

BOOKS

Emergence of the Indian public sphere



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themes in politics

The Indian Public Sphere

Readings in Media History

edited by

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As citizens of a nation in the making, Indian scholars have been deeply interested in the writings of Benedict Anderson and Jurgen Habermas. Anderson has discussed the ways in which print capitalism allows a literate monolingual population to imagine the nation through the newspaper and the novel. Habermas, for his part, has delineated his notion of the public sphere as a realm of free debate and rational argument.

In a country where, even today, one in every three does not have signature literacy, it is hard to straitjacket the complex idea of nation-building into the phenomenon of print capitalism. Some of the [essays](#) in this book pertain to pre-colonial India when barely six per cent of the population was literate. What is exciting about the descriptions of the colonial era is that they uncannily mirror the post-colonial state's obsession with a strong law and order paradigm (see Rajeev Dhavan's essay). If nationalist struggles and an emerging free press were seen as an infectious disease (because it spreads quickly) by the British colonialists, revolutionary movements and the free media are viewed with suspicion by the Indian state even today, as Ranajit Guha points out.

Undoubtedly, the Indian public sphere has rarely been based on the force of better argument. It has often assumed symbolic, non-constitutional forms of politics (see Francesca Orsini's essay), like salt-making, drum-beating, horn-blowing, and bazaar gossip. Arvind Rajagopal dubs this dual nature of the public sphere as a 'split public' – a term that calls to mind Partha Chatterjee's distinction between the 'us' of civil society and the 'them' of political society. C.A. Bayly calls the indigenous public sphere as the "Indian ecumene," or the form of cultural and political debate that was typical of north India, before the emergence of the print media.

Ecumene is marked by the coexistence of different forms of communication, old and new. Did the emergence of a print culture in India lead [^] the forging of a Habermasian public sphere?

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in the United Provinces in the early 20th century. Furthermore, local print culture established the truth of a split public even in the case of a pan-Indian leader like Mahatma Gandhi.

Visually, Gandhi could be equally depicted as a documentary photographic image, and as a (factually incorrect) representation of a popular messiah owing allegiance to Bhagat Singh and Subhas Chandra Bose. Christopher Pinney says: “A new historiographic practice, grounded in the study of popular visual representation reveals with startling clarity the powerful presence of radically different preoccupations.”

Circulation of [newspapers](#) in Hindi, spoken by about 40 per cent of the population, surpassed that of English language dailies in 1979 (referred to in the contribution by Peter G. Friedlander, Robin Jeffrey and Sanjay Seth). Many local news items (a few of which may be mere rumours) which appear in the regional language dailies do not appear in English language papers. The profile of the readers of these different language dailies determines what is carried in a newspaper and what is not. Here, then, is an interesting Indian paradox. As in the film industry where a few rich individuals make movies for the consumption of the masses, in the newspaper industry too a wealthy few set out to discover and publicise in the regional language (with the help of established journalists and stringers) the concerns of ordinary men and women. The problem is that these owners, more often than not, happen to be Hindus and therefore tend to be mainly concerned about the interests of the Hindu majority. Witness the role of Hindi language press in the Ramjanmabhoomi campaign. On stringers, Sevanti Ninan says how well a stringer reported depended on “whether or not he also collected advertising, what his caste and professional background was, why he had come into the profession, and how much gumption he had as an individual.”

This fascinating book, comprising 17 articles, is bound to interest media scholars as well as political scientists.

THE INDIAN PUBLIC SPHERE – Readings in Media History: Edited by Arvind Rajagopal; Oxford University Press, YMCA Library Building, Jai Singh Road, New Delhi-110001. Rs. 750.

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