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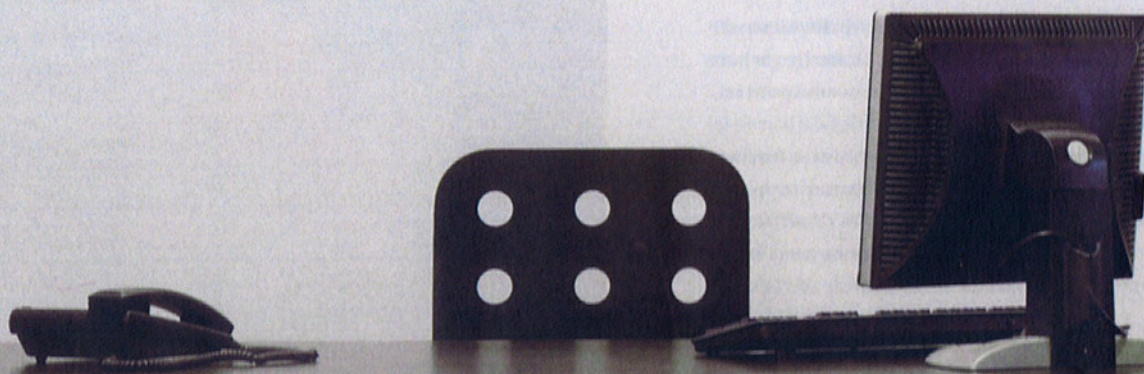
CULTURE

STOP PRESS!

India needs Journalists

The Statesman Print Journalism School and Germany's Konrad-Adenauer-Foundation train youngsters to be competent, well-informed, liberal-minded journalists with an abiding faith in India's democratic institutions and the rule of law, and an abhorrence for tyranny, injustice and corruption

/ TEXT: RAVINDRA KUMAR



The Indian Newspaper Society reports there are 89 English-language newspapers published every day in India. Some may be small. But at least 20 of these may be termed newspapers of substance, in that they wield influence either nationally, or in a part of India. All these newspapers need a regular intake of trained journalists. The advent of other media – television and, to a smaller extent, Internet news portals – saw the attrition rates in newspapers go up.

India has several journalism training schools. Many of them are institutions of excellence, and have been around for decades. But almost all of them changed their focus from print to training youngsters for television and online journalism. Increasingly, and by the turn of the millennium, Indian newspapers – especially English-language newspapers – started to face a crunch. The days of plenty were over.

The shortage of journalists first became evident when Hindustan Times and DNA launched in Mumbai in 2005. There was an exodus from the city's established newspapers. Journalists were hired for the new ventures at several times their salary, then re-hired by their erstwhile employers for even higher sums. It reached a stage that proprietors had to sit down and agree not to poach on each other.

But the ripple effect was felt all over India, as Mumbai's newspapers transferred journalists from other branches to the Western metropolis and shortages began to be reported in other cities as well.

News needs were meanwhile galloping along. Newspapers had to find more specialist journalists to cover environment, technology and lifestyle stories, to cater to demands of a growing Indian middle-class. And many editors began to wonder where the next generation of young journalists – reporters and sub-editors – would come from.

On 23 July 2005, Cushrow Russy Irani, Editor-in-Chief of The Statesman died. He had been a distinguished newspaperman, twice chairman of the International Press Institute, and winner of the Commonwealth Astor Prize as well as the Freedom House medal for his role in upholding Press freedom. The following year, the C R Irani Foundation was set up as a not-for-profit body to propagate the values that this veteran journalist had believed in.

In 2006-07, the trustees of the CR Irani Foundation, responding to the needs of newspapers, including of The Statesman, decided to set up a school to exclusively train print

journalists. Donations came in from well-wishers, and The Statesman decided to contribute office space, infrastructure, training and back-office support to the school. Several senior journalists on the staff of The Statesman agreed to teach at the Statesman Print Journalism School (SPJS).

The Statesman has been a founding member of Asia News Network, a grouping of 22 Asian newspapers supported by Germany's Konrad-Adenauer-Foundation (KAF). When KAF representatives heard of the journalism school idea, they offered to provide support to the venture as part of their commitment to building media institutions in democratic societies.

The support comes in several forms – assistance with staff, support to specialised training programmes and workshops, and arranging experts from India and overseas to focus on specific areas of training. But the cooperation is much more than a mere financial or support arrangement. It includes involvement of The Statesman's journalists in many of KAF-India's activities and frequent interactions in areas of mutual interest. It works because it is born of a shared commitment to democratic values. »We want journalists and media institutions to effectively realise their sociopolitical tasks as watchman and their duty to supply information. This also includes training selected young journalists by international standards,« explains Martin-Maurice Böhme, KAF project officer.

The first batch was admitted in 2008 following a rigorous admission procedure involving a written test and interviews and graduated the following year. Already a majority of the first batch is employed as working journalists, and many have made their mark. The second batch graduated in May. The class of 2010 was fortunate to be invited for a week's trip to Berlin, organised by KAF. The idea was to give young journalists a chance to understand the workings of German democracy, interacting with people in German public life and media, and providing a glimpse of an integrated Europe.

Building durable and strong institutions for democracy requires honesty of purpose and commitment to ideals. The Statesman Print Journalism School is, for many of us involved in its creation and operation, much more than the fulfillment of a need; it is a labour of love. ■

Ravindra Kumar is Editor of The Statesman and a Trustee of the C R Irani Foundation