

India Ummeed se Hai!

(A S Raghunath, Media Consultant)

*"Ufak pe paanv rakho
Aur akad ke chalo,
Falak pakad ke utho
Aur hava pakad ke chalo....!"*

**[Step on the horizon, walk tall & bold,
Grab the sky to ascend and keep the breeze in your hold.]**

The magical words of Gulzar, woven in Shankar Mahadevan's invoking voice wafting through the HICC auditorium in Hyderabad, aptly summed up the Indian Print Media's élan at the 62nd World Association of Newspaper [WAN] Congress held in November last year. This Times of India's 'India Poised' anthem video - *Tum Chalo Hindustan Chale* - had held delegates comprising international print media barons, members of World Editors Forum and other acclaimed media practitioners from over 80 different countries in rapt attention.

As the video faded on the giant screen, an unusually long and thunderous applause followed. And this coming from the international media fraternity - that rarely so liberally lauds anything Indian - was worth a mention. Ravi Dhariwal, CEO, Publishing, BCCL [Times Group] who played this clip as part of his presentation 'The making of a media Brand' went on to field the largest number of queries from the world audience at the end of his session. And he surely must have felt proud to answer them.

And why not? In an era where the world is engaged in deliberating how to save print media from total reader erosion, most Indian news media owners at the forum assumed the role of 'superstars', giving the world a tip or two in their presentations. Indian print media has not only recovered fast from the recent slowdown, but looking at its ad-filled pages and climbing circulation graph, this can safely be termed as the quickest turn around ever since the last 1994 slowdown. No media brand in India worth its salt [save those language business dailies that came in and perished in great haste] died an unnatural death in the last decade.

The West, on the other hand, had witnessed a sharply declining print landscape in recent times. The year 2009 might well be remembered as a year of slashes and stops. It was a year when newspapers began to reassess their business models. While some cities in the US turned into solitary-daily metropolitan, while some others even metamorphosed into no-paper town.

Those, whose survival is assured, have been slashing staff. According to a post on World Editor Forum blog, The New York Times has drastically cut down its staff strength by closing its bureaus. The Washington Post now has no domestic bureau outside the capitals. Many publications have cut down on international reporting. And with cancelled subscriptions, the news agencies too are feeling the heat. The Chicago Tribune, for instance, has experimented its functioning without using AP's reports for a week. Though Europe does not seem as severe - in terms of slash or stop - as the US, it cannot be said that newspapers there were immune to the print meltdown. For example, The Guardian is attempting to make major cuts in its staff strength.

With conventional paper-based news media houses gasping for revenues in the West, the big question facing them is whether or not they should charge for their online content. Platforms on which news is consumed are proliferating by the day. From being content aggregators the platforms are now threatening to become content creators. They want to know if Google is their sleeping partner or is the news media sleeping with the enemy?

Google is already being called the 'copyright thief' because it has built a business model off newspaper content without contributing significantly to the news media organisations. News Corp is leading the fight in the US and some Spanish and German publishers, too, have started raising their concerns about Google's encroachment on their territories.

One whole session was dedicated to this burning topic in the WAN Congress. A publisher presented a detailed account as to how Google has been gauging news consumers' preferences for content in all these years by allowing free access to news media. And now, armed with some clinching consumer insights through consumer trails, Google is threatening to usurp the news media space. To be fair to Google, the search giant has also been at pains to convince the media organizations that it indeed is their only friend in need. To buttress its point, it cites the one billion clicks that it sends to news websites each month via Google News!

Meanwhile, amidst all this chaos, the power of print is shifting its base to Asia - India and China to be precise - as these two Asian giants are keeping the print hopes aflame.

A look at the World Press Trends-2004 report reveals that there were only seven Indian newspapers in the list of Top 50 of the world. Cut to its 2009 edition released recently, India stays at the top of the global list with 14 titles! The Times of India and Dainik Jagran occupy slots within the top 15. In the top 100 global list, there are five Indian English, six Hindi, two Tamil, two Marathi, two Malayalee, one Gujarati, one Telugu and one Bengali newspaper listed.

World Top 50 Newspaper Titles [Circulation]		
Country	2009	2004
India	14	7
China	13	10
Japan	12	16
Republic of Korea	3	3
United Kingdom	3	3
United States of America	3	6
Germany	1	2
Thailand	1	1
Austria		1
Egypt		1
Total	50	50

If world newsprint demand forecast is any indicator for the print's growth area, North America is witnessing a downfall in newsprint demand by 24.8 per cent, Europe's demand is down by 3.2 per cent, Latin America is up by 7.4 per cent, South Africa is up by 3.2 per cent, Australia up by 13.7 per cent and Asia is up by 12.8 per cent. Asia's consumption base is, however, larger than most of the continents.

Back home, the advertising fraternity sure has been skeptic about Indian print's buoyancy factor, but they are entitled to their elite urbane viewpoints. Print in India has no threat. Print media is here to stay - at least for the next three decades. And there are reasons to it.

Print in India is an uncomplicated means of individual empowerment. Let's not start looking at a common man in India as a global citizen who has easy access to all information that empowers him. Information is power to him. The more the information is on his personal life's issues, the more enlightened and empowered he becomes. The pulp version of his news and information delivery is within his easy reach that costs him less than a cup of coffee. And what's more advantageous is the fact that it is also door-delivered to him every morning and he also is entitled to get the entire month's supply on credit! No advance security deposit is demanded. And to keep him engaged in reading media organizations also reward him in India! Does this happen with any other media options in India? Or in west?

Print is local and hence for him it is a tangible means of self-empowerment. He is as local as the mufasil reporter of the daily he reads is. And both of them take good care of each other's empowerment.

TV is universal and hence is an illusion. As illusionary as Katrina Kaif is to an Average Joe — he sees her, likes her but cannot expect her to solve his daily grind's problems. Similarly, TV news can rattle the Parliament and the nation but it cannot move the individual life of an ordinary man, unless he had fallen in a deep pit!

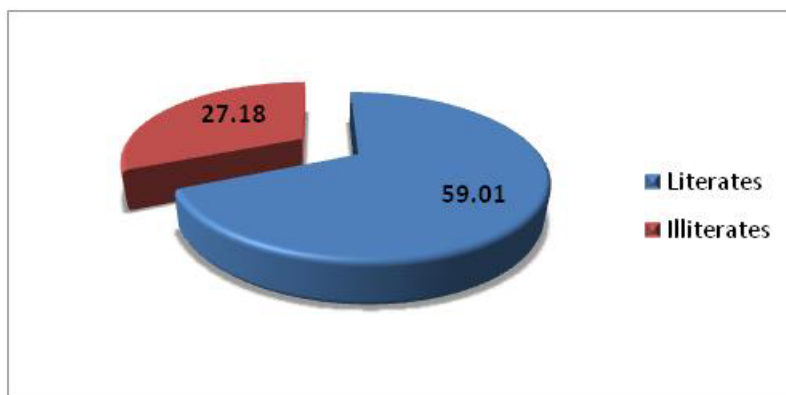
If printed news is the first need in the enlightened mankind's mornings in India, this is also the first luxury that a very ordinary man affords himself as he moves up the ladder of social status. Print is also aspirational. Being seen reading a daily in the morning is still considered a more civilised habit than sitting in front of a TV and watching a news channel that hardly allows you to digest anything. Moreover, Indians are argumentative and love spending hours debating a subject. And an Indian is more equipped in his favourite trait when he's an avid reader of newspaper. His Random Access Memory works faster when he reads and stores it in his hard disk!

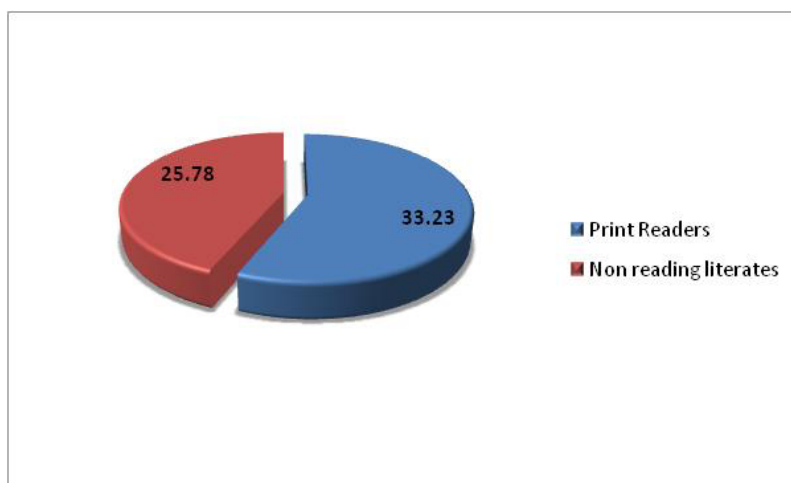
There are other reasons besides these arguments. According to the IRS 2009R-2 estimates, India is a large base of 86.19 crore 12+ aged Indians of who only 59.01 crore people are literates. MRSI defines literates as ones who can read with understanding and also write in at least in one Indian language. Print follows where the literates are.

Of this print enabled audience of 59.01 crore, only 33.23 crore read any form of print. There are potentially 25.78 crore readers still to be recruited by the print media as its readers.

In the coming years, literacy is only going to get further enhanced. So there's strong bench strength waiting for Indian print media and most major print players are blurring their traditional readership boundaries to convert a non-reader literate into regular print consumer.

Dainik Bhaskar went to Rajasthan to only expand the reader's market there. Similarly Dainik Jagran blurred its boundary and expanded its footprint to 13 states only to expand the reader's market. Then Sakshi, the new Telugu daily sensation in Andhra Pradesh, has generated a record readership debut number of 45.56 lakh for itself. In doing so, the Telugu daily readers' number has seen a growth of 32.08 lakh. Who says that print has reached its saturation? Marathi, Hindi, Malayalam, Oriya, English, Punjabi, Assamese and Kannada language dailies have also recruited new readers and have expanded their Total readership base, as per the latest readership estimates. There's even further growth prospect out here for some more media brands to explore.





[Figures in Crore. Base: 86.19 Crore Indians of 12+ Age. Source IRS 2009]

India, a nation where print is still an aspirational subject, it will take quite some time for the digital media to proliferate and expand its access to every common man. Simultaneously, it would also give print media a renewed lease of another three decades to re-engineer its content and re-orient itself to be in contention.

Cellular service is likely to reach quicker than print but cell phone may not satiate the aspirational urge of a common man on upward mobility. Further, the seconds-based price regime will also see intense pressure on their profit margins. And if they have to generate and assimilate content as part of their offering, it would cost them plenty and will only erode their margins further. Four to five news headlines in text or in IVR [Interactive Voice Response] form would cost the consumer more than a full 20-pages newspaper. And on that count, print still has a huge scope of finding newer territories, as shown in the chart above.

On the revenue front, Indian print media is still cutting a larger pie. With localized advertising on the rise, TV or digital media would not benefit from it. India still has a lower ad spend ratio to the GDP. As the GDP grows, the revenue sources for the advertising industry will also be on the rise. And India, undoubtedly, has fundamentally a strong economy. It has quickly decoupled itself from the financial meltdown of the West and is on to the path of recovery. Newspaper business model, much detached from the western pattern, will also find innovative ways to be relevant to the next succeeding generations. Print is also becoming multiple media platforms now by integrating with TV, OoH, Radio, Cinema, activations etc. Hopefully, it would also occupy the digital space by coming together to ward off the threats posed by the search giants.

Change is constant. Landscapes change and so does the lifestyle. In the densely wired urban space, chances are, we might have drifted in our lives many a times in the past. From being subjective on issues, we have become more objective in life. Life, too, is shifting from a depth-oriented society to width-oriented society — leading to much gaudiness in content creation and packaging. Greater consciousness has only led to even more bewilderment, leading to further loss of dependence on any one set form of news consumption. Information overdrive has led to some kind of unease within the news consuming audience, advertising fraternity and so also among the media houses operating out of major metros.

The metropolitan news consumer, who feels that he knows it all, has in the process become too self-centric, hence too pampered and therefore too demanding. He is also very much involved in the process of content creation and is therefore too less loyal than before.

But look carefully at the forces that drive country's GDP today. It is no longer rests with this individualistic urban-centric man. The consumer power has shifted base to the more aspiring

people residing on the country side. And they are the ones who are ringing in the cash registers for all product categories across the board. Mobiles, durable goods and the other FMCG products categories are finding newer consumers with enhanced consuming frequencies.

And print is poised to move in that direction to reaping the newer growth. And advertising revenue stream therefore has to follow where the consumer is and not where the advertising fraternity is headquartered.

New Growth engines all from the country side:

Product Category	Consumer Growth in Mn.	Rural Share %
TV	28.1	64
Pressure Cooker	22.6	54
Refrigerator	7.7	31
Motor Cycles	7.4	51
Washing Machine	2.6	6
Automobile	1.2	24
Hair Oil	479	76
Shampoo	148	68
Toilet Soap	79	53
Soft Drink	43	54
Talcum Powder	31	42
Skin Creams	31	58
Ice Cream	30	42
Base: 1998 to 2007, Source IRS of different rounds		

William Powers, the author of Hamlet's Blackberry had said '*Paper is the most successful communications innovation of the last 2000 years, the one that has lasted the longest and had the profoundest effect on civilization. Without the technology that is paper, there would be no civilization. Yet most people don't even think of paper as a technology..!*' Speaking about his book he had said '*Hamlet's Blackberry is a little different from other studies. It's not about circulation or ad revenues. And it's not really about journalism. In fact, strictly speaking, it isn't about newspapers. It's about the material that newspapers are printed on-Paper. On the question of future of newspaper he says 'It seems to me that the question of whether newspapers have a future is related, in a very related deep way, to whether the paper itself has a future'*'.

The pulp is precious. It occupies mankind's mind and heart space. In India it still is priceless. Be it crisp hard currency that gives you supreme confidence or legal papers that affords you security. Or be it a tiny booklet called passport that allows you access as Global citizens, or even the hard copy of your appointment letter that makes you feel more secured in an era of pink slips. Or that neatly folded bundle of joy that you eagerly wait for every morning for your Random Access Memory's daily fill. Pulp and Newspaper are here to stay, dominating your mind space even as you read this on a pulp sheet.

Meanwhile what makes readers tick in India and what ticks them off in the west is a topic of another debate, reserved for some other occasion.