

## **Re-Writing Politics**

### **Consumerist messages and the emergence of a new style of political reporting in India**

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#### **Abstract**

The following paper focuses on the transformation of news-writing in the English-language press in contemporary India. It analyses the emergence of a new style of political criticism that is supported by the rapid commercialization of the press and coupled with the crowning of new heroes from private companies, the media and star industry. Thereby, newspapers in post-1990 India contribute towards a global trend of devaluating political institutions and celebrating the free market. Yet, they have also gained power as instruments for the practice of democracy.

#### **Introduction**

Today mass media are an integral part of everyday life, also in India. There has been a steady rise in the production and consumption of media products in India since the 1970s and a spurt since the 1990s, when liberalization politics gave a boost to the Indian economy. The growing presence of media had a resonance also in the community of social scientists, so that there is an impressive number of studies about the impact of the new electronic media as well as good knowledge about emerging forms of visual representations (see, for example Brosius 2005; Butcher 2003; Dell 2005; Juluri 2003; Mankekar 2000[1999]; Manuel 1993; Mazarella 2003; Pinney 1997, 2004). In contrast, much less attention has been paid to the press (Jeffrey 2000; Peterson 1996; Stahlberg 2002). While newspapers no doubt represent an 'old' medium, they have not become old-fashioned. In India newspaper have *not* been marginalized by electronic media, but have participated in the growth with a steady rise in circulation figures, number of publications as well as income. Jeffrey gives several reasons for this development: Improvements in printing technology and distribution systems, growing literacy, the increased purchasing power of consumers, aggressive marketing by publishers, growing revenue from advertisements and increased political awareness (Jeffrey 1993: 2004; 2000: 18–19).

Growth has also triggered change. Jeffery (2000) talks of a *Newspaper Revolution* when characterizing the recent development of the Indian newspaper industry. He emphasizes the tremendous expansion of the vernacular press – which has now overtaken the English-language press in circulation figures – and its rapid climb in status. The political consequences are immense. Today vernacular newspapers offer an alternative public forum, especially for locally embedded leaders, whose political projects challenge national political elites (Rajagopal 1998 and 2001, Rao, forthcoming)<sup>1</sup>. Also the English press has undergone transformation. Associated with the up-market segment of society, it has profited most from growing advertisement revenue and become independent of political money. This had consequences for the style of reporting. English-language newspapers have become spearheads for the spread of a consumerist message and at the same time developed a new type of political reporting that makes a mockery of local leaders. Articles that ridicule politicians have taken their place firmly along an older style of reporting that offers the newspaper as an organ for the spread of politicians' message to the people.

The following text will spell out this new style of political reporting and discuss its emergence with reference to the changes in financing and the popularization of 'infotainment' as news ideology and writing style. The argument is informed by an anthropological concern with social context. I discuss news texts with reference to the social environment that creates a particular perspective and thus gives political acts their meaning. News is treated as interactively created cultural artifact that absorbs interests and perspectives of writers, informants and financiers and functions as a resource for defining circulating and criteria for the evaluation of social life.

I will begin my argument with the social motion triggered by an article on the chief minister Ram Prakash Gupta, whose senility was exposed when a reporter from the *Time of India* decided to publish gossip circulated in inner political circles.<sup>2</sup> Gupta was unable to control this negative publicity which haunted him during most of his short time (altogether 11 months) in office. The case study provides an entry point to a discussion about the changing condition of news-making in India and the transformation in the evaluation of power and glamour in post-liberalization India.

### **Who believes in Ram Prakash Gupta?**

The event I will discuss here began with an article that was extremely critical of the chief minister Ram Prakash Gupta – leader of the North Indian state Uttar Pradesh. Its refreshing style and critical tone made it a major contribution to the political debate that was well

received in journalistic and political circles. The text was part of pre-election reporting. It was published on 24 February, communicating the news that the chief minister would not contest in the nearing by-election, during which still vacant posts of Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA) and Member of Parliament (MP) were to be filled. The announcement that Gupta would not become a candidate came as a surprise, since most political observers were convinced that the BJP (Bhartiya Janta Party) would not let this chance pass to make the leader of the government a regular member of the legislative.

Ram Prakash Gupta was new in the position of chief minister. He inherited the post from Kalyan Singh who had become too controversial and was removed and Gupta sworn in on 12 November 1999.<sup>3</sup> While the degradation of Kalyan Singh had been expected, no-one thought of Ram Prakash Gupta as a possible processor. Gupta had left active politics 20 year ago, when he had been successful as MLA and deputy chief minister.<sup>4</sup> Now well into his seventieth he was brought back. His appointment to the highest office in the state was part of a strategy to discourage infighting in the state BJP, since there were at least three ambitious leaders<sup>5</sup> making claims to lead the state government. Gupta was brought in as a non-controversial alternative. He was selected for the office, even though he was no longer a member of parliament. This is possible according to the constitution for a limited period. If Gupta was to keep the office he needed to be elected to either houses of the parliament within six months of taking office. Scheduled three months after his swearing in, the by-elections would have been an ideal time to prove Gupta's credibility before the electorate. However, the BJP decided otherwise and avoided the risk of fielding Gupta.

Reporters from all newspapers reported on the 24 January that against all expectations the chief minister would not stand as candidate in the February elections. However, Biswajeet Banerjee highlighted this news in a special way by inserting it into an article about the inability of the aged chief minister to live up to expectations. Banerjee, like his colleague, was sure that the BJP leadership did not nominate Gupta because they feared that he might lose, since he did not appear to have become very popular during the first three months of his reign. In his article Banerjee suggested why this might be so.

### **Forget me not, Mr Chief Minister**

LUCKNOW: The 76-year-old chief minister of UP has a habit of forgetting things. The other day he asked his minister of state. Who are you? The minister was taken aback. But replied politely that he was Shivendra Singh, Minister of State attached to the chief minister. If you are Shivendra Singh then who is that man with curly hair, asked the chief minister referring to Rangnath Mishra, another minister of state!

This habit of CM [Chief Minister] has become a topic of discussion in political and bureaucratic circles. Bureaucrats recount with glee the encounter between the Union Power Minister PR Kumaramangalam and the chief minister. Mr Gupta, who has a habit of telling everyone that he was deputy CM in 1967 [sic!] told the Union minister: [...] ‘Where you in union cabinet when I was deputy CM’. It took a few minutes for Mr Kumaramangalam to realise what the CM was saying. He corrected him saying: Mukhyamantriji [Mr. Chief Minister], you are talking about my father.

The legislators have begun taking advantage of Chief Minister’s memory slip. A MLC [Member of Legislative Council] said it is better to meet the CM, introduce oneself and get the work done the same day. If you take a chance then there is all possibility that the CM would ask next time ‘Who are you! A joke going around the BJP office is that the CM has refused to contest by-elections because before the polling day he would forget from which seat he is contesting elections.

Caught in this strange situation, Mr Gupta has been declared persona non grata by the BJP. Senior leaders are not even ready to discuss about the CM and his prospect of contesting elections. Please talk about something else, said a senior BJP leader [...]

By now the scenario is clear that the chief minister will not contest election in the coming by-assembly polls. [...]. (Biswajeet Banerjee, *Times of India*, 24.1.2000)

The author here re-contextualised information that would normally have been routine news by adding his own observations. The ‘main’ information of that day – that Gupta would not be contesting the elections – is disclosed only at the end of the text, which dwells rather on the leader’s position in the government. Indirectly the article suggests that the failure to nominate Gupta could be either part of a strategy to get rid of an inefficient chief minister or a calculated move coupled with a plan to find a safer way of securing a seat in parliament for the unpopular leader, for example, through nomination to the upper house.

The reception of the article was tremendous. Gupta became a laughing stock among journalists and politicians alike. The positive assessment of the article began in the offices of the *Times of India* itself. The residential editors in Lucknow and Delhi both acknowledged its importance. Thus, it was printed twice on the first page, on 23 January in the Delhi edition and again on 24 January in the Lucknow edition.

Subsequently, politicians took up the phrase of the ‘forgetful chief minister’ and used it to formulate their own criticisms of the government. The BSP leader and former chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, Mayawati, echoed Banerjee’s text in a private interview. She commented on the highly controversial statement that Ram Prakash Gupta had made in favour of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya: ‘Poor Mr. Gupta, he always forgets everything, even that he was told not to disclose the true opinion of the BJP on Ayodhya’ (Interview 2.2.2000). The statement was published the next day (*Times of India* 3.2.2000). The Lok Dal leader, Chaudri Ajit Singh,

also commented on Gupta's forgetfulness, though in a different context. He criticized the size of the state government in Uttar Pradesh. With a cabinet of almost a hundred ministers it had become ungovernable, he stated. This was demonstrated most clearly by the inability of the chief minister to recognize his own ministers: 'The Chief Minister was not able to recognize ministers owing to the large size of his ministry' (*Hindustan Times* 30.1.2000). Almost a month later the minister of state for animal husbandry, Prem Prakash Singh – a member of the *Jantantrik Bahujan Samaj Party*, one of the coalition partners in the government – demanded the removal of the chief minister. The minister complained that under the current regime the government had become completely inefficient and that work in many ministries was at a standstill. He phrased his negative comments with reference to the now well-known phrase: 'Anything may happen if a forgetful person like him [the CM] is allowed to remain in office by the BJP leadership. Is it not strange that he does not even recognize his cabinet colleagues?' (*Pioneer* 24.2.2000; see also *Sahara* 24. and 25.2.2000).

The press was continually circulating the phrase, even when not directly quoting politicians. Banerjee himself reported a press conference in Delhi during which a woman journalist asked the chief minister about his forgetfulness and requested him to identify the officials who accompanied him (*Times of India* 31.1.2000). In an analytical article about the state of affairs in the Lucknow government the state correspondent of the *Times of India* added to earlier criticism: 'UP chief minister Ram Prakash Gupta emerges not only as "forgetful" but also a pale shadow of a "lost man", leaving his party men disappointed and dejected on many accounts' (*Times of India* 26.2.2004). Ram Prakash Gupta's fame also spread outside Lucknow when the weekly national magazine *Outlook* took up the theme:

He's a relic among politicians and suffers from frequent 'memory loss'. UP chief minister Ram Prakash Gupta, also deputy CM in 1968, recently turned to his own private secretary and asked him, 'Who are you? What do you want from me?' And a few days later, he stunned union power minister R. Kumaramangalam with the poster. 'Were you in the Union cabinet when I was deputy CM?' The CM was, of course, referring to Kumaramangalam Sr. Ministers in the state cabinet are now so paranoid about the CM's forgetfulness that they don't risk leaving any work for another day. After identifying themselves, they just ask the CM to sign on the dotted line and scoot. (*Outlook* 14.2.2000)

Ram Prakash Gupta was also confronted directly with his weakness. The chief reporter from *Dainik Jagaran*, a newspaper normally known for its friendliness towards the BJP, provoked the leader in a personal interview with the statement: 'You are remembered for not taking decisions in time or if you take them that you do not take action and that you forget things very fast' (*Dainik Jagaran* 16.2.2000, my translation). The chief minister contradicted the

reporter and claimed that his government was one of the most efficient. He gave the example of his successful fight against the electricity strike, the restoration of electricity to the people and the rise in the prices of sugar cane to benefit the farmers.

Another interview appeared in the online edition of the *Times of India* more than six months after B had initially circulated the phrase:

Question: One hears stories from Lucknow that the CM cannot remember things, that you suffer from forgetfulness.

R.P. Gupta: I take that as a compliment. There is no issue that can be used against me. So new stories are being churned out every day. It shows there are no serious charges against me.

(*Times of India*, online edition 10.8.2000)

Banerjee successfully *coined a phrase* and – what is even more interesting – *set an agenda*. The phrase ‘the forgetful chief minister’ became a trigger for people to come out openly against Ram Prakash Gupta. The point was pursued not only by opposition leaders, but – as the quote from Prem Prakash Singh proves – also by members of the government itself (see also a statement by BJP general secretary Sanghpriya Gautam in *Sahara* 22.2.2000). Public criticism of the highest man in the state appeared safe, because it played on an already commonly accepted ‘truth’. The constant repetition of the same phrase constructed a continuity between several otherwise unconnected issues that now all appeared to emanate from one single problem, namely the inability of Ram Prakash Gupta to lead an efficient government. Whenever there was criticism of the state BJP, hints of the senility of the chief minister came to the surface, whether the debate focused on the BJP agenda on Ayodhya, the way the party dealt with protests against the shooting of the film *Water* in Varanasi, the fear of the increasing power of Hindu nationalist organizations like the RSS, the handling of the energy strike, the inefficiency of the political apparatus or the unsatisfactory management of the coalition.<sup>6</sup>

Also at this level of more general political criticism journalists worked in tandem with oppositional leaders. Banerjee realized his own success and wrote a sequel that showed the inability of the BJP leadership to maintain party discipline. The argument is introduced in headline “BJP squeezed between forgetful CM and arrogant president”. The introductory paragraph reminds the reader of the short essence of Banerjee’s earlier article on the forgetful chief minister. Then follow three episodes, a fight over a BJP party committee in Aligarh, accusations raised in Meerut against BJP ministers for criminal activities and Kalyan Singh’s efforts to try and hurt the BJP by wooing its members for his newly founded party (RKP). All

incidents took place in different places and were embedded in different local dynamics, and none of them directly involved the chief minister. Yet, here they are all knitted together in one article and made to appear like the symptoms of one single problem, namely indiscipline in the party as a direct outcome of the top leaders' inability to run the government and the party organs efficiently. The articles uses unconnected events to constructs an image of a party that is falling apart because it is being 'squeezed' between two individuals who are unsuited to their posts.

There were other articles. On 22 February Virendre Sengar of *Amar Ujala* reported from Delhi about the accusations that Sangh Priya Gautam had raised against Gupta and the way the chief minister had been defended by members of the RSS. The article ended with more voices from the state that saw little hope for Gupta. Tavishi Srivastava of *Pioneer* wrote on the same day and again on 22 February, explaining in the first article why no one had any reasons to celebrate Gutpa's hundredth day in office and why the chief minister explicitly forbade a feast from being held. In the second article she wrote about the worries that burden the chief minister with reference to the imminent *panchayat* (local council) elections and the budget session. Again a day later, Sunita Aron wrote an piece dwelling at length on Gupta's inability to cope with the work load, describing incidents and providing quotes that he does not clear pending files and that, if he does do so at the special request of ministers, gives contradictory orders (*Hindustan Times* 25.2.2000). On 26 February Arvind Singh Bisht, the state correspondents of the *Times of India*, wrote a long commentary on the inability of Gupta to instill discipline into the cabinet and on his indecisiveness, leading to many cases being left pending. The article ends with speculations about his possible recruitment for the post of governor of Harayana (*Times of India*, 26.2.2000).

Bisht's article came out on the same day that the results of the by-elections were published. They were positive for the BJP, which led to contradictory reporting by the *Times of India*. While Bisht continued to criticize the chief minister, another article appeared on the front page of the newspaper entitled 'Bypoll results in a shot in the arm for CM' (26.2.2000). The article had no byline since it was a routine article. Although the chief minister had not participated in the by-elections he became the peg. The second of the four paragraphs dealt with the chief minister:

The BJP never looked confident in this by-election. This may be the reason why CM Ram Prakash Gupta preferred not to contest the elections. Much before the by-election results were declared murmurs had begun in the highest echelons of the party to replace Gupta. But, the victory of the BJP in the bypolls has come as a shot in the arm for the septuagenarian CM. 'The people who were talking about CM's non-

performance could not shut their mouth,' said BJP spokesman Shayamnandan Singh. (*Times of India* 26.2.2000)

Another article in *Sahara* reported the strength that Gupta had drawn from the elections. It was written by Rakesh Arya quoting the urban development minister Lalji Tandan, who claimed that the positive result would make Gupta's seat secure (*Sahara* 26.2.2000). The scene for such an interpretation had already been set a day earlier, when several newspapers declared – quoting internal talk in the ruling party – the by-elections to be a 'referendum on RP Gupta's (non-)performance!' (*Hindustan Times* 25.4.2000; see also *Hindustan Times* 22.2.2000<sup>7</sup> and *Sahara* 25.2.2000).

Lalji Tandon was proved right at least as far as the time immediately following the elections was concerned. The controversy surrounding Gupta started to die slowly and the chief minister stayed in office for another eight months, until 10 October 2000.<sup>8</sup> I left the field in Mai 2000 so that I was not able to follow the press during the period of Gupta's removal. However, the issue here is not one of BJP politics. Reporting about Gupta caught my attention because of the way it came into being. B attracted interest by attacking a powerful man, in this case the top leader of the state government, and created an uproar by highlighting routine news. To do this he drew on a wider context that consisted basically of internal gossip, which in routine situations remains the knowledge of political insiders. But he was not criticized for indecency but congratulated for his witty article and his phrase 'the forgetful CM' became a standard formula and a vehicle with which people could attack the government.

There is nothing new about the fact that the press can effectively destroy the authority of a man or woman in power through negative publicity, even to the point of resignation. It is a typical dynamic that follows the 'discovery' of a person's involvement in a scandalous affair, the losing of an election, or the implementation of an unpopular political measure. However, in this case nothing of that kind had happened. There was no obvious event that justified the heightened attention that the press gave to the chief minister. The article *was* the event. It appeared at a time when Gupta had not even been in office for a hundred days, a deadline after which journalists usually start to assess a leader's performance. B outdid everyone else by predating his evaluative article.

Again this in itself is not very remarkable. Indian newspapers are full of articles that highlight leaders without any specific reason, just because there is a chance for a private interview (Peterson 1996; Rao 2006). However, this article did not quote Gupta's views, nor was it a 'return gift' of publicity for 'favours' received. To the contrary, it was an attack on a figure of authority. The secret of the article was its witty style, with no enumeration of

political issues, but rather the narration of ‘funny’ incidents, gossip and jokes from the inner circles of the party. B here realized to perfection a new style of news-making that is both entertaining and informative.

### **Infotainment or How to make routine news interesting**

The articles on Gupta are part of a new style of reporting that is taking root especially in sections of the English-language press in India. Nationally successful newspapers like the *Times of India* or the *Hindustan Times* are experimenting increasingly with style in order to find new, exciting, popular ways of presenting their analysis of the social world. This trend is part of a global development in the news media. Since the 1980s it has been described with the term infotainment, whereby infotainment can mean many different things. It is used to refer to entertaining ways of presenting information or new media products that mix entertainment and information. It is also a fashion word thrown in whenever the discussion turns to new developments in news-making and it is a technical term that describes computer programs for interactive learning or playing (Wittwen 1995: 15–26).

I do not mean to propose a particular definition of infotainment here. I picked up the term from the field and introduce it in its ‘emic’ sense. Journalists in Lucknow used the word rather unspecificly for a bundle of new trends in news-writing.<sup>9</sup> They referred to a whole set of new popular themes, like show business, fashion, industrial products, health, education and employment. They also pointed out that creative writing and the exploration of new themes is encouraged and rewarded. Increasing importance is also given to a high quality of color printing and a ‘modern’ outlook developed with the help of famous layout designers from Europe. Photographs are displayed at prominent places, not necessarily being printed for any information value. Not every photograph carries an article. Some are just printed for the aesthetic pleasure they offer, to provide visual relief.

While some hail infotainment as a new form of commitment, others reject it as sensationalism. The reactions are set within a discursive space in which news-making is conceptualised alternately as ‘fact finding’ or ‘creative invention’. On the one hand, ‘objectivity’ and ‘completeness’ rate highly as ideals in journalistic writing. Employers demand from their reporters that they do not ‘miss news’, abstain from personal involvement, and do not comment but give straightforward reports of what they observed. On the other hand, constructivist theories have had an enduring impact on press people’s perception. At least those who have gone through a formal education in Masscommunication learn that everything has the potential to become news and that writing is a process of inventing

meaning. Superficially this contradiction is solved by declaring ‘fact reporting’ and ‘creative writing’ (or ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ news, ‘news’ and ‘features’) to be different things.

However, making such a distinction does not solve the problem, because in actual practice the two perspectives cannot be kept separate. They offer two radically different understandings of the nature of texts and thus *compete as grounding ideologies of the news discourse*. Thus, it is hardly surprising that the issue creates friction between different groups of journalists. Opposing the shift towards more infotainment, a senior journalist from *Times of India* remarked:

A new brand of journalism has developed which I call ‘enterprising journalism’. This means to create something to have a story. You make things readable, sellable, though the content is close to nothing. There is also this practice of going around at random asking everyone what he has to say on a current issue. That is not news. It is just a means to fill the pages. What we need instead are pieces that are full with information content, which are organized in a logical way reaching a logical conclusion. (Journalist, *Times of India* 14.2.2000)

This statement sounds similar to Gupta’s reply in the interview quoted above, when he commented that describing him as ‘forgetful’ was an invention made to hit the news in absence of any ‘real’ complaints against him. In a more general critique such people assert that the press no longer serves as a political watchdog, but has turned into a medium for mere entertainment.

However, what appears to some like a decline in ‘fact finding’ and the invention of random sensations is for others an acknowledgement of the perspectivity of news, which allows journalists and companies consciously to define their goals. Guided by the idea that the publication of news is creative invention, the selection of articles is not informed by notions of ‘completeness’ but determined by images of what might interest the reader and what serves the company’ policies. Promoting new themes and styles does not necessarily mean to give up the idea that newspapers should be informative and critical. Take, for example, the opinion of a journalist who works in a features section of the *Times of India* called the *Lucknow Times*:

*Lucknow Times* is a supplement to the newspaper because it is supposed to be different than the paper. It might talk about the same things, but it does so in a different way: reader-friendly language, positive thinking, pointing at the beauty of life instead of just talking about the negative side [...]. Of course the instruction from the head office in Delhi is that it should be light and easy, but we do try to go deep and

tackle also serious issues, but in a reader-friendly way. It is not so much a question of what you write but how you write. (Journalist, *Lucknow Times* 7.5.2002)

Here the journalist is seen as creative agent, who is experimenting with language in order to convey information. It is in this spirit that B wrote his article on the chief minister. He made it interesting and entertaining, while at the same time tackling an important issue, namely the political (non-)performance of a new chief minister. The residential editor of the *Times of India* made it very clear that he favors such reflexive writing. He was reluctant to accept reports that simply replicated opinions circulated in political circles. For him news-making requires introducing the wider context. Articles should draw attention not only to what a leader said or did, but to how he did it, why and when. If politics is a 'game', the reporter should look through this game and expose its 'rules' and the position of individuals within these settings (Editor, *Times of India* 25.1.2005).

Banerjee's article skillfully realized this demand. He made routine news interesting and informative by adding context that exposed the strategies behind the performance or the decision. His analysis deconstructed the official image of a politician with 'behind the scenes' information. Of course, there has been critical reporting before. Cartoons also have a long tradition in Indian newspapers. However, there has been a change in scale since even routine news have become starting points for reflexive articles. Routine news poses a problem for the newspaper that wants to be different in an increasingly competitive market, the journalist who is seeking ways of sticking out from the crowd, and for the company that is claiming to offer entertainment as a part of (serious) reporting. Confronted with the challenge of being different from all the others, what seems to be the least spectacular event can be made interesting by including background information that is otherwise not likely to be revealed. At the *Times of India* personalized accounts are now routinely used to analyze political performance. Here is second example

### **Attacking Fierce Men**

In the middle of February, Archana Srivastava from the *Times of India* decided to write on the by-election campaigning in the district of Kannauj, although she had not travelled to the constituency herself. She was reacting to an ongoing debate about the contest that, in her view, had fully grown out of all proportion because of the energy and money that leaders were spending in a prestigious competition between the son of *Samajwadi Party* (Socialist Party) supremo Mulayam Singh Yadav and *Bhujan Samaj Party* (Majority Society Party) heavyweight 'Dumpy'. Narratives from the 'battlefield' had made her uncomfortable<sup>10</sup>

because to her mind they exposed the rudeness of politics. She decided that it was time to write an article exposing the nature of the campaign.

A collected material by calling colleagues from various newspapers and getting quotes from politicians in Kannauj. Based on these statements, she wrote a text that dwelt on the language of leaders and what it indicated about the attitude of politicians towards their electorate. Her article appeared on the front page on 15 February, entitled ‘Politicians in Kannauj speak like villains’. In a pink box three quotes appeared, one from each of the main competitors for the post of MP in Kannauj. The sentences were printed in the newspaper in the original Hindi, but in roman script. Below are the translations:

*“If anyone dares to glare at my workers, I will gouge his eyes out, and if anyone dares to raise his hands on them, I will get their arms chopped off.”* (LCP President Naresh Aggarwal)

*“There have been only two powerful goondas [thugs] in the whole country – Sanjay Gandhi and myself. From where has this third goonda, Mulayam Singh Yadav, come from?”* (BS candidate Akbar Ahamad ‘Dumpy’)

*“If anything goes wrong here, then this place will be strewn with dead bodies.”* (SP chief Mulayam Singh Yadav, *Times of India* 15.2.2000)

The statements were repeated, with translations, in the main text, and further quotes from other politicians added. Srivastava drew attention to the wording and compared it with dialogues in c-grade Hindi films. She criticized the bad taste of the campaigning and drew attention to the hostile atmosphere it creates.

Mulayam Singh reacted immediately and issued a disclaimer, stating that he had never said the sentence that A attributed to him. The next day the *Times of India* published this declaration along with another statement from the energy minister who was quoted as saying that Mulayam Singh was ‘threatening “mass killings” if anything went wrong [in the Kannauj election]’ (*Times of India* 16.2.2000). The article was printed on page three, but was announced on the front page underneath another article about Mulayam Singh Yadav. This article on page one was marked ‘Run-up to Kannauj bypolls’ and carried a small picture of the leader. The text had Banerjee’s byline. In the article he quotes informants who participated in a closed door meeting of the SP president with leading Brahmins in Kannauj, during which the politician is said to have apologized to the local Brahmins. This statement provides the introduction to an article seven paragraphs long about Mulayam’s campaigning strategies with respect to Brahmins.

### **Mulayam extends olive branch to Brahmins**

'Mulayam Singh Yadav has apologized to us', said a smug Om Prakash Tiwari (name changed), who claimed to have been one of the 120 prominent Brahmins in the area who were invited to a closed-door meeting on Sunday with the Samajwadi Party president. [...] Mulayam Singh, he recalled, claimed that it was the BJP which has projected him as a 'villain' but he was not such a bad man after all [...] 'I am not this type of a man. But, if you still feel that way I ask to be forgiven', he recalled Mulayam Singh as saying. (*Times of India* 16.2.2000)

The rest of the text interprets this apology in the context of the coming election. B shows its significance as part of Mulayam's strategy to win over the Brahmins, who traditionally vote for the BJP, which, however, did not field a candidate in Kannauj this time.

While at first sight the article may appear sympathetic towards Mulayam, it can also be read as providing support for Srivastava's text. The newspaper is here asserting that others also consider Mulayam Singh Yadav to be a criminal, an image he actively plays with as part of his election strategy. He also used it as an excuse to meet the Brahmins and appease them through an apology reported by a 'smug Ohm Prakash Tiwari', who, however, wants to remain anonymous, which again indicates that it is dangerous to talk against or even about Mulayam.

Among journalists I heard a lot of praise for A's article during the days following its publication. They admired her courage in coming out against powerful men like Mulayam Singh Yadav and 'Dumpy'. Journalists felt that the article hit the nail on the head, painting a clear picture of what many felt to be the sad state of politics in Uttar Pradesh. By highlighting only a few selected sentences, Srivastava managed to express a shared perception about the increasing criminalization of politics.

### **Between Advertising and Politics**

It is interesting to note the directness with which journalists here attack major Indian leaders. It is much in contrast to the respect traditionally offered to politicians in India (Peterson 1996). It is also in contrast to the way representatives of the private industry are cultivated in today's newspaper (Rao 2006). This latter observation is significant, since it gives a clue to understanding the transformation taking place in important sections of the Indian press, away from political patronage to dependence on private capital. A significant turning point has been the liberalization of the Indian economy in the 1990s. It led to rapid economic growth and the foregrounding of a new consumerist ideology.

Also the newspaper market has been drawn into this dynamic of change. Though the press has long been present in India – the first Indian newspaper being published in 1780 (Raghavan 1994: 2) – the news-business has undergone major changes in the last 15 years, marked by a move away from a dependence on state protection to a reliance on private financing. In the foundational years of independent India there was great political support for state interference in news-making as a means of protecting it from capitalists' interests, ensuring 'neutral' and 'objective' reporting, and making newspapers an instrument of progress (Peterson 1996: 41–54; Raghavan 1994: 142–64). The suspicion of capitalists' interests drew upon ideas that emerged already during the independence struggle. Mahatma Gandhi, for example, was a fierce opponent of consumerist ideologies, as Jeffrey points out.

Gandhi (1869-1048), an outstanding journalist in English and Gujarati, had a vision of an Indian tradition revived, cleansed and free. Advertising had no place. Gandhi's newspaper, dedicated to the cause of Indian freedom and deeply suspicious of Western materialism, set standards that other Indian publicists often felt the need to emulate. Gandhi's weekly did not accept advertisements, 'ninety-nine per cent' of which he deemed 'totally useless. [...] If there were no system of advertisements, we are surely to save at least half the price [of any article].' He declared that 'the sole aim of journalism should be service.' (Jeffrey 2000: 54)

The reservations of the first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru against advertising followed a slightly different argument. He felt that private advertising posed a danger to the project of building a socialist society. Nehru was suspicious of advertising for its power to influence the masses and inculcate in them a wrongful desire for consumerism. "Advertising", he once told the Indian Society of Advertisers, "is essentially a thing to induce consumption, to make people buy things they do not want" (Nehru; cf. Jeffrey 2000: 55; see also pp. 51–7). Indira Gandhi was no less critical of advertising and clearly favoured state regulation. She was, of course, much criticized for curtailing the freedom of the press during her Emergency, when censorship was imposed on newspapers for eighteen months between 1975 and 1977. During the other years of her reign – including when she came back into power in 1980 – she actively promoted the view that state management was superior to private ownership in the media business (Raghavan 1994: 147–64).

None of these governments actually pushed through a law that would have destroyed the plurality of ownership in the Indian newspaper market. Yet state money played an important role in building up a 'progressive' press that follows what Peterson called the 'logic of responsibility' (1996: 22–69). Essentially this meant a pro-government press.<sup>11</sup> While private advertising was viewed with suspicion, political sponsorship was the norm. Jeffrey

states that, in the 1970s, 20 to 30 percent of advertising income in the newspaper business was generated from state sources, of which half is estimated to have gone to the English-language press (Jeffrey 2000: 55). 'The use of advertising to punish, reward and thereby seek to influence newspapers became part of the repertoire of political parties in government' (Jeffrey 2000: 56).

The role of private advertising in India's public life began to play a greater role since the 1980s and by the 1990s growth rates in the advertising industry reached the giddy heights of over 30 per cent a year (Jeffrey 2000: 58; Mazzarella 2003: 12–5; Rajagopal 1998: 18–21). The availability of sufficient private capital, together with the greater social acceptance of consumerist ideologies has changed news-making in such a fundamental way that the transformation can hardly be overemphasized. How much this has effected political reporting can be assessed with reference to Peterson's (1996) study from the early 1990s. Peterson demonstrates the excessive closeness that used to exist between the press and politics, also in terms of the ideologies of national progress their ascribed to. According to a typical professional ethos, journalists were to function as an avant-garde that promotes the making of a modern nation state in India. By shouldering this responsibility the press operated in a twin-role with the state. It was invested with the responsibility to bring down to people the logic of the developmental activities of the political class. In this role the press stood for progress, inculcating in citizens a modern thinking and an appreciation for the political manoeuvres that were designed to promote the forward movement of the nation (Peterson 1996: 300–24).

What used to be the norm before the onset of liberalization has been discarded in the post 1990 development, where the press no longer accepts the role as a mouth piece of politicians and has become daring in its exposure of the faults in the system. Today political criticism is a force to be reckoned with. Articles like those on Ram Prakash Gupta and Mulayam Singh Yadav are not an exception, nor are they simply part of a new routine in English-languages newspapers. Rather, their production takes place amidst and contribute to the development of a new culture of political criticism that can develop where mass circulation is no longer tied to political financing. This, of course, is not to argue that political pressure has ceased to show effects. Politicians are powerful and pull all stops when they want to influence reporting. They are also major informants who can make life for individual reporters quite difficult, or comfortable for that matter. Politicians can hide information, confide it in particular individuals or complain against reporters and their articles. There is also the self-serving mentality of some journalists who exchange news for personal favours (Rao 2002, 2006). However, while negotiations with political agents play an important role in

news-making, the institutional basis for political influence has been weakened. And while some politicians still use the press very skillfully to build a positive image for themselves, the government does not have the same structural advantage it used to have before the liberalization of the economy.

### **New heroes**

The decline in political patronage has, of course, its own side effects. More freedom in political news-making has been acquired at a cost. Journalists resent what they experience as increasing pressure from private advertisers and they take it for granted that the introduction of new forms of news-making is motivated *solely* by financial calculations, a strategy to make newspapers more sellable and thus increase revenue returns from advertising. When writing up my material I wrote an email to a journalist friend in Lucknow, communicating my conclusion that I saw innovative potential for new forms of subversive news-making as a result of changes in newspaper financing. I received an answer that strongly resisted my rather optimistic interpretation:

Dear Ursula, [...]. As far as my experience in journalism goes I am of the perception that every business house running a newspaper is driven by its definite agenda regarding the primary motive/objective of a newspaper. In the *Times of India* the primary objective is not so much promoting journalism as a means to highlight the truth and thereby ferment change in the society as to rake *moolah*. This has lead the paper to vest unnatural powers in the hands of advertisers, so much so that in Lucknow it has led to a clash of egos between the journalist community and the marketing department. If a report (irrespective of the fact that its stands for the truth) threatens the interest of the business community it is spiked. [...] As far as imbuing the newspaper with a new perspective by the way of viewing it through the advertiser's eyes goes, well I can say not all advertisers are cerebral enough to look beyond their vested interest towards making the newspaper a more readable and informative product. As long as their particular area of interest is attended to they seldom whimper a change. (Email correspondence, journalist, *Times of India* 22.7.2002)

This letter mirrors the experiences of other reporters, who all feel that newspaper companies do not promote critical analysis, although they may tolerate it if it does not hurt their business interests. Internal politics make it difficult to write anything against customers who advertise in the own newspaper, these now being mostly from private industry.

However, positive reporting about the private industry is not solely a result of direct pressure from advertisers. The change has gone deeper and influences the way journalists perceive their task and set priorities in reporting. Journalists share a fascination for consumerism and partake in the emerging discourse that hails consumerism as a new kind of individual freedom

and sign of personal prosperity and success. The new spirit is well described by William Mazzarella (2003), who conducted fieldwork in the advertisement industry in Bombay during the second half of the 1990s. He shows that the changed economic situation in India has led to a transformation in the way the nation is imagined. He identifies an emerging transition from a 'developmentalist' to a 'consumerist vision of the nation' (Mazzarella 2003: 71).

A case in point is the advertisement campaign for KamaSutra condoms. Mazzarella points out the difference in rhetoric adopted here compared with earlier government ads for family planning. The government ads, he argues, were informed by the ideals of an elite that lives far removed from the realities of most citizens and believes that the country can best be developed through a planned economy and educational measures. In line with this attitude, advertisements for family planning had a pedagogical tone, telling people how to behave correctly in order to protect the interests of the nation. In contrast, the KamaSutra advertisement was designed to seduce individuals into using a condom for the sake of their own pleasure. This new approach in selling condoms to people, Mazzarella shows, is more than a shift in rhetoric: it is a symptom of an ongoing transformation that propagates the free choice of consumers and replaces an older image of citizens dutifully working towards the progress of the nation. It is also coupled with changes in the evaluation of state institutions, which no longer appear as facilitators of progress but as agents who, through bureaucratic interference, are hindering the development of the nation. The new popular image celebrates citizens as mature subjects making their own choices (Mazzarella 2003: 70–71; see also Rajagopal 1994).

News discourse in English-language newspapers in many ways supports this line of thinking. There is admiration for the economic potency and power of the new economic elite, and disgust for politics as politicking, that in comparisons appears not only fashion, but ineffective, unprofessional, even corrupt. Regular expression of this kind of competitive evaluation are rankings published in news media that present the richest, most powerful, sexiest, most influential, etc. men and women. Take as an example this article from the *Hindustan Times* (Delhi edition, 4.4.2004). It presents twenty men as the most attractive in India and everything a woman could want 'in a single package'. To qualify for selection a man had to be 'well-read, well-traveled, a man of power and not a little wealth, sophisticated, self-assured, intelligent, articulate and experienced' and 'good-looking'. The selection indicates that politicians rarely have all this together. There are only three politicians in the list that also names sportsmen, medical doctors, managers, artists, journalists. Interesting is the subtitle describing Saleem Sherwani of the Socialist Party (Samajvadi Party). He is

admired for his *new* style of politics. The article suggests that in the ‘new India’ respect is distributed among many professions and if it is found in politics, then certainly not in the ‘old’ kind of politics.

What I am proposing here is that the emergence of new perspectives on politics is tied to the crowning – both forcible and voluntary – of new heroes and the creation of new life designs. There is the celebration of the new Indian female, who is admired for her international success. Images of the new beauties are perpetually circulated through all mass media and influence body styles and fashions (Munshi 2001, 2004; Sangari 2003). Bollywood actors and actresses enjoy wide following. They are hyped by the media (Dwyer 2001; Juluri 2003), celebrated in clubs (Dickey 1993a, 2001; Osella and Osellal 2004), and vowed by political parties (Dickey 1993b; Hardgrave and Neidhart 1975). There are also the heroes from the private industry, who buy advertisement space for well-calculated representation of their companies (Mazzarella 2003) and exercise coercion on the press to prevent negative publicity in the editorial part (Rao 2006). In this atmosphere where styled ‘products’ of the star industry and the private economy are celebrated, politics appears anything but glamorous. Thus, what could have been an admiration for seniority turns into the criticism of senility. Similarly, what could have been awe for the economic power of politicians becomes a trigger for seeking out corruption. Expression of muscle power appears no longer threatening, but becomes the starting point for lamenting the criminalization of politics.

### **Afterward**

I presented the history of two news articles that made a mockery of respected politicians. While journalists applauded the witty pieces, politicians opposed them but were unable to control the criticism. This latter observation is interesting because it indicates the shift that has taken place in political reporting. With the commercialization of newspaper the grip of political actors on the press has weakened. The structural advantage provided by the close cooperation between government and the press till the 1980s has disappeared in a market economy where newspaper financing through private advertisement is extremely profitable. Today politicians compete for press attention with many other actors, whose activity is judged more favorable. In a society that hails media stars and mangers politics appears to be losing its glamour, which in turn makes it easier to see and expose the faults in the political system.

While this process of the commercialization of the media and the simultaneous devaluation of politics has a particular trajectory in India, it is not unique or isolated. Journalists ‘invent’ alternative perspectives because of their exposure to a new globally emerging regime of truth

that is devaluating state institutions, propagating free markets, celebrating media stars and moving towards infotainment as popular forms of knowledge production. It is within this context that this local development in India, which is being pushed by national media companies as well as local, national and international advertisers, is part of a global development. Here India is participating in the making of a global *mediascape* (Appadurai 1991) characterized by experiments with perspectives for news that fit into and propagate ideologies of global consumerism, facilitate a devaluation of the political and celebrate capital as a (the?) major force shaping societies.

## Endnotes

- 1 See more generally for the regionalization of politics also Jaffrelot 2003.
- 2 The case study is part of the material I collected during 10 months of field work among journalists in Lucknow. The capital of the North Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. The fieldwork took place in two periods in the years 1999 to 2000 and 2002.
- 3 Ram Prakash Gupta's term as chief minister lasted from 9<sup>th</sup> November 1999 to 27<sup>th</sup> October 2000
- 4 Gupta was MLA for three terms in the sixties and seventies and held the office of deputy chief minister in 1968.
- 5 Lalji Tandon, Kalraj Mishra
- 6 Criticism of Gupta was, of course, also countered by other statements that contradicted rumours that the chief minister might be removed.<sup>1</sup> Several BJP heavyweights came out publicly to defend the chief minister and reassure the public that he would serve a full term in office, for example, urban development minister Lalji Tandon (*Aj* 18.2.2000, *Times of India* 19.2.2000, and *Pioneer* 24.2.2000) and BJP vice-president Jana Krishnamurthi (*Dainik Jagaran* 22.2.2000, *Hindustan Times* 22.2.2000, and *Sahara* 22.2.2000). Yet the rumours refused to die down.
- 7 This article on the by-elections spells out the situation in Kannauj during the campaign. Although it does not refer directly to the chief minister, he appears as a gimmick in the headline: 'Kannauj [sic!] by-poll brings BJP-BSP closer to stabilize RP Gupta?'
- 8 Later he was made Governor of Madhya Pradesh. He died in 2004.
- 9 While English-language newspapers in India have introduced this new trend, Hindi-medium newspapers are following suit with more and more supplements devoted to 'traditional culture', tourism, show business, consumer goods, etc.
- 10 For a description of the situation, see, for example, Mohit Dubey, *Times of India* 5.2.2000; Deepak Gidwani, *Hindustan Times* 8.2.2000; Ursula Rao, *Times of India* 15.2.2000.
- 11 The *National Herald*, for example, was known to everyone as mouth piece of the Congress (Peterson 1996: 262–65).

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