

## Hindi media's nostalgia for Brahmin supremacy isn't over. It's unapologetic, in your face.

One question did not leave me, though: How has the world of Hindi journalism, especially Hindi television news, sunk to this depth?

**Yogendra Yadav**

Yeh kahan aa gaye hum? Why has Hindi journalism sunk to the bottom of the pit in what should have been its moment of glory?

I was on Aaj Tak, the first independent Hindi news TV channel founded by Surendra Pratap Singh, the legendary 'SP'. Of late this was one of my rare appearances on this channel. For some reason, while I am regularly asked to speak to their English counterpart, the Hindi channel does not want me, neither for elections that I once specialised in nor for the farmers' movement where I was directly involved. An informal ban, I was told. But I could not verify.

The show was on the Karnataka election. The channel's script was clear: Congress has won by playing the divisive OBC card, as was evident from Rahul Gandhi's sudden support for the caste census. It was hard to miss the unstated message: BJP has been defeated not by its own incompetence and corruption but by some dirty caste politics, part of a diabolic design that would culminate in the nationwide demand for caste census. And then, just to underline the contrast sufficiently, the anchor reminded the viewers of the times when 13 out of 20 chief ministers were Brahmin, and one-fourth of the Lok Sabha comprised Brahmins. No qualifiers, no awkwardness. Just a plain, in-your-face, unapologetic nostalgia for what scholar Suraj Yengde would call "Brahmin supremacy".

### **When the gutter broke loose**

I had SP's image in my head when my turn came to speak. Born into a Rajput family from eastern Uttar Pradesh but brought up in Kolkata, SP was ultra-sharp on issues of caste injustice and would admonish reporters for using insensitive or indifferent language on social justice related news. I was a witness to how he created a socially diverse newsroom in the early days of Aaj Tak.

So I must have been irked when I responded to the anchor. But I did restrain myself and made four points. One, political dominance of 3 per cent of the population can only be a matter of concern for any civilised society, not something to be proud of. Two, Aaj Tak's own very accurate exit poll had conclusively refuted the assumption that there was a disproportionate swing of the OBCs toward Congress. Three, BJP practises caste politics as much as everyone else and enjoys the support of one of the most loyal but invisible caste-based vote banks, namely the twice-born Hindus. Four, there is nothing new or unusual about the opposition's demand for caste census, which was backed by the BJP in Parliament in 2010 and promised by then-Home Minister Rajnath Singh in 2018. I must appreciate that I was given time to say my piece. After the show, I tweeted Aaj Tak's clip with a polite dig at the channel's Brahminic nostalgia. Obviously, not a word about the anchor, who I knew little about.

This is when the gutter broke loose. The anchor's response was a textbook case of ad hominem: no response to the facts and arguments but name-calling that stopped just short of four-letter words. I was described as psychologically frustrated, politically failed, rank opportunist and – surprise, surprise – anti-national. Two years ago, India Today Group had terminated Shyam Meera Singh for not following the

group's social media policy that required the employees to limit their post to news only and to keep it "abuse-free". Perhaps the guidelines did not extend beyond protecting the prime minister from abuse.

It was free for all. Many social justice advocates jumped in, led by my sometime-friend, sometime-foe Dilip Mandal. The channel and the anchor were called out, rightly so, for their Brahmin supremacism. But there were also many below-the-belt attacks on the anchor, something I felt very bad about. I received all forms of filthy invectives for being anti-Brahmin (note that I had not said one word against Brahmins), for being a Yadav (how are such caste slurs permitted in public?), and for bearing my childhood name (this indictment was from a 'journalist'!). I tried responding, but soon realised the futility of diving into a trash can.

### **A book on Hindi journalism**

One question did not leave me, though: how has the world of Hindi journalism, especially Hindi television news, sunk to this depth? I would have liked to ask SP this question, as most trainee journalists from his team have risen to be channel heads. But he left us too soon, before Aaj Tak became a full-fledged channel.

So, I turned to a recent book by Mrinal Pande, herself one of the last specimens of the fast-dwindling tribe of respected Hindi editors and the first woman editor of Hindustan Dainik, a major Hindi newspaper. The Journey of Hindi Language Journalism in India: From Raj to Swaraj and Beyond is a very deft combination of personal history with archival and social scientific research to trace the story of Hindi media from its early print days to the domination of television news and the rise of digital media. It is not a sad tale of decline and fall but mainly a story of the rise and rise of Hindi media. Pande tells the story of Hindi language journalists who struggled against colonial power, economic hardship and cultural subordination to help Hindi media reach the position of dominance in terms of footprint, clout and profitability. She documents how Hindi media has defied the global trend of the decline of print, left English far behind in its reach and finally enjoys the power that it deserves.

This story only deepens my question. When an industry experiences a boom, as Hindi media has, you should experience core professional standards to go up. This book tells us how technical standards have improved in the news industry, from design and font to printing and advertising. But why have the core journalistic standards of news and views declined? To be sure, Hindi journalism is no exception in this regard. The story of journalism and journalists in English and other Indian languages is no different. And to be fair, media outside India has also suffered in quality, perhaps not as steep a fall as in India.

The book is not aimed at answering my question. But it does not shy away from looking at the broader trends of tabloidisation of the media and 'refeudalisation' of the public sphere, a concept borrowed from German thinker Jürgen Habermas. Pande's book gave me three clues to making sense of the current state of Hindi media, especially television.

### **TV news an 'upper-caste affair'**

First and most obvious is the role of politics. Hindi media always suffered from proximity to political power, but 2014 inaugurated a new regime of "censorship and self-censorship" induced by incentives for pro-government media and vicious delegitimisation of anyone who steps across the official line.

The second big factor is the economics of media. Basically, there is no way for the media to make decent money and stay independent. Without getting into the formal political economy debates, the book tells us the story of how old owners were replaced by their next US-educated generation, how editors were sidelined by managers, how sale-worthy trumped trust-worthy news and how paid news became an acceptable norm.

Finally, the book also delves into the sociology of Hindi newsrooms. Pande draws attention to the exclusion of women while noting that “TV news did slightly better vis-à-vis women’s visibility because it was felt that viewers liked to see young and pretty faces as anchors.” I was happy to see her taking on the issue of the skewed caste composition of Hindi newsrooms. It is no secret that Hindi media, especially TV, has remained a bastion of ‘upper-caste’ Hindus, mostly Brahmins. In this respect, Hindi news media is worse than its English counterpart. No wonder it leads to a cosy social setting where the relegation of Brahmins from their position of political power invites a spontaneous and unreflective nostalgia.

Media critic Urmilesh says that reactions to my comments on Aaj Tak did not surprise him as the world of TV news is an “upper-caste affair”. He invites anyone who disagrees with him to make public the caste composition of the media persons and key decision-makers of “TVPuram”. I would like to check it for Aaj Tak. But I am not sure if I should expect an invite soon.