

The evolution of press in Kashmir region

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ABSTRACT

The local press in Jammu and Kashmir region traces its origins in the nationalist movement during the Dogra regime in the State. The press proved to be an effective tool of dissent for the local leaders who were spearheading the movement against the Dogra hegemony and authoritarianism in the state. The local newspapers have consolidated their role in the tumultuous politics in the region and have maintained a significant position in the local political discourse. The state-owned Doordarshan maintained a monopoly in regional news broadcasting, however, the local cable television that facilitated an unbridled access to a variety of news, entertainment and sports channels for the local audience, came up as a challenge to DD. The paper discusses the evolution of regional press in Kashmir region which also constitutes the regional television broadcasting.

1. Print media

The history of the press in the region dates to pre-1947 erstwhile Dogra rule in Jammu and Kashmir State. The Dogra rulers adopted a very repressive policy towards press in the region. In 1924, Lala Mulk Raj Saraf who previously worked as a sub-editor for nationalist daily *Bande Matharam* with Lala Lajpat Rai in Punjab was allowed to publish first newspaper titled 'Ranbir', named after then king, Maharaja Pratap Singh's father Ranbir Singh [1]. The newspaper which was published in the Urdu language continued to be the mouthpiece for Dogra regime, however, with the beginning of the nationalist movement against the authoritarian Dogra rule under then prominent rebel leader Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah, the journalism in the region started to flourish [2]. The 'Quit Kashmir Movement' launched by anti-Dogra nationalist leaders in 1930's paved way for political activists to vent out the dissent through pamphlets and small newspaper publications [3]. The nationalist consciousness provoked some educated civil society people to start their own newspaper publications. Prior to that, the Urdu newspapers being published from Lahore used to provide overwhelming coverage to the internal politics in Jammu and Kashmir State [4]. The newspapers in Lahore that were covering Jammu and Kashmir politics were divided between 'Hindu press' and 'Muslim press' depending on the publisher's faith and political inclination [5].

After the infamous massacre of July 13, 1931, in which twenty-one civilians were killed by Dogra forces, Maharaja Hari Singh appointed a Commission under the Englishman B.J Glancy to look into the grievances of agitating Muslim subjects [6]. The Glancy Commission besides recommending immediate steps for the welfare of Muslim subjects suggested freedom of press and association which paved way for the publication of local *Kashmiri* newspapers [7]. In 1932, Prem Nath Bazaz, a prominent Kashmiri nationalist was permitted to the publication of first Urdu weekly newspaper *Vitasta* in the State which emerged as an influential voice against official apathy and government misrule [8]. The unheard regional voice in the margins found coherence with Srinagar based progressive

nationalist movement through the proliferation of political discourse in new publications.

The progressive nationalist movement in pre-1947 era witnessed mobilization of socialist and left leaning leaders who propagated their ideals of democratization through individual and joint newspaper publications. Sheikh Abdullah later associated Prem Nath Bazaz and started publishing Urdu daily *Hamdard* in 1935 which served the purpose of the movement against the Maharaja's despotic rule. The *Hamdard* promoted the idea of democratic political reformation and the public awakening of the subjects within the region. Since this newspaper worked closely with the Muslim Conference, the first nationalist political party under the leadership of Sheikh Abdullah, it played an essential role in the conversion of Muslim Conference into National Conference [9].

During the years between 1931-1947, the State of Jammu and Kashmir witnessed a rapid growth of Journalism and press became an influential organ for progressive nationalists to effectively express their opinions regarding politics and the society. The newspapers started consolidating their position in the socio-political context of the state after the partition of Indian sub-continent. The departure of Dogra regime in 1947 and the efforts to establish democratic political setup in the region provided a boost to the journalism in the region with lesser state scrutiny. The relative growth of literacy to some extent increased the readership and demand for the newspapers within the state. The involvement of journalistic professionalism with relatively lesser political associations resulted in the growth of credibility and objectivity within newspapers. The *Hamdard* edited by Ghulam Rasool Arif and *Daily Aaftaab* edited by Khawaja Sanaullah Bhat emerged as prominent newspapers after 1947 [10]. However, the political, as well as religious institutions, continued to share space in the existing discourse through the press by having their own newspapers.

The Plebiscite front which advocated the right to self-determination formed under the patronage of Sheikh Abdullah published weekly *Front* (English) *Mahaz* (Urdu) and the socio-

political organization Awami Action Committee under the leadership of Molvi Farooq published Urdu weekly *Hurriyat* in 1967 [11]. During the tenure of Prime Minister Shamsuddin, the Holy relic was stolen from Hazratbal Shrine in 1963 which resulted in state-wide agitation and chaos.

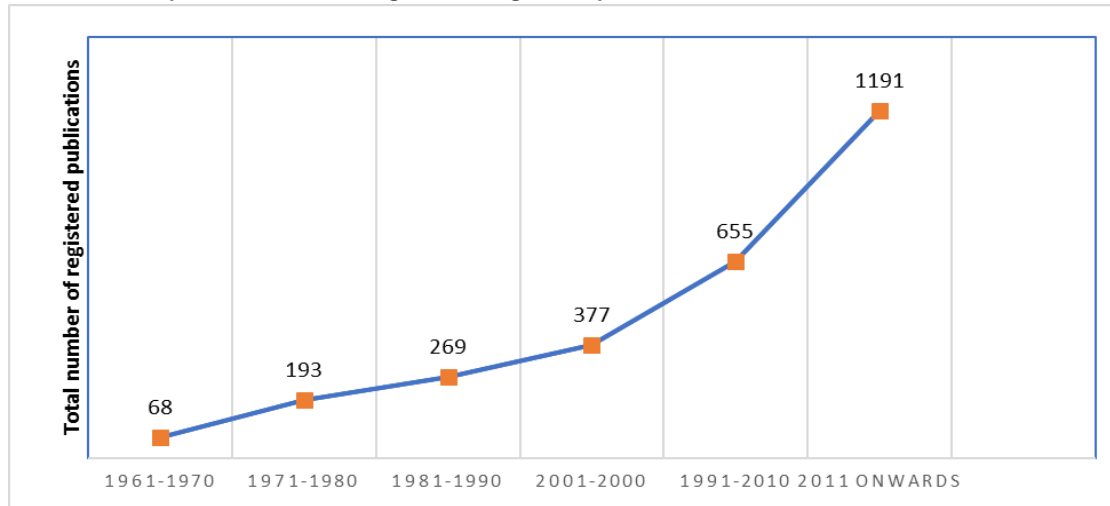
Table 1: Registration of the news publications in the State (decade-wise)

Years	Total publications registered
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1961-1970	68
1971-1980	125
1981-1990	76
1991-2000	108
2001-2010	278
2011 Onwards	499
*NA	37

Source: RNI, *NA-Date of registration not available

Graph 1: The Cumulative growth of registered publications in the state from 1961-2011



Note: The figures represent the cumulative number of registered publications in last six decades.

The local newspapers played an effective role in mediating the political discourse with lesser government interference [12]. The Urdu newspapers dominated the scene for decades, however, English language newspapers started progressing during the late 80's and early 90's and among the prominent newspapers that started publishing were, *Kashmir Times*, *Greater Kashmir*, *Kashmir Images*, and *Daily Excelsior*. With the outbreak of militancy in late 1980's, the local newspapers in the region that had already started absorbing themselves in the political discourse faced tremendous pressure. The State witnessed a rapid growth of local newspaper registrations with Registrar of Newspapers for India (RNI). The data retrieved from the RNI database shows that up to 2011, a total of 1191 news publication have been registered from the Jammu and Kashmir state [13]. However, among the registered titles a huge bulk has turned defunct so not all the newspapers registered with RNI come out in print. Only around a dozen of newspapers including some old famous Urdu newspapers have a maintained a name in the field and are widely read across the state.

While as a higher number of total news publications from the region is registered with RNI, the Jammu and Kashmir Information Department shows a relatively smaller number of newspapers registered with the department. This validates the fact that a large chunk of news publications registered have either turned defunct or cease to exist. The database maintained by the Jammu and Kashmir Directorate of Information and Public Relations (JKDIPR) shows that a total of 372 news publications (Jammu region -201, Kashmir region-171) are registered with the department [14].

The Urdu and English language dominate the local press in the state. According to the State Information Department, there are a total of 31 English, 59 Urdu and 2 Kashmiri language newspapers are published in Kashmir region. Since Urdu is the official language in the state, a few famous Urdu newspapers like *Aaftaab*, *Srinagar Times* and *Kashmir Uzma* are among the widely circulated newspapers in Kashmir region. The regional newspapers in Jammu region are mostly published in the English language. In Jammu, there are 49 English, 23 Urdu, and 20 Hindi newspapers published for the regional audience. The Hindi language has a relevance in the regional press in Jammu since the region is predominantly Hindu dominated with Dogra and Punjabi ethnicities in Urban quarters. It is interesting to note that there are only two registered Kashmiri language newspapers in Kashmir region and only one *Dogri* language newspaper in Jammu region despite the fact that the Kashmiri and Dogra are the two dominant ethnicities in the State.

2. Broadcast news

The television broadcasting (Doordarshan) was extended to Jammu and Kashmir state in early 1990's by the Indian Ministry of Information & Broadcasting. The government owned *Doordarshan* maintained its monopoly over the regional news broadcast in the state during the peak of militancy in the region in 1990's. Doordarshan news broadcasting was instrumental in disseminating the information which was purely laden with the pro-government narrative of the incidents and the politics in the region [15]. The Doordarshan news broadcasting in the region adopted an instrumental position in reshaping the regional political discourse which was earlier dominated by local newspapers. DD Kashir, a subsidiary channel of DD Television Network was introduced in the state by the Information and

Broadcasting Ministry in 2000 for the promotion of regional culture and an effective tool to counter 'Pakistani propaganda in the state' [16]. Due to the security reasons and the hostile situation in the region, the DD Kashir was being run and operated from the Doordarshan headquarters in New Delhi. The channel operations of DD Kashir were relocated to the capital city of Srinagar only in 2006. According to the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, the move was considered as an effort to assist the state government and security forces in the region to counter the misinformation being propagated by the non-state actors [17].

3. The case of local cable television in the region

In early 2000's, the local cable networks that started operations in the region came up as an alternative and a challenge to hegemonic Doordarshan and its monopoly on local news broadcasting. These local cable networks started growing rapidly across urban as well as rural areas in the region. The local cable channels that generated revenue from local business advertisements catered information as well as entertainment to the people in the region. Unlike DD Kashir, these local cable channels telecasted regional news with a focus beyond pro-government agenda. The local cable television news telecast irked the state government during the recent years of political instability in the region [18]. These local cable channels soon became popular in the region and garnered audience across rural as well as urban quarters of the state.

During 2008 mass demonstration following Amarnath Land Row, these local news channels gave exclusive coverage to the mass protests, demonstration, and speeches by separatist leaders in the region. The state government reacted by banning all local cable TV channels for allegedly violating the Cable Television Networks (Regulations) ACT, 1995. The local cable channels in Jammu region were immediately allowed to restore, however, in Kashmir region the ban was lifted a month after the agitation ended [19]. These local cable networks were again forced to shut down during the mass demonstrations against double rape and murder case in Shopian district in 2009 (Irfan, 2012). The cable operators were asked to reduce news airtime by state authorities. The local cable operators faced the worst during massive summer uprising in 2010 in which cable channels were first asked to slash the news airtime from 24 hours to 15 minutes at a stipulated time every day [20]. As the situation worsened in the region, the state authorities asked the local cable to at once stop telecasting news altogether. The local news channels were accused of telecasting provocative speeches by secessionist elements, which according to authorities, was dangerous for law and order in the region (Greater Kashmir, 2010). The then Deputy Commissioner

Srinagar, Mehraj Ahmad Kakroo, had stated "We have told the cable operators to adhere to the Cable Network Act (1995) in letter and spirit as under this act they can't telecast news," [21].

The representatives of local cable networks repeatedly requested the state government to reconsider the ban on news telecast, however, the government was not in a mood of revoking the order. In 2011, then Chief minister Omar Abdullah while addressing a press conference stated that his government will continue to ban news telecast on cable television. He was reported saying "We are not going to allow local channels to broadcast news, not in the immediate future," [22]. Even one of the senior Congress leader and then cabinet minister stated that he would resign if the channels were allowed to broadcast news. The cable television and its unbridled news coverage of the crises in the region turned to be a challenge for state government which considered such news responsible for provoking people followed by violation of law and order.

In 2012, the Jammu and Kashmir government decided to review the ban on cable tv news telecast. According to then Divisional commissioner 'If cable operators do not indulge in misinformation and disinformation campaign, the government has no problem (to lift the ban)' [22]. The local cable channels continue to telecast recreational and cultural programmes however the ban that prohibits them to telecast news, continues. The local news broadcast on regional politics continues to be a state monopoly through DD Kashir however, some Indian private channels like ETV Urdu and Gulistan started telecasting half an hour news bulletin on regional politics. In the absence of private news broadcast, the local newspapers continue to dominate the regional press in the region.

4. Conclusion

The regional press in Kashmir region traces its origins in pre-1947 nationalist movement and it continued to maintain a significant political relevance in the regional political discourse. The strong regionalism and the protracted conflict in Kashmir region are the main reasons for the strong political relevance of regional media in the state. Over the decades of intractable conflict in the region, the local press and the media persons have faced the intimidation and threats from both state and non-state actors operating in the region. *Doordarshan* having the monopoly over the regional news broadcasting could not undermine the relevance of local newspapers that have remained as one of the main sources of political information for the people in the region. The cable television transformed the regional television broadcasting; however, the local news channels were soon disciplined by the government on the pretext of law and order.

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