

## INDIE VISIONARIES

Advancing the Digital Frontier of Literary  
Journalism in India

*David O. Dowling and Subin Paul*

In recent years, India has experienced a new wave of English-language narrative journalism startups, many positioning themselves with ambitious, optimistic editorial mission statements that read like manifestos bent on revolutionizing conventional mainstream media. India's independent, online journalism ranges from news aggregators to non-profit and for-profit startups specializing in original reporting, editorial, and essay writing. Central to this diverse field is longform narrative journalism, led by the print monthly *The Caravan's* digital extension Vantage. Essays and journalism by renowned authors such as Arundhati Roy regularly appear in *The Caravan*, the slow journalism production process of which entails extensive reporting and writing distinguished by dramatic narration, pace, character, and literary style. Also emphasizing intellectual agility and the art of narrative is *Peepli*, a multimedia platform dedicated to using digital tools to enhance storytelling, as in the serialized "Noble Mansion," by award-winning journalist Rahul Bathia. *Scroll*, an independent news venture focused on politics and culture, touts another powerful display of narrative journalism in Supriya Sharma's "Window Seat," a 26-part series dedicated to coverage of the 2014 Lok Sabha elections. The acclaimed piece, which was the first digital-born story to win the prestigious Ramnath Goenka Award, is notable for its first-person ethnographic reportage.

Through case studies centering on *The Caravan*, *Peepli*, and *Scroll*, this chapter explores the digital publishing industry's competing business models and news brands that constitute narrative longform journalism in India today. The digital ecosystem in India has recently seen a surge in narrative journalism targeting an array of audiences and topics, including the feminist outlet *Ladies Finger*, the rural advocacy publication *Rural India Online* and the technology, science, and business journal *The Ken*. Methodologically, we engage close readings of multimodal texts and paratexts to situate these publications industrially and culturally. Special attention is paid to the change in India's digital ecosystem that has opened new spaces for independent journalism startups online, particularly those focusing on longer, textured narratives supported by embedded multimedia interactives, videos and graphics. The cases exemplify India's pivot toward immersive narrative longform journalism, a development that now occurs across media. Revati Prasad's recent work on digital journalism startups in India, and Summer Harlow and Monica Chadha's typology of founder identity among the nation's entrepreneurial digital news organizations inform our examination of the evolving market for online narrative journalism as a thriving sector of independent slow media in India.<sup>1</sup>

## The Rise of Digital Narrative Journalism in India

The surge of urbanization in India is interconnected with the rise of private news outlets that have seen a diversifying market emerge across television broadcast and print newspapers. From the 1990s through 2011, newspaper circulation skyrocketed, reaching 39 percent of India's population over the age of 12, totaling 350 million readers.<sup>2</sup> With 20 of the world's largest newspapers, India's print media continued to thrive throughout digitalization, unlike nations in the West that feared the demise of traditional journalism at the hands of new media. Television, radio and internet outlets complimented rather than impeded the rising tide of the media wave, with labor flowing across media outlets and shared ownership on the rise.<sup>3</sup> Digitalization accelerated these developments, raising both optimism for civic participation in the democratic process and skepticism toward the manipulation of social media for political and commercial advantage.<sup>4</sup> Even as questions were raised about the erosion of ethical and free speech standards in this new hyper-competitive media market, the news industry continued to flourish.<sup>5</sup> The expanding market for news began to accommodate a range of products, including digital longform journalism, which grew out of the magazine industry's expanding repertoire of feature, trend and profile stories accompanied by glossy images.

The introduction of digital longform journalism in India has contributed to the development of a "New India," one whose urbanization could arguably be associated not with chaos and decline but with a new cosmopolitanism featuring intellectual, literary, and cultural perspectives.<sup>6</sup> India soon became attractive for its outsourcing opportunities enabling disaggregation among tech companies, which increasingly became useful for spatially flexible business and knowledge services. Regional legislators in states such as Karnataka recognized this growth and soon established lucrative tax abatements, land subsidies, and regulation loopholes to accelerate development by importing equipment and infrastructure, particularly for digital communication. In this context of India's burgeoning tech industry, legacy news organizations in the nation pivoted to digital extensions of their products and independent startups soon appeared, formed by legions of reporters, editors, and publishers from across the media spectrum.<sup>7</sup>

Internet access in India has expanded dramatically since 2010, sparking innovation in digital news. Startups compete for the expanding online audience, particularly in urban areas, with internet use predicted to reach 50 percent in 2020, according to Ravi Agrawal's study of digital developments in India. Agrawal notes that when smartphones and cellular data became mainstream in India in 2010, internet access grew exponentially. Despite a lack of connectivity in rural regions, which still represents a considerable digital divide in India, the online audience exploded from 100 million in 2010 to 317 million in 2015, five years after the mainstreaming of the smartphone. Two years later, online users expanded to 462 million in 2017, with an estimated 700 million in 2020 and one billion with internet access projected by 2025.<sup>8</sup> India now has the world's second largest population of internet users.<sup>9</sup> Digital publishing in India has never experienced more promising circumstances, at least technologically, as producers have begun a phase of radical experimentation in business models, editorial content, and aesthetic forms of digital narrative journalism.<sup>10</sup> The following three case studies explore the platforms and genres that have emerged in online multimedia feature reporting and writing on both digital native startup platforms and digital extensions of legacy media. It is to the latter that we now turn in the case of the renowned journalistic brand of *The Caravan*, one of India's most respected magazines.

## Relaunching *The Caravan*: Legacy Media Pivots to Digital Journalism

The 2010 relaunch of *The Caravan* coincided with the mainstreaming of the smartphone in India, which opened the floodgates of digitalization, transforming cultural production and consumption in the process. That year, *The Caravan* editors reached for the expanding digital audience through “meticulous reporting and the art of narrative” in line with its ambition to become “one of the country’s most respected and intellectually agile magazines,” which continues to set the standard for Indian journalism.<sup>11</sup> In India, intellectual and literary culture is integral to both digital archiving as social protest on platforms such as *Dalit Camera* and personal narrative reportage and criticism, as in the work of acclaimed authors such as Meena Kandasamy in magazines like *Outlook*.<sup>12</sup>

Harlow and Chadha propose a typology of social identities adopted by founders of startup digital publications in India, which include Darwinians (driven by competition and profit), Communitarians (focused on serving the community and public interest), Missionaries (who see themselves as agents of change for a cause on behalf of social justice), and Guardians (focused on reinventing journalism to provide a higher quality alternative to mainstream media).<sup>13</sup> In addition to advocacy journalism and investigative reporting for social justice associated with Missionaries, *The Caravan*’s focus on quality—especially “dramatic narratives that employ pace, colour, character, and literary style”—also places it in the Guardian category.<sup>14</sup> Literary journalism is important to *The Caravan*’s aim to “bring the excitement and readability of great fiction to stories with real characters, real plots and real consequences.” The editors of *The Caravan* self-consciously select from “the finest reporters and writers in South Asia, and beyond, to track complex subjects.” The aim of providing a superior alternative to mainstream media appears in the objective of writing “at a depth which transcends that of the daily news.”<sup>15</sup>

In an effort to enhance its web presence and thus exert greater influence over public discourse on topics of learned debate, *The Caravan* introduced Vantage in April 2014, a section dedicated to exclusive online content. Since then, Vantage has featured award-winning work leveraging literary journalistic techniques, such as Chirtangada Choudhury’s two-part story that won the Laadli Media Award for Gender Sensitivity in the Web Investigative Series. The story covers the underreported topic of women’s rights in India, focusing on the sexual assault of agrarian Adivisi women, hardscrabble subsistence farmers near the bottom of India’s socioeconomic ladder.<sup>16</sup> The first installment ends ominously with an activist leader doubting that any action on their behalf would be taken against the guilty.<sup>17</sup> The following installment revealed progress—however incremental—toward justice in the form of a National Commission for Scheduled Tribes (NCST) reprimand of police for reluctance to file incident reports.<sup>18</sup> Embedded in links within the online story, which scrolls vertically on a single page without banner or pop-up advertising, is the complete 15-page report and operative sections of the anti-rape Indian Penal Code among other vital primary sources. This advocacy for social justice on behalf of rural women places this award-winning digital journalism squarely in the Missionary category.

In addition to investigative journalism, *The Caravan* also treats topics in the world of sport and business economics, such as Rahul Bhatia’s acclaimed profile of Narayanaswami Srinivasan, an industrialist and a major figure of global cricket known as the sport’s “ruler.” The story’s accolades include the Rammath Goenka Award, Red Ink Award, and Mumbai Press Club Award for excellence in journalism. Compared with the spare and minimalist prose of Choudhury, which is appropriate to the political urgency of her subject, Bhatia weaves a yarn with writerly detail and a love for the cadences of descriptive narration.

The opening scene, for instance, depicts two celebrity cricket players from India's 1993 championship team that defeated a talented West Indies team. They are at ease, lounging "in the groggy afternoon, reminiscing and laughing." The protagonist is then introduced, an individual whose psychological interiority is revealed through his actions: "With them was a third man, a large but unobtrusive spectator, who, from all available evidence, admired them unstintingly."<sup>19</sup> Bhatia's portrait of Srinivasan exposes the dissembling businessman as a crafty deal broker. "Dressed for summer, and his hair was not quite a mullet, but certainly business up front and a party in the back. This was all, in fact, Srinivasan's party," particularly one designed to leverage his status as a generous sponsor of high-profile matches to access inner circles of the best players and fix outcomes of those matches for financial and political gain.<sup>20</sup> Bhatia crafted this opening from his research into the base of Srinivasan's notorious business schemes in Chennai. During the initial stages of his reporting, Bhatia recalled that "the first person I met showed me old pictures from a time when Srinivasan was just entering the world of cricket administration. Those pictures became the story's opening."<sup>21</sup> This opening scene sounds the keynotes of insider industry corruption through gaming and politicking, an apt frame for the portrait of an intermediary bent on profiting from the soaring popularity of cricket in India.

Bhatia takes the reader through Srinivasan's deft maneuvers to elude allegations of illegal betting and game fixing. In addition to meticulous preparation for hearings, Srinivasan "could think like an accountant, he kept his advisers close, and almost never failed to ensure that his supporters were happily and well rewarded."<sup>22</sup> This portrait of insider corruption is played out in the key of true crime intrigue, yet backed with meticulous reporting. In gathering interviews for the piece, Bhatia discovered that he had no shortage of sources, since "people really want to talk about men like Srinivasan because the list of his slights is so long." The over-abundance of source material ideally situated Bhatia to craft an elaborate profile. The challenge "was to discover how many people it was humanly possible to speak with" for a profile that doubled as an investigation into the corrupt dealings of cricket administration in India.

Although Bhatia intended his story as a "call for change," he speculated that it may have functioned as more of a "how-to guide" given the spread of corruption in the sport since its publication.<sup>23</sup> In either case, the piece stands as the most comprehensive investigation of the topic, one rife with intense conflict between characters. For example, Srinivasan dealt with delayed payments from Nimbus—a company that bid \$600 million (roughly Rs 2,700 crore) for the rights to telecast Indian cricket—with a threat: a faxed statement would be sent indicating the company's bank guarantee would be cashed if payment was not received. At the meeting, Harish Thawani, the media entrepreneur and owner of Nimbus, shot back at Srinivasan. "'When you leave this room,' Thawani replied, 'I will be waiting for you outside and I will personally break both your legs. Then you won't be able to walk home ... and send me the fax.'" In this unmistakably novelesque register, the story unmaskes the brutal dealings behind Srinivasan's polished public persona as an ambassador of sport and nation, whose love for cricket is cast "as a kind of patriotism, and everything he would do for cricket as a form of service for his country."<sup>24</sup> Bhatia's exploration of the intersection of politics and sport in Srinivasan's career balances compelling scene construction with reporting drawn from the politicians, businesspeople, athletes and documentary sources driving India's passion for the sport of cricket. In the process, the piece exposes the institutional damage Srinivasan would leave in the wake of his colossal ambition.

*The Caravan's* emphasis on quality through deep storytelling according to the methods of slow journalism often converges with its advocacy for the rights of marginalized and oppressed groups in India. Arundhati Roy, a renowned literary figure and winner of the Man Booker Prize for Fiction, is a human rights activist in India whose essays such as "The Silence is the

Loudest Sound: Echoes of Fascism in the Kashmir Valley” (2019) have appeared in *The Caravan*. Her lyrical prose epitomizes the precepts of slow journalism defined by Susan Greenberg as “essays, reportage and other nonfiction writing that takes its time to find things out, notices stories that others miss, and communicates it all to the highest standards,” particularly as an alternative to mainstream media’s “fast news.”<sup>25</sup> Roy’s essay “*enacts a critique*” of the limitations of conventional, headline-driven news, a signature function of slow digital journalism, as defined by Megan Le Masurier.<sup>26</sup> The essay is also reflective of *The Caravan*’s communitarian aim to serve the public interest.

In Roy’s “The Silence is the Loudest Sound,” the critique aims at human rights violations not typically covered in India’s headlines. The Indian government instituted a media blackout of the independent states of Kashmir and Jammu, stripping them of their constitutions and their own flags. Roy’s poetic description of the political manner with which these interventions were made reflects a distinctly literary mode of expression. With a poet’s finely tuned ear for the tone of this brutal authorization of the takeover of these independent states, Roy describes how “the passing of the act was welcomed in Parliament by the very British tradition of desk-thumping.” Invoking India’s history of colonial exploitation, she notes, “there was a whiff of colonialism in the air. The masters were pleased that a recalcitrant colony had finally, formally, been brought under the crown.” She pauses, bringing emphasis to the critique of colonialism: “For its own good. Of course.”<sup>27</sup>

In addition to these exemplary pieces, the repertoire of public interest journalism in *The Caravan*’s Vantage extends to interactive features. An irreverent humorous tone marks the two-part “Modi Meter” interactive that performs public service through a check on power in a point-by-point assessment of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s campaign manifesto. Each claim is rated on a scale from “Unfulfilled” to “Nearly There.” “Unfulfilled” campaign promises include uniform civil code, election reform and black money, whereas the less essential promotion of sport is “Nearly There” in realizing his original vision.<sup>28</sup> A related interactive offers a detailed record of the global leaders Modi has hugged, extending this humorous approach that nonetheless bears political implications on what is a telling nonverbal sign of allegiance for the Indian Prime Minister.<sup>29</sup> From women’s rights, to sports to political satire, *The Caravan* touts a range of digital longform genres in its editorial repertoire.

### ***Peepli: Born-Digital Multimedia Storytelling***

After serving on the staff of *The Caravan* from 2011 to 2014, Rahul Bhatia co-founded *Peepli*, a multimedia journalism platform dedicated to covering vital issues in India. As one of four regular contributors to *Peepli*, Bhatia’s features center on land acquisition, urban development, and environmental issues. *Peepli*’s editorial policy blends Communitarian and Missionary social identities, according to Harlow and Chadha’s typology, especially in its public service to marginalized communities and mission to achieve social justice by investigating environmental legislation’s impact on the lives of citizens. Guardian characteristics—defined as a commitment to a high standard of quality that seeks to improve upon conventional storytelling in mainstream media—appear in Bhatia’s work for *Peepli*, which displays narrative prowess of the sort that distinguishes his *Caravan* writing, except with enhanced use of multimedia elements and a topical focus on urban development. His five-part series, “Noble Mansion,” exhibits his signature thick description of the choices India makes, particularly “what the state takes and what it gives and how these choices affect lives and livelihoods.”<sup>30</sup>

Distinguishing *Peepli* from many digital startups is its combined focus on longform investigative journalism and integration of multimedia tools to enhance storytelling. Bhatia’s “Noble

Mansion” series showcases these qualities in an investigation of NAINA, a planned city in the Mumbai Metropolitan region. Its digital design employs an array of multimedia elements to augment storytelling, especially embedded audio, video, graphics, interactive maps, and photography. Each element enhances the overall quality of the narrative, as in the opening looping video of the chapter, “Location, Location, Location.” An aura of intrigue is evoked through what initially appears as a static black image above the title and the opening paragraph. Seconds later, lights appear and move across the screen in haunting night footage taken from a portion of the 126-kilometer road that winds through NAINA. With cinematic echoes of David Lynch’s *Lost Highway*, particularly the postmodern noir aesthetic of its dark road shots, the scene comes into focus with each passing vehicle. This clip functions as an apt visual metaphor for the shady and often surreptitious operations of land developers in this region of India. Dramatic tension immediately mounts with the allusion to sinister prospectors “who began to stalk the countryside around Kon, a small village” located near Panvel. “Fertile fields” dotted by “huddled homes and villages” were subject to “invasion” by an “in-principle approval” of the government for construction of an international airport ten kilometers away. Although landowners were coaxed into selling their fields based on the promise of the luxuries of urban life, “the benefits of urban life had not reached them.”<sup>31</sup>

Bhatia weaves scents and sounds into this multimodal chiaroscuro. The industrial complex fronting the village with its factories and plants dedicated to the experimentation and production of dyes and polyesters “flavored the air—a hint of baking one moment, the suggestion of a burning tire the next.” Dwarfed and dominated by this industrial sprawl, “humans were tucked behind high walls.” At night, the only sounds besides “dance bars lit up like casinos in Vegas ... were automotive; namely the clattering of cargo trucks.” Following this section of written text is a six-minute embedded audio clip from SoundCloud, which provides aural documentation immersing the user in the cacophony of clattering, honking, and muffled voices of passers-by in conversation, and an occasional trumpet riff from the bars. In the ensuing text, Bhatia engages with locals and hears their misgivings toward the development. An embedded video from YouTube captures an edgy moment during a panel in which developers address the public. The tense exchange between a developer and skeptical audience member highlights the economic domination of the displaced villagers, particularly in the rhetorical question, “If the man above is not with you, then you’re dead, right?” Bhatia’s reporting reveals that the NAINA corridor “was designed so that it curved around the lands of influential residents and ran over the powerless.”<sup>32</sup> The story illuminates the underreported costs of urbanization and infrastructure development as a part of India’s ongoing efforts toward becoming recognized as a leading nation in the global community.

The digital prowess and social media reach of *Peepli* appears immediately on the publication’s main landing page, which includes a series of posts, under the heading “Postcards,” on SoundCloud, YouTube, and Instagram, promoting its features. The platform’s .org URL is in keeping with its advertising-free digital design, as promotion takes place primarily through social media channels. The lack of display and native advertising reflects *Peepli*’s non-profit status and startup alternative to India’s mainstream commercial media. Commercial pressures have compromised journalistic standards in India, as shown in *The Times of India*’s acquisition by the Jain brothers, who openly merged business and editorial interests, traditionally disparate, non-overlapping functions known as “church and state” in industrial parlance.<sup>33</sup> According to a Reuters Report on digital journalism startups in India, new media afford “an exceptional chance to produce new and engaging forms as an alternative or supplement to what is produced by Indian legacy media,” which is oriented “towards short-term profits, occasionally dubious professional ethics, problems with outside pressures, and sometimes conflicts of interest related

to their owners' other business and political activities."<sup>34</sup> Founders of digital journalism startups in India have seized this opportunity to maintain ethical standards while still earning a profit. Those who use native advertising generally "stated there was no overlap between people who worked on the editorial side and the content marketing side to ensure editorial was free of the influence of business pressures."<sup>35</sup>

This, of course, is less true of digital startups that conceive of themselves as profit-oriented, designated as Darwinians according to Harlow and Chadha's typology. These companies tend to conform to the Jain brothers' business model that openly sells stories to parties interested in brand promotion. Many "walk an impossibly fine line," as Rashka Kumar observes, between economic necessity and "the desire to report on the powerful, usually political, figures [journalists] also rely on to place adverts."<sup>36</sup> Within mainstream print media, this "torturous balancing act" occurs when "journalists are hired more as advertising agents than reporters." Under this condition, news subjects routinely provide interviews *and* purchase advertising, whether promoting their government bureau or commercial product, either in a separate advertisement or within the story itself. According to older print business models in India, it is common practice for newsmakers to buy stories for publicity. Digital journalism startup founders tend to be more conscientious of their new range of business models at their disposal, often leveraging technological affordances for a more ethical product, particularly through such practices as highlighting native advertising to readers with "different borders, background colors, and typography."<sup>37</sup>

### **Story Over Content: Parsing the Print Ethic of Digital Startup *Scroll***

Consonant with Harlow and Chadha's Guardian social identity of Indian digital startups, *Scroll's* founder and CEO, Samir Patil, is dedicated to elevating the standards of conventional, advertising-dependent business models in mainstream media. This desire to "reinvent the cost-structure" for profitable journalism in India is consistent with the platform's commitment to fair, balanced and immersive digital longform journalism.<sup>38</sup> Although the platform relies on advertising for its main source of revenue, *Scroll* founding editor Naresh Fernandes conceives of himself strictly as a journalist and not an entrepreneur, noting that the business side of the publication is managed by his partner and that editorial content remains entirely separate in its operations and production standards. Fernandes had no knowledge of the metrics of the website, according to an interview with Harlow and Chadha, nor did he have any desire to know. "Nobody is allowed to use the word 'content' in my presence," he insisted, in the interest of maintaining *Scroll's* special relationship with its readers. "We do not produce content, we produce journalistic articles," he affirmed, asserting the journal's aspiration toward crafted literary narrative.<sup>39</sup> In the process, the editorial vision of *Scroll* is to revive pre-digital storytelling of an artisanal, hand-made nature, yet employ digital tools to revive what is essentially a print ethic of production, an aim common to many online slow journalism publications according to David Dowling.<sup>40</sup>

*Scroll's* lucrative financial situation began with its 2014 launch, which was supported by generous investments from the Media Development Investment Fund of New York and the Omidyar Network, run by eBay founder Pierre Omidyar. This financial base allowed for a diverse editorial palette, which covers both breaking news in shorter pieces as well as crafted, longer features for its Magazine section. Among those features are sports retrospectives covering such topics as the rise of Martina Navratilova in the world of women's tennis, as well as a historical piece utilizing original archival material from the Marine Department of the India Office to probe the mysterious journey of the *Roebuck*, an East India Company ship that sailed during

the 1620s. Such topics appeal to *Scroll's* upscale market with sophisticated reporting and storytelling, an approach that contrasts sharply with *The Quint*, whose focus is “popular digital journalism” for a “quick, visual and social experience.”<sup>41</sup> *Scroll* is instead “committed to developing new ways of telling and sharing journalistic stories” while abiding by “the basic principles of traditional journalism—fairness, objectivity, on-the-ground reporting, cross-checking of sources, and a distaste for speculation.”<sup>42</sup>

One of *Scroll's* major achievements in narrative longform storytelling is Supriya Sharma's award-winning “Window Seat” series, detailing her 2,500 kilometer train journey to report on the 2014 Lok Sabha elections. Sharma was the first journalist from a digital news organization to win the Ramnath Goenka Award in 2015. Adjudicators of the award noted her precise handling of a wide range of facts, “putting them together in a way that explains something, and doing so in a way that would make people care.”<sup>43</sup> Reportorial accuracy is reflected in the former, the expository element of storytelling in the second, and narrativity in the latter. In 26 installments profiling India at a critical juncture in its political history, the series features conversations about political strife in Assam's Bodo regions, an investigation of the condition for workers in West Bengal's tea gardens, discussion with a rickshaw driver who had never heard of Narendra Modi, and a snapshot of an impoverished area of Bihar where an MLA (Member of Legislative Assembly) arrived at his wedding in a helicopter. The series culminates on election day in polling booths at the Line of Control in Kashmir.

Sharma's series takes the pulse of India during its elections, laying bare the full scope of its social inequality and embattled politics. Capturing a nation of such diversity and scope in a work of journalism that accurately reflects its condition entailed colossal ambition. Such a project had not been accomplished on this scale for a digital platform in India. The selection of subjects is telling of the nation's desire to rise from its social and economic struggles. Particularly poignant is Sharma's report on a drug detoxification center in Punjab, one of 80 licensed centers for recovering addicts in the state. The connection to the elections is less remote than it may appear. As the center's owner said, “parents get their boys admitted before elections.” This is “because young men are in demand during elections,” he explained of the spike in demand for his thriving business. Young men are recruited to “do party work” such as gathering crowds; in exchange, they receive free drugs. “Some of them overdose ... and die,” the owner explained. Thus “panicked parents send [their sons] to rehab to keep them away from harm during the elections.” In what is “neither a hostel nor a prison, but somewhere in between,” the reader enters the world of young men in a “neon-lit windowless hall,” where they are assembled “solemnly on the floor ... eating eggs and bread for breakfast,” their heads shaved, flanked by posters listing the hourly schedule under bold headings labeled “encounters,” “family deal,” and “mood making.”<sup>44</sup>

Sharma's thorough background reporting reveals a long history of heroin, poppy husk, and opium trafficking in Punjab, suggesting the entrenched nature of the state's illegal drug trade. The adjacent poppy fields of Afghanistan offer a ready supply and government vehicles provide distribution channels. The narrative deepens when Sharma reveals that the rehabilitation centers themselves are fraught with abuse, functioning in some cases as detention centers where individuals may be sent without recourse by their opponents in legal disputes. Men are frequently picked up from their homes in the dead of night, beaten, tortured, and sometimes killed. However, the piece ends with a slim ray of hope, by way of the elections, in news of a party whose campaign theme is to sweep out the illegal drug trade.

As a major milestone in digital narrative journalism in India, “Window Seat” was instrumental in realizing the vision of *Scroll's* founders. The appeal to an up-market audience enables the publication to attract advertisers associated with magazine journalism of the stature of

*The Caravan*. “The next step is not to go to Google ads, but magazine quality advertising on the internet,” Fernandes said.<sup>45</sup> Given the substance and quality of storytelling exhibited in Sharma’s award-winning series, *Scroll* parlays this literary reputation into content-led e-commerce through the sale of books and literary merchandise on its website. Distribution is handled by a separate team dedicated to search algorithms and social media, where *Scroll* has a prominent presence on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube. Although the digital elements are not as profuse nor as carefully woven into each story as in the more design-savvy *Peepli*, *Scroll* boasts a more diverse strategic communication method for brand amplification via an app for Androids and two regularly distributed email newsletters.

### Conclusion: The Future of Digital Literary Journalism in India

The “rise in digital platforms is a major force multiplier for journalists,” according to Raj Chengappa, President of the Editors’ Guild of India. Questions remain, however, regarding the gatekeeping and curation of such content, especially given the tensions between human-selection and machine-driven automation. “How far do analytics decode a consumer’s preferences and pre-decide the array of news that they will have the option to choose from?” Chengappa asks. Sen and Nielsen argue that “fundamentally sound reporting” is the foundation of the solution, one that is expanding rapidly as an increasing number of online news publications have begun to invest in sophisticated, longform narrative journalism.<sup>46</sup> As literacy rates and connectivity continue to soar in India, the demand for literary journalism through innovative digital design expands into a new frontier, one marked by rich multimodal aesthetics and alternative business models.

### Notes

- 1 Prasad, “Digital Disruption?” 1–17; Harlow and Chadha, “Indian Entrepreneurial Journalism,” 891–910.
- 2 Udupa, *Making News in Global India*, 2.
- 3 Prasad, “Digital Disruption?” 4–5; Udupa, 3.
- 4 Ali, “The Rise of a Hindu Vigilante in the Age of WhatsApp and Modi.”
- 5 Udupa, *Making News in Global India*, 3–4.
- 6 Udupa, 3, 215.
- 7 Udupa, 2–4; Chadha, “The Indian News Media Industry,” 140.
- 8 Agrawal, *India Connected*, 4–5.
- 9 Prasad, “Digital Disruption?” 4.
- 10 Dowling and Paul, “Digital Literary Journalism in Opposition,” 87.
- 11 “About Us,” *The Caravan*.
- 12 Paul and Dowling, “Digital Archiving as Social Protest,” 1240–44; Dowling and Paul, “Digital Literary Journalism in Opposition,” 92.
- 13 Harlow and Chadha, “Indian Entrepreneurial Journalism,” 898.
- 14 “About Us,” *The Caravan*.
- 15 “About Us.”
- 16 Choudhury, “In Two Districts of Bastar”; “The NTCS’s Report.”
- 17 Choudhury, “In Two Districts of Bastar.”
- 18 Choudhury, “The NTCS’s Report.”
- 19 Bhatia, “Beyond the Boundary.”
- 20 Bhatia.
- 21 Mishra, *The Caravan Book of Profiles*, 67.
- 22 Bhatia, “Beyond the Boundary.”
- 23 Mishra, *The Caravan Book of Profiles*, 67.
- 24 Bhatia, “Beyond the Boundary.”

- 25 Greenberg, "Slow Journalism."
- 26 Le Masurier, "Slow Journalism," 405, emphasis in original.
- 27 Roy, "The Silence is the Loudest Sound."
- 28 Chakrabarti, Janardhan, and Sivan, "Modi Meter: Manifesto."
- 29 Chakrabarti, Janardhan, and Sivan, "Modi Meter: Who Does Modi Choose to Hug?"
- 30 "About Peepli," *Peepli*.
- 31 Bhatia, "Noble Mansion."
- 32 Bhatia.
- 33 Auletta, "Citizens Jain."
- 34 Sen and Nielsen, "Digital Journalism Start-ups in India," 41.
- 35 Prasad, "Digital Disruption?," 7.
- 36 Kumar, "India has Lots of Newspapers."
- 37 Prasad, "Digital Disruption?," 7.
- 38 Harlow and Chadha, "Indian Entrepreneurial Journalism," 898.
- 39 Harlow and Chadha, 901.
- 40 Dowling, "The Business of Slow Journalism," 535.
- 41 Sen and Nielsen, "Digital Journalism Start-ups in India," 13.
- 42 Sen and Nielsen, 19.
- 43 Sen and Nielsen, 20.
- 44 Sharma, "Window Seat."
- 45 Sen and Nielsen, "Digital Journalism Start-ups in India," 21.
- 46 Sen and Nielsen, 42.

## Bibliography

- "About *Peepli*." *Peepli*. Accessed March 24, 2021. <http://peepli.org/about>.
- "About Us." *The Caravan*. Accessed March 24, 2021. <https://caravanmagazine.in/pages/about-us>.
- Agrawal, Ravi. *India Connected: How the Smartphone is Transforming the World's Largest Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.
- Ali, Mohammad. "The Rise of a Hindu Vigilante in the Age of WhatsApp and Modi." *Wired*, April 14, 2020. Accessed March 24, 2021. [www.wired.com/story/indias-frightening-descent-social-media-terror](http://www.wired.com/story/indias-frightening-descent-social-media-terror).
- Auletta, Ken. "Citizens Jain: Why India's Newspaper Industry is Thriving." *The New Yorker*, October 1, 2012. Accessed March 24, 2021. [www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/10/08/citizens-jain](http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/10/08/citizens-jain).
- Bhatia, Rahul. "Beyond the Boundary: How N. Srinivasan Became Crickets Biggest Hitter." *The Caravan*, July 31, 2014. Accessed March 24, 2021. <https://caravanmagazine.in/reportage/beyond-boundary>.
- Chadha, Kalyani. "The Indian News Media Industry: Structural Trends and Journalistic Implications." *Global Media and Communication* 13, no. 2 (2017): 139–56.
- . "Noble Mansion: Location, Location." *Peepli*, October 13, 2015. Accessed March 24, 2021. <http://peepli.org/stories/location/>.
- Chakrabarti, Ajachi, Shruti Janardhan and Anjaneya Sivan. "Modi Meter: Manifesto." *The Caravan*, May 21, 2017. Accessed March 24, 2021. <https://caravanmagazine.in/modimeter>.
- . "Modi Meter: Who Does Modi Choose to Hug?" *The Caravan*, May 11, 2016. Accessed March 24, 2021. <https://caravanmagazine.in/modimeter/hugs>.
- Choudhury, Chitragada. "In Two Districts of Bastar, Adivasi Women Report Sexual Assaults by Security Forces During Military Operations; Police Delay and Resist Filing FIRs." *The Caravan*, January 23, 2016. Accessed March 24, 2021. <https://caravanmagazine.in/vantage/bastar>.
- . "The NCST's Report on Gangrapes and Assaults in Bastar Says There is a Breakdown of Discipline among Security Forces." *The Caravan*, May 11, 2016. Accessed March 24, 2021. <https://caravanmagazine.in/vantage/bastar-ncst-report-gangrapes-assaults-result-breakdown-discipline>.
- Dowling, David. "The Business of Slow Journalism: Deep Storytelling's Alternative Economies." *Digital Journalism* 4, no. 4 (2016): 530–46.
- Dowling, David, and Subin Paul. "Digital Literary Journalism in Opposition: Meena Kandasamy and the Dalit Online Movement in India." *Literary Journalism Studies* 11, no. 1 (June 2019): 86–99.
- Greenberg, Susan. "Slow Journalism." *Prospect*, February 2007: 15–16.

- Harlow, Summer, and Monica Chadha. "Indian Entrepreneurial Journalism." *Journalism Studies* 20, no. 6 (2019): 891–910.
- Kumar, Raksha. "India has Lots of Newspapers and Lots of Readers and One Big Journalism Problem." *Columbia Journalism Review*, June 10, 2019. Accessed March 24, 2021. [www.cjr.org/business\\_of\\_news/india-has-lots-of-newspapers-and-lots-of-readers-and-one-big-journalism-problem.php](http://www.cjr.org/business_of_news/india-has-lots-of-newspapers-and-lots-of-readers-and-one-big-journalism-problem.php).
- Le Masurier, Megan. "Slow Journalism: An Introduction to a New Research Paradigm." *Digital Journalism* 4, no. 4 (2016): 405–13.
- Mishra, Supriya. *The Caravan Book of Profiles*. New York: Penguin, 2017.
- Paul, Subin, and David Dowling. "Digital Archiving as Social Protest: *Dalit Camera* and the Mobilization of India's 'Untouchables.'" *Digital Journalism* 6, no. 9 (2018): 1239–54.
- Prasad, Revati. "Digital Disruption? Journalism Startups in India." *Journalism* 22, no. 8 (2019): 2122–38.
- Roy, Arundhati. "The Silence is the Loudest Sound: Echoes of Fascism in the Kashmir Valley." *The Caravan*, August 26, 2019. Accessed March 24, 2021. <https://caravanmagazine.in/conflict/echoes-of-fascism-in-kashmir-valley>.
- Sen, Arijit, and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen. "Digital Journalism Start-ups in India." *Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism*, May 2016: 1–52. Accessed March 24, 2021. [https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2017-04/Digital%20Journalism%20Start-ups%20in%20India\\_0.pdf](https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2017-04/Digital%20Journalism%20Start-ups%20in%20India_0.pdf).
- Sharma, Supriya. "Window Seat: Cocktail of Drugs and Elections is Taking Lives in Punjab." *Scroll*, April 21, 2014. Accessed March 24, 2021. <https://scroll.in/article/662385/cocktail-of-drugs-and-elections-is-taking-lives-in-punjab>.
- Udupa, Sahana. *Making News in Global India: Media, Publics, Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.