

## **IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON INDIAN PRINT MEDIA**

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### **Abstract**

India has a glorious tradition of print media since pre-independence times. The Indian print media had a significant role to play in securing independence. After independence, various forms of media have made a great contribution in inculcating democratic values. Accurate, factual and objective reporting is the key to maintaining the credibility of the print media. Indian readers are more trusted in print media than electronic and web media. With the spread of the Corona, the country's print media has faced many challenges. The print media is in a dilemma on many levels such as news gathering, advertising, distribution, finance. Some journalists have even been tested positive for COVID-19. Many media groups have slashed production costs. Newspapers showed exit doors to many employees on account Covid-19. Some newspapers announced furlough. All major newspaper groups in the country have slashed the salaries of their employees. The print media is in big financial trouble due to declining advertising income. The effects of corona on the Indian print media are studied in the present research paper.

### **Key Words**

*Corona, Indian Print Media, Cost Cutting, Financial Crisis*

### **Introduction**

The British era marked the beginning of newspapers in India. The first newspaper in India, started by James August Hickey, had to constantly fight for freedom of expression. The pre-independence Indian newspapers also carried on the struggle for independence. Indian readers have strong faith in the print media. There were many crises in the print media but with the support of the readers, the print media in the country continued to expand. Many newspapers and magazines are regularly published at national, regional and local levels. Regional and district journalism in particular raised the issue of local development. The print media in India has contributed to increasing public participation in the development process. Locally published small and medium newspapers as well as Indian language journalism have given impetus to India's development. According to Tara S. Nair (2003) the political movement in India shifted

from the center to the states between the 1960s and the 1990s. It was during this period that powerful classes and groups emerged. This transition was accelerated by the changing role of language while local issues were gaining importance. This transformed the Indian print media into a large economic and social structure.

After 1990, India became involved in the process of globalization. In the years that followed, the Indian print media changed dramatically. The Indian media world opened up to foreign media groups for the first time. This led to a major revolution in content and technology in the Indian media. As a result, there was professionalism in the print media. Newspapers run as a mission or goal became a commodity. This made the management of print media more commercial. India, the largest democracy in the world today, supports over 82,000 registered newspapers with a cumulative daily circulation of 11 crore and is estimated to represent an industry turnover of Rs. 32,000 crore. As India has been improving its literacy rate up to 75 per cent, more citizens now develop the capacity and resources to access newspapers and digital forums. The country's print media has been hit by a number of crises, including the global recession, domestic disasters and inflation. But through all of this, the print media persevered. However, the current Pandemic of COVID-19 has broken the backbone of newspapers.

### **Objectives and Data Collection**

Covid-19 is adversely affecting all regions of the world. The media sector is no exception. Two objectives have been set for the presented research paper. 1. To study the impact of COVID-19 on the print media in India and 2. To know what measures have been taken by the print media in India to overcome the situation created by COVID-19. Secondary sources have been used for this research paper. Research conducted in various countries around the world, Corona's impact on the media and the corresponding information disseminated from various newspapers as well as official websites have been used as references. It is presented in the research paper by analyzing the information based on secondary sources. It is also based on some reference texts.

### **Lockdown disrupts newspapers**

According to Unnithan P S Gopikrishnan (2020), India's first Covid-19 patient was found on January 30, 2020 in Kerala. A student from Wuhan University in China returned to Kerala and tested positive. The Union Ministry of Health tweeted this information. After this, COVID-19 was introduced in India. As the number of COVID-19 patients increased, a lockdown was declared by the Central and State Governments. This hit the country's print media. As mentioned by Ranjona Banerjee (2020), the lockdown cooled the production of newspapers and magazines. There were also problems with the distribution system. As a result, the print media across the country was disrupted. Fear of the corona virus spreading through newspapers was expressed on social media. Many readers stopped handling newspapers. Distributors also refused to distribute newspapers. Transportation of newspapers were also shut down due to the lockdown. In this unfavorable situation, the management had no choice but to stop the production of newspapers.

Indian readers are much habituated to newspapers. There is a very large class reading newspapers every morning with tea. The lockdown of this class caused a commotion. Most of the Indian readers trust the information coming from the newspapers. Although information is available through electronic and web media, the credibility of print media in the country is still highly regarded. As reported by Gaurav Laghate (2020), the viewership of electronic media and mobile consumption increased during the period when the distribution of newspapers was stopped. At the same time, Indians used web media extensively to meet the need for information. According to figures released by the Broadcasting Audience Research Council in March 2020, the number of Indian TV viewers increased by 8 per cent during the lockdown. Smartphone access has increased by 6.2 per cent. This meant that the reader turned to electronic and web media during the time when newspapers were closed. At the same time, the newspapers also tried to provide objective and reliable information to the readers through their web editions. Although the production of the newspaper was stopped, the journalists of the print media were collecting information and distributing the information through web editions. Most of the newspapers in the country made e-papers available to the readers. The issue was designed to be able to read newspapers on mobile. Some magazines published mobile editions.

### **Newspaper circulation declined**

Covid-19 caused many adverse effects on newspapers as well as periodicals. As observed by Amrita Nayak–Datta (2020), the most significant of these was the reduction in circulation of most newspapers and magazines. Newspapers in India are constantly competing to increase circulation, but due to the lockdown the newspapers could not reach the readers. Corona virus does not spread through newspapers, explained Union Information and Broadcasting Minister Prakash Javadekar in a tweet. The production and distribution of newspapers in the country resumed thereafter. However, due to doubts in the minds of the readers about the newspaper, many readers stopped the subscription which is delivered to home. This is also one of the reasons for the decline in circulation. Newspapers were shut down from March 23, 2020 to March 31, 2020 in Mumbai and other parts of Maharashtra. This created panic in the minds of the readers about the newspaper. No matter how many times it has been said since then that the corona virus does not spread through newspapers, the general reader still does not believe it. This has been a major setback for the print media in India. The government included newspapers in the category of essential commodities. As a result, newspapers began to be published as before. A statement was also published on behalf of the major newspapers in India, stating that corona is not transmitted through newspapers. These included Dainik Bhaskar, Dainik Jagran, Inadu, Hindustan Times, Amar Ujala, Sakshi, Deccan Herald and other media groups. Some newspapers disinfected the newspaper by spraying sanitizer on it while it was in print. Newspaper vendors were provided with masks, sanitizers and hand gloves, but it was not used much. According to Gaurav Vivek Bhatnagar (2020), print orders of newspapers in the capital Delhi had declined by 90 per cent. This gives an idea of how much the newspaper circulation in

India had declined during this period. Although the publication of newspapers was reversed in later times, it was not possible for the newspapers to reach the circulation figure as in the past.

### **Financial crisis due to lack of advertisements**

All public events were canceled or postponed due to COVID-19. Many sports competitions were either suspended or postponed. All economic cycles, including real estate, bullion markets, political events, came to a standstill. This hit the print media hard. Advertisements in newspapers and magazines stopped and the print media faced a major financial crisis. The production cost of print media is high. Thus media get into trouble if sufficient amount of revenue is not generated. Advertising business was badly affected by this. As a result, small and medium newspapers with large media groups have found themselves in trouble. According to figures released by the Indian Newspaper Society (INS), the print media has suffered a staggering loss of Rs 4,500 crore in the two months of March and April 2020. In the next seven months, the loss is expected to be more than Rs 15,000 crore, the agency said; more than 3 million people are connected to the print media business in India. The print media has provided direct employment to over 10 lakh people. More than 20 lakh people are indirectly dependent on this industry. Therefore, the Indian Newspaper Society has taken a stand that the central government should take this sector seriously. Newsprint currently has a 5 per cent customs duty. The INS has requested the central government to waive the tax. The organization has written a letter requesting the central government to help the country's print media. According to a report published by Anushree Bhattacharya (2020), advertising revenue for all national, regional and local newspapers has declined. As a result of Kovid-19, the country's print media will face a serious financial crisis in the near future.

### **Cost cutting in the newspaper**

After the decline in advertising revenue, the print media in India began to gain control over spending. Management began working on how to minimize production costs. The management emphasized on publishing the newspaper with minimum manpower to avoid unnecessary expenses. The number of pages of newspapers was reduced to compensate the costs. Weekly supplements with newspapers stopped. The print media is in crisis in many parts of the world, including India. The US weekly India Abroad had to close down due to COVID-19. This newspaper has been running for the last fifty years. The newspaper was started by Gopal Raju in 1970 with the needs of American Indians in mind. According to Simran Sabharwal (2020), the print edition of 'Sportstar', a fortnightly magazine published by the prestigious 'The Hindu' group in India, has been suspended for some time. The Hindu group tweeted this information. The fortnightly, which has been publishing for the last 43 years due to the Corona virus, had to be suspend, the tweet said. In Kerala, the Times of India is shutting down two of the four editions, according to a report published by the web portal News Laundry. Kochi Post has claimed that two editions of Malabar and Thiruvananthapuram will be closed. This shows the serious impact of COVID-19 on the print media. The country's leading newspaper, Hindustan Times, did not

publish Sunday's supplement HT Weekend separately but instead in its main issue. The decision was announced by the management as the number of staff in the office was low. The Indian Newspaper Society (INS) in a letter to the Union Ministry of Information and Broadcasting has mentioned that many newspapers in the country have reduced the number of pages. The financial crisis of newspapers is growing every day. INS has also requested the central government to intervene.

Newspapers instructed their employees to work from home to prevent corona infection. The country's leading newspapers encouraged journalists to work from home. Meetings were held using video conferencing, Google Duo or Zoom app as well as some other web platforms. Covid-19 caused many changes in the style of work of the newspaper. Most newspapers decided to work from home but many journalists have to work on the field. Many journalists are risking their lives while reporting on the corona virus. Visiting Containment zones resulted in journalists being affected with COVID-19. This includes journalists in print as well as electronic media in India. In April 2020, a health check-up camp for journalists was held in Mumbai. At the same time, 53 journalists were found to be corona positive. This gives an idea of how much risk journalists in the country are taking while collecting information. This number could increase if all journalists in the country undergo a health check-up.

### **Jobs gone, wages cut**

Newspapers in India found themselves in financial difficulties due to Kovid-19. Newspapers showed exit doors to many employees on account Covid-19. Some newspapers announced furlough. All major newspaper groups in the country have slashed the salaries of their employees. The Indian Express Group has announced a pay cut for its employees. Corona has adversely affected advertising revenue. Therefore, the Indian Express has given an explanation that the salaries of the employees have to be reduced. There will be no reduction in the salaries of employees with an annual salary of less than Rs 5 lakh. The salaries of employees with an annual income of Rs 5 lakh to Rs 7.50 lakh have been reduced by 10 per cent. The salaries of employees earning Rs 7.50 lakh to Rs 10 lakh have been reduced by 15 per cent, while those earning Rs 10 lakh to Rs 20 lakh have been deducted by 20 per cent. 25 per cent deduction has been made for employees earning Rs 20 lakh to Rs 25 lakh and 35 per cent for employees earning more than Rs 35 lakh. The decision will be for a while, Express management said.

Bennett Coleman & Company Limited (BCCL), the publisher of the Times of India, has also announced a pay cut for its employees. From April 1<sup>st</sup> 2020, the BCCL has decided to reduce the salaries of employees of major newspapers such as the Times of India, Economic Times and Navbharat Times by five to ten per cent. 5 per cent of total remuneration would be cut for those earning above Rs 10 lakh per annum; and 10% per cent would be cut for those earning more than Rs 1 crore per annum. For those with salaries above Rs 6.5 lakh, 10 per cent of their pay has been moved to a 'special performance incentive pool'. The payment of this will depend on a target the company has to achieve a profit before interest, taxes, depreciation and amortization for 2020-21. According to a report in Maharashtra's leading newspaper Dainik

Lokmat, Corona has made it difficult for newspapers to reach households. The newspaper business is in trouble due to the closure of advertisements. Against this backdrop, the Maharashtra Times has decided to close three editions in Maharashtra, Kolhapur, Nagar and Jalgaon. The decision has left hundreds of journalists and non-journalists unemployed.

The Hindu announced pay cuts for those earning above Rs 6 lakh per year. Those earning between Rs 6 lakh and Rs 10 lakh per annum would see a pay cut of 8 per cent; those earning between Rs 10 lakh and Rs 15 lakh would see a cut of 12 per cent; Rs 15 lakh to Rs 25 lakh is 16 per cent; Rs 25 lakh to Rs 35 lakh is 20 per cent; and those earning above Rs 35 lakh would see a cut of 25 per cent. From April 1<sup>st</sup> 2020, Hindustan Times said that 5 per cent of the salary earned by those whose CTC (Cost to Company) is Rs 6-10 lakh would be variable. For those earning between Rs 10 lakh and Rs 20 lakh, 10per cent will be variable, and for people earning above Rs 20 lakh, 15per cent will be variable. This will not affect those earning below Rs 6 lakh. Like with the print media, the electronic media has also suffered financially. NDTV has slashed the salaries of all employees with a monthly salary of Rs 50,000 by 10 to 40 per cent. Malayalam channel JaiHind TV, also announced steep pay cuts. Those earning uptoRs 10,000 gross salary would see pay cuts of 30per cent; 35per cent for those earning between Rs 10,000 and Rs 15,000; and 40per cent for those earning between Rs 15,000 and Rs 30,000. Those earning above Rs 30,000 would see a 50per cent pay cut.

Along with the print and electronic media, the web of web media has also been shaken tremendously. Employees are also receiving jobs through web media. The salaries of some employees are being slashed. According to BestMediaInfo Bureau, reeling under financial stress since its inception, RaghavBahl's Quintillion Media, which runs general news website *thequint.com* and business news website *bloombergquint.com*, has undertaken drastic cost-cutting measures to survive the economic impact of the COVID-19 crisis. While The Quint has sent estimated 50 per cent employees on a leave without pay until April 15 further notice. Bloomberg Quint has gone for heavy salary cuts of up to 75per cent. In a related development, Hindi news channel News Nation has asked its entire English digital team of 15 people to leave.

According to Tasmayee Laha Roy (2020), COVID-19 will change the face of the media in the years to come. In just fifteen days, hundreds of journalists lost their jobs. News of layoffs hasn't stopped since. In such a situation, journalists face a big challenge. With the revenue of newspapers and magazines declining, it is time for journalists to lose their jobs. Journalists' associations are also upset over these issues. Newspaper owners have appealed to the government for help. Journalists' associations are also demanding that the government help journalists. There are hundreds of vacancies for journalists in television and radio under the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. The Central Government should fill these vacancies immediately. This will provide an opportunity to many journalists who are currently unemployed, said Padma Shri awardee and senior journalist Alok Mehta. Traditional newspaper advertisers from sectors like the automobile industry, construction, home appliances, private education, travel, hospitality, and others have faced the shutdown equally. Once consumers lose the capacity to buy such products at least for the next few months, the advertisers may more



selectively use their resources. Finally, the newspapers may have to depend on government advertisements only in the post-Coronavirus period.

Newspapers have not yet received some advertising bills from the government. Newspapers have demanded that the bills be paid immediately. Various newspapers across the country are owed Rs 350 crore by the government for advertising bills. INS has demanded that the central government pay the money immediately. The Advertising Agencies Association of India (AAAI) echoed INS's demand for a bailout package, requesting the government to allow advertisers to treat advertising money as investments and allow it to spread expenditure incurred in advertising over three years. Apart from newspaper associations, some political parties have also urged Prime Minister Narendra Modi to help the newspaper industry. DMK leader M. K. Stalin urged Prime Minister Narendra Modi to waive customs duty on newsprint, take steps to pay government's advertising dues to newspapers and hike advertisement rates by 100 per cent, saying as the industry has taken a severe hit owing to the COVID-19 induced lockdown. It will be important to see what the government decides on this.

## **Conclusion**

COVID-19 has raised the question of the existence of the print media in India. The newspaper business has found itself in the throes of a massive recession. Advertising revenue has almost stagnated. The lockdown has also disrupted newspaper distribution. This has also hampered the revenue earned from the sale of newspapers. Newspapers are stuck on all sides. The journalists and other employees working in the newspapers have been hit the hardest. Many journalists have lost their jobs. Many journalists have had their salaries cut. Some publishing houses have temporarily suspended the publication of newspapers and magazines. Employees are also being laid off in electronic and web media. This is an unprecedented situation for the media industry in India. Leading media groups, journalists' associations and some political parties have demanded that the central and state governments intervene and help the media to rectify the situation. The country's media industry can only survive if the government helps. Otherwise, the industry, which is currently at a huge loss, is likely to go bankrupt in the near future. The future of the industry depends on how the government responds to demands made by various newspaper groups, journalists associations as well as political parties.

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