper likes to distribute its staff—in a large, quiet room where a few people are fenced off but even they are often in glass cubicles, in full view of all eyes. The room is quiet because modern electronic press technology is quiet.

The room will be divided into two sections, one part deals with the news which has to be searched for or reported and the other where it has to be edited. The reporters are the people who go out to cover diary events, that is to say, happenings announced beforehand and entered into the paper's 'diary'. They may also be doing features thought up by the paper or maybe a follow-up of a previous incident. Some will be investigative stories where the reporters dig and expose some wrongdoing which sometimes gets them appreciation and applause from the public. The common garden reporter starts by covering some set beats—crime, courts, the municipality. Unlike a few years ago there are now quite a number of girl reporters who have proved that they can more than pull their weight in this often exacting job.

Starting with the dull, everyday beats the reporter gradually gets to specialize. Sports reporters cover only sport, crime reporters do any crime and soon get to know a lot of people in the police and underworld who are useful contacts.

Once upon a time all the equipment that the reporter needed was a notebook and pencil. After returning from his assignment he usually typed out his story. Shorthand used to be a necessary skill. Today, reporters are more and more using tape recorders, especially for interviews. Indian language reporters still handwrite their 'copy' though in some languages typewriters are becoming common.

Another group of people are reporters really but they have, especially in Delhi, got themselves a more impressive-sounding name—special correspondent or special representative. They cover Parliament and various ministries of the Government of India. They often have to sit through dull speeches and boring debates, but sometimes are rewarded by an exciting happening if they keep their eyes open. Others give themselves fancy names like diplomatic correspondent, industrial correspondent, science correspondent or in one paper recently, women's affairs correspondent.

The sub-editor edits and rewrites all the news and features that flow into a newspaper office through the ticker (be it teleprinter or telex) or by mail as well as the copy that reporters hand in. Sifting material, pruning long items to the required length, giving good headlines, and rewriting is a very skilled job but sometimes the active reporting types find it too desk-bound a job. It is a matter of temperament, some people like desk jobs and others prefer work where they are out and about, meeting people, using their contacts, digging for information. In fact no
The cartoonist Abu at work

reporter will be much good unless he has done a fair stint as a sub, because only then will he or she learn to write clearly and without using too many words. All subs, too, should be reporters for a while else they can never appreciate the conditions under which stories are done.

Assistant editors are another group, not very large in number. They write editorials and sometimes columns, look after the letters that flow in from readers, and also the articles contributed by outside writers. One assistant editor often looks

after the special Sunday features which make up a paper’s Sunday magazine.

The news editor, who would rate a separate cubicle, is often in general charge of the reporters (whose leader is the chief reporter) and also the sub-editors (whose leader is the chief sub-editor). The news editor also usually controls and oversees the

Children's page in a newspaper
work of the correspondents of the paper who work from other cities.

The larger the paper the more elaborate is the organization. There are deputy news editors, science editors, picture editors. But all threads lead to the editor whose main job is of leader and coordinator. The closest comparison is with the conductor of an orchestra. Every musician of the orchestra, playing his own separate instrument, is called up and directed by the conductor to fit into the symphony.

The editor, who will most certainly get a cubicle to himself or herself, can mean different things in different papers. In one he can be more a writing man, deciding, writing, passing the editorials and generally controlling the editorial page, leaving the rest to his colleagues though having a loose control over them. Or he could be a planning person most of whose time and creative energy are taken up with planning the ways the news will be displayed and the views it will express on major topics so that he often has no time for writing a line. This might seem strange but some of the world’s most dynamic editors are those who are busy churning up ideas, planning and inspiring others to write.

The Indian editor, however, has often tended to be an editorial or column-writing person and not a planning person. In some countries the planning model is favoured and a few Indian editors are trying to follow this pattern.
Who are the people behind newspapers? You might think there is a simple, one-word answer—journalists. You would be only partially right.

For a newspaper to carry news and views which journalists report or present, it has to be printed, it has to have a business organization which buys machinery and raw materials, maintains accounts, distributes the paper and, generally, runs the show. Somebody has to own it, whether it is an individual, a family, a trust, a group of partners, a political party or even a group of industries.

Let us look into the printing rooms. There are a lot of people who work in the printing press. There might also be calligraphists (handwriting experts) in the older Urdu newspapers (and even in some modern ones with photo printing processes) who write each page by hand before it is printed off.

There are proof readers whom people often dismiss as of no account but who are, in fact, important because the more carefully they do their work and the fewer mistakes there are in the paper, the more do people tend to have faith in what they read.

We mustn’t forget the people who supply the news and those who reach it to readers’ homes. Sometimes they are the same people. Apart from the reporters that a paper has in its main office there are correspondents in district towns and, even in villages. They send their news in by mail and by telegram. Some even telephone it in. Not all work full-time on the paper. They may be teachers, lawyers, businessmen who are journalists in their spare time to make a little extra money.

In very small places those selling the paper—the agent—
and those supplying news—correspondents—are the same people. This is often true of Kerala where more people can read and write than anywhere else in India and where some papers have circulations of three and four lakhs.

Today, of course, there is more and more specialization. There are designers whose job it is to plan the appearance of a page down to the smallest detail. There are photographers and photo-editors who go through hundreds of pictures daily before choosing the few they want. There are writers and correspondents who specialize in science, architecture, defence, the environment, education, religion, etc.

Technology

A far cry from the relative peace of the newsroom, in a large hall on the ground floor or in the basement, is the printing press. Somewhat like a ship’s engine-room and something of a factory, the press awaits the finally composed paper.

Great heavy metal monsters stand in this hall. These are linotype machines, which are like small foundries or metal factories with lead pieces hanging over them waiting to be melted and cast into ‘slugs’ or little slivers of lead type. This begins to happen when the reporter’s typewritten copy is set by a
typograph on a linotype machine. A typograph resembles a typewriter but when the operator works the keys little moulds are spun out (called matrix) and pressed on to lines of molten lead forming whole lines. This is why the name 'line o'type' was given to the process.

Trays filled with lines of the lead type are fitted into a large metal frame. This is a page which with its headlines has been composed in metal. A special kind of cardboard called a 'flong' is then pressed on to this fully-assembled page and an impression taken. The flong is bent into a concave sheet and molten metal is poured into it. When cool this sheet, weighing about thirty kilos, is clamped on to the rollers of the press. At the other end, huge rolls of clean newsprint are slung on to spindles. Once the press starts to roll, with a rumble and a clatter, fifty to sixty thousand newspapers will be spewed out each hour if the press is a fast one.

There is another way of printing called the offset method. Here a negative is made from which an offset plate of zinc or aluminium is made. The printing area is then treated with water or other chemicals to repel the ink or to accept it.

Newspapers are printed on a special kind of paper known as newsprint. This paper is very absorbent and ink dries on it quickly and does not smudge during printing.

Apart from printing, machines also cut, gather, fold and stock the newspaper.

There is a great deal of noise and bustle: men move mountains of paper, workers wearing overalls and aprons grunt under the load of trays of lead slugs, everyone rushing to get the next day's newspaper out in time.

But the clatter, the din and dirt associated with newspaper
printing is likely to be soon replaced by the quiet hum and whirl of electronic newsrooms. Already The Hindu, one of our great dailies is using photo-typesetting and the facsimile method, which is very like the radio-photo, to make production easier and a lot quicker. In this method the image of its pages is sent from the head office to other offices in Coimbatore, Bangalore and Hyderabad.

The electronic revolution has brought even more drastic changes in the newspaper world in other countries. New methods have made it possible to produce a newspaper with less effort, less manpower and in less time for less money. In thirty minutes fifteen pages can be edited, composed and produced for you to read. The heart of all this activity still lies in
the newsroom—but with a difference: it is now an electronic newsroom. Where there were once chief sub-editors, sub-editors and assistant editors, compositors and proof readers, it is now possible for just one man to do all these jobs and quicker. A journalist can now have his electronic typewriter attached to the phone, type out his story, have it directly received in the electronic newsroom, where a sub-editor scans and corrects it on a screen, feeds it into a composing computer which flashes it back to him as proof-copy, in a matter of minutes. Agency messages, too, are directly fed into the computer composing machines. The scanning screens are called visual display terminals and the printing is done by computer controlled photo-typesetters. Even newer is the digital transmission and electronic transmission of full pages by means of satellite. Soon
Computer controlled ink jets will 'spray' ink on to newsprint, and plateless printing will become a reality.
In India changes are coming but our newspapers provide work for many people and speed is not as essential to us as to technologically advanced countries.
In many small Indian newspapers there is only one centre of power—the manager and the editor are the same person and usually he is the owner as well.

Today there are many models of ownership and control. We must try them. There could be papers run by a cooperative of the people who work in them, alongside those that are run by a publisher and manager.

Without an editorial staff there would be no product. But without the managerial staff a paper couldn’t survive. In most countries a newspaper costs less than the price of the paper on which it is printed. This is possible only because the newspaper sells space to advertisers and it is the advertisements that not only pay the costs of production and the editorial and managerial salaries, but also allow the newspaper to run at a profit.
One of the important jobs of the managerial staff is to collect advertisements. This they do through an Advertisement Department whose workers call on advertisers, big and small, and persuade them to advertise, saying that their paper reaches a lot of people and people of the right kind, who have money in their pockets and who therefore can buy the products advertised.

And it is advertising which makes the American newspapers have as many as one hundred and twenty to one hundred and sixty pages in their dailies and British papers sixty or eighty pages. Sunday issues in America and Britain sometimes weigh more than a kilo.

It is advertising which keeps newspapers afloat. If you cut out advertising the price of newspapers would have to be raised five, six or even ten times and fewer people would be able to afford them. Socialist countries like Russia, China, Poland and Viet Nam think advertisements are wasteful and have done away with them. How do they manage? The government feels newspapers are important and so supports them by putting in a lot of funds. The papers are not privately owned. Some organization or State unit runs the paper—like the ruling party, the farmers’ union, the army, or the youth organization.

Governments are quite big advertisers. As such they have a fair amount of power over the Press. It is difficult to decide whether the good of advertising weighs more than the bad.

The management has other responsibilities too. It must organize the sale of its paper not only in the city where the paper is produced, but also in the region around. This is a tough job and an extremely competitive one. Very early in the morning, when it is still pitch dark, vans carrying newspapers race up to three hundred kilometres. Sometimes they hire taxis. These vans and taxis are driven hell for leather to try and beat the rival paper. One newspaper in the south used to cover the other southern cities by air. It ran its own fleet first of Herons and then the two-engine DC3 Dakota planes.

The newspaper is deposited at particular points from which the wholesale newsagent collects them. He in turn delivers them to retail newsagents whose job it is to sort out the papers and mark names and addresses on them. Then the delivery boy takes over. His life is a hard one, which begins at about four in the morning, winter or summer, rain or shine. Sunday or weekday. He gets a commission for every paper he sells and it makes a comfortable addition to his income. But it’s very hard work.

In Europe most people buy their paper at a stand when going to work and their evening paper when returning home. In India (and also in Japan) newspapers are delivered to the house.

In the world there are widely different levels of advancement and differing ideas on what a newspaper should be—from Japan, where you can read your newspaper off the TV screen; to China where the walls are pasted over with newsheets.

In most advanced countries newspaper publishing has been accepted as an industry like steel-making, chemicals or textiles. In India, we are in a kind of in-between state—it is an industry and it isn’t. We have many small papers, often owned by one person or his family, and run as small family businesses and we also have some firms that are trying to practice what is called ‘scientific management’, just as big industries do.
6 WHAT IS A GOOD NEWSPAPER?

Now let's examine our newspaper to see if it has the qualities it should. You can, if you like, make up a system of 'points' to judge it.

The front page of a paper is like the show-window of a shop. A great deal of editorial skill goes into it—in choosing the main stories, in dressing them up, in displaying them and, of course, in seeing that they are crisply and well written. If there is competition in a city, then the front page should try and avoid looking like one produced by a rival. Also the paper shows its skill by not picking up the obvious story served up by the news agency but finding, if possible, an exclusive new story or giving the accepted main story of the day a fresh angle.

Being a newspaper it must carry the news. Carry it without leaning to any side and carry it briefly and straightforwardly. Its coverage should include the town where it is published, the
region or state where that town is, and the world. Of course, it
can’t carry the same amount of news about the world, as about
the place where it is printed. But there has to be a reasonable
mix, the reasonableness being measured by the aim that the
readers must be broadly kept in the know of the big movements
in the world—for peace, for war and for human progress in
science and culture. That isn’t easy as covering news is
expensive. The paper must have correspondents, at least part-time,
or it must subscribe to a very good news agency and an
equally good feature service or several.

The next thing to look for is interpretation or explanation.
The problems of today’s world, and today’s India are so
complicated and difficult that it is one of the duties of a
newspaper to explain them in such a way that the reader can
follow them and draw his own conclusions.

Most newspapers have an editorial page. This usually
means an opinion page. On it the paper expresses its own stand,
its opinion through editorials. The best editorials are written
simply and in language that persuades. You may not agree with
a particular viewpoint but by the very fact of helping you to
think and disagree, it has done its job.

Besides the editorials there can be other opinion columns in
a paper. These ‘columns’ written by people from the newspaper
itself, and sometimes by specialists from outside, not only
comment on but also give further details of news items. Some
papers carry ‘syndicated’ columnists, that is columns which are
offered to all papers who are willing to pay for them. In fact, it is
sometimes said in America that by carrying four or five different
columnists with differing views some papers shirk the
responsibility of having an editorial view of their own.

So much for opinion. But we haven’t finished with ‘views’.
One of the truly important parts of a paper is that which
publishes reader’s letters. From these the paper can judge its
own performance and those in authority (governments,
universities, municipalities, for instance) can know how the
public feels. An interesting development in many countries is
that many papers are now giving more space to reader’s letters.
One way of judging the character and liveliness of a paper is to examine its editorial page. If the editorials are stodgy and dense, the articles dull and the letters mostly complaints about bus services or things like that, then the editorial page will be boring and people will tend to skip it.

Now let's come to entertainment. Newspapers shouldn't just be about wars, revolutions, ministers' speeches and prices. Newspapers should be about life with its fun and games, its sorrows and anxieties. It should be a good guide to the entertainment available in the city—cinemas, theatres, tamashas, exhibitions, and so on. It must carry the radio and TV programmes, with some kind of advice, if it can.

But entertainment includes a lot more—hobbies like gardening, motoring, playing bridge and holiday travel. A good paper should have departments for all or most of these and keep them strictly apart from the political side of its coverage.

In Hindi, Bengali, Gujarati and some other languages the papers give a lot of importance to literature. They publish poems, short stories and a great deal of literary criticism. Many young writers get their first ‘exposure’ in the weekend pages.

Then there is sport. Millions of people are interested in sport, not just young people but the old and middle-aged as well,
men and women. And sport itself is very wide-ranging nowadays from athletics and archery, through football, cricket and hockey to claypigeon shooting, weight-lifting, sailing, and golf. So leave a good measure of your 'points' for sports—how well it is described, how many sports are covered, how often does it teach people to improve their own game, etc.

Something for which you should hold back your marks—because few Indian papers do anything about it—is money. People must be helped with information about what they can do with their money, where they can invest their savings, why they should insure their lives, how to prepare for retirement, sickness and old age, etc. All this must be written about simply and clearly and with definite advice. Although three financial dailies (The Economic Times, the Financial Express and the Business Standard) are published in the country, their news coverage is limited to government decisions and notifications affecting business and industry and the latter’s reaction to these policy decisions.

In other words you judge newspapers against life. You list the things that the average Indian is deeply interested in and compare this with what the newspaper carries. This is more so on Sundays. Because people have more time for reading, the papers carry supplements—some newspapers call it a 'magazine'—and try to cover every kind of interest.

Finally the photographs and other illustrations too must be distinctive. A few Indian newspapers have experimented with more attractive lay-outs but by and large the design and pictorial values remain dull although offset technology, which a good many Indian papers are using today has given quite a lift to the front page (in fact all pages) of Indian newspapers.

Let's look at the real state of affairs in India. Our papers are over-involved with only one of our interests—political affairs—and they give it columns and columns of space. Sport is given reasonable coverage but not nearly enough and we don't have (as many countries do) daily papers only about sport, though we have some weeklies. Other interests like travel, money and health are treated very sketchily. In fact, the whole business of leisure and what to do with it isn't given much skilled attention.

Many of our papers don't even have correspondents in the State capitals. Sometimes not even in the four metropolitan cities, Calcutta, Bombay, Madras and Delhi, so that they give very little news from out-of-State. As for the world, their coverage is slipshod with very little judgement or interpretation.

Besides an interest in literature mentioned earlier our language papers show a marked interest in one other thing—
films. Films of course, take up much of the imagination of the average Indian. And so our newspapers give quite a lot of space to films, to gossip about the stars, to what new films are being made and so on.

Moreover, newspaper standards vary greatly in our country because there is no proper system of training. Until a few years ago there were hardly any schools of journalism. You were made to learn on the job. The lack of adequate training is a pity because the mass media have a powerful influence on the minds of our citizens. Both in Britain and France the newspaper industry is made, by law, to pay towards training. In socialist countries like Russia, Poland, East Germany and Hungary training is almost essential and very well organized.

Of course, different newspapers should reflect the varying interests of readers—a shopkeeper might be a cricket enthusiast and will want to buy the paper with the best sports page while an economist will be interested in financial news and articles. So the presentation of news and features differs to suit the kind of reader the newspaper is aimed at. Notwithstanding these differences all newspapers must report news accurately, without bias, and views should be expressed thoughtfully and moderately.

Now that you know how to judge newspapers, how to decide whether they're good or bad, go ahead and take a sharp look at them and don't hesitate to criticize them if they fall below your marking level.

Often one hears someone or other railing at ‘yellow journalism'. What this means is bad journalism, unworthy journalism, irresponsible journalism. But we have to examine the phrase with care. Quite frequently people who are criticized by a
newspaper tend to accuse that paper of yellow journalism. Sometimes a government which has had some of its activities investigated and revealed by probing reporters also comes up with a charge of yellow journalism or irresponsible journalism.

The common meaning of yellow journalism is fairly clear. When newspapers concentrate on the seamy side of life and, in order to attract readers, carry a lot of stories on crime, sex, violence; when they persuade criminals to write their life stories, film stars to reveal everything about their private lives, when they threaten to write nasty things about people unless they are paid to hold off, that is called yellow journalism.

How does one stop it? Well, there are some basic laws about obscenity, libel and so on. But contrary as it may sound, yellow journalism can't be wiped out, maybe even shouldn't be. It has to be tolerated in the interest of free speech and freedom to criticize. If there are too many gagging laws then honest criticism may be throttled. Perhaps the only way to check yellow journalism is for the Press itself to have organizations which keep an eye on newspapers and smack those who walk out of line. This has been tried out in several countries—in India too—but the success is spotty.

Now that you've heard a lot about newspapers and what they are, the question to ask you is: Would you like to join one and be a journalist?

Somehow there is the stardust of glamour sprinkled on journalism. Almost every week I have young people coming to see me and saying that they want to become journalists. The picture of talking with the great, being on the inside of big decisions, and taking jumbo jets or frail two-engined planes to far away and remote lands isn't at all true of most people who work in a newspaper office or magazine. Much of journalism is hard and humdrum work—there are a lot of backroom jobs in journalism.

Nevertheless, there is something special about journalism. Newspapers, if they are selflessly and fearlessly run, can indeed cross swords with those who do injustices. They can expose
The promise of fulfilment

A sample of press freedom in a Hindi newspaper

evils and dishonesty. But there are lots of obstacles to free information. Many powerful interests including those of the newspaper owners themselves, strong pressure of government officials who like to keep things under wraps, the powerful influence of big business houses, international companies and organizations like trade unions, medical associations and even religious bodies—all these can stand in the way but there’s always the chance that a paper will be able to carry the truth, expose wrongdoings, voice public grievances, get things put right, and in the process win the respect of the public. It is this hope that has kept generations of journalists going.

As time marches on journalism tends to become like any other career, any other job. This is inevitable because much of journalism is business and it often gets close to becoming big business. But there is always that little extra zip that makes journalism something young people dream about.

For a country as large as ours when more people can read and write (at the moment it’s no more than thirty out of every hundred Indians) there will be a great hunger for news and newspapers. Only about nine million copies of newspapers are printed every day for one hundred and thirty million homes. At present ninety-eight or even ninety-nine per cent of our newspapers are sold and read in towns. In the four cities Calcutta, Madras, Bombay and Delhi alone are sold almost half of all our dailies. Very few of our villagers read newspapers. So it’s obvious we’ve only scratched the surface in Indian journalism.

But it’s good to be realistic. You should not go into journalism unless you feel deeply that it is really and truly the way of life for you. Except in a few newspapers the wages are not high and the work is very hard. In the final analysis you choose journalism because you’d never be satisfied doing anything else.

If you do choose it then there’s no limit to the excitement. You never feel the difference between a working day and a holiday. You meet lots of interesting people. You are involved in important events. You often get to travel. And you have the thrill of writing. Every day will be an adventure—you will never know what exciting event you will have to cover.
In democratic countries everybody, including governments, have come to accept that the people have the right to know what is happening in the country. People should be able to read in the papers, see on the television screen and hear over the radio what is going on. Government policies must be announced and talked over in public. Some countries even broadcast their Parliament sessions live. Many opinions must survive and have fair play.

This gives a special role to the mass media. Even though the electronic media, TV and radio, have spread like wildfire, newspapers have stood their ground. TV and radio, however, can and have, made papers change, change very much. Newspapers have become more thoughtful, more inclined to carry views, more apt to think of special groups of readers. But neither TV nor radio can push newspapers aside. Newspapers, often very small ones, have always played a very important part in keeping a revolution going. Even under the most oppressive regimes they have circulated secretly.

Journalists, therefore, have a very special responsibility. They are expected to be people with an outsize conscience, fearless and fair.