

# Democracy, Elections and Print Media in India: At the Intersections of Fictionalised and Partisan Narratives<sup>1</sup>

Gopalan Ravindran\*

*Democracies are nourished and promoted by healthy and well informed relationships between the politicians, citizens and news media. The famous American Journalist of last century, Walter Lippmann theorised in his three books published during 1920s, the advantages of having informed publics and the disadvantages of having “phantom publics.” This paper employs the notions of Walter Lippmann to examine the contexts of fictionalised and partisan narratives in Tamil press during the 2016 Assembly Elections in Tamil Nadu. This paper concludes that the members of the Tamil Press were working as “unregulated private enterprises” in promoting fictionalised and partisan narratives during the 2016 Assembly Elections in Tamil Nadu to promote their political and casteist affiliations.*

**Keywords:** Indian Democracy, Indian Press, Tamil Nadu, 2016 Assembly Elections, Walter Lippmann, Fictionalised and Partisan Narratives, Dinamalar, Junior Vikadan and Media Regulation.

Long years ago we made a tryst with destiny, and now the time comes when we shall redeem our pledge, not wholly or in full measure, but very substantially. At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom. A moment comes, which comes but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new, when an age ends, and when the soul of a nation, long suppressed, finds utterance (Nehru, 1947).

These were the defining words of Jawaharlal Nehru (1947), in his famous midnight speech on the eve of India’s Independence on August 15 1947. These words were emblematic of a visionary who dreamed about India emerging as a modern, democratic and pluralistic State. This temporal moment turned the hopes of millions of Indians to gain their lost power and freedom. Nehru strove hard as the First Prime Minister of independent India to give meaning to his words ‘India’s soul finding its long suppressed utterance’ in a new form, the largest democracy of the world.

India observed its 70th Independence Day on August 15 2016. The complex pluralism, diversity and democratic character of India are under severe test in contemporary times

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<sup>1</sup>Gopalan Ravindran (gopalanravindran@gmail.com) is Professor and Head, Department of Journalism and Communication, University of Madras. His research interests are in the areas of film cultures, digital cultures, diasporic cultures, critical theories and philosophies, political economy of space, time and communication.

and what Nehru hoped for in his famous midnight speech, “a soul finding its utterance” is fraught with odds despite the marching of India as the largest electoral democracy. General Elections are being held in India at specified intervals, causing the installation of democratically elected governments at the Central and State levels. India’s elections are dubbed as the world’s largest event with 814 million voters and 9,30,000 polling stations (Election Commission of India, n.d.).

One might wonder, how come one complains about the soul of the largest democracy not finding its utterance in recent times? The reasons are to be located in the serious erosion of pluralistic linkages within the complex democratic fabric of India in India, made possible by the Indian Constitution. The right to freedom of expression provides one of the linkages for individuals and institutions such as media under Article 19 (1) (a) of Indian Constitution. The other linkages include the diversity of the political actors and consequently the political choices available for the Indian voter when he goes to cast his ballot. The integrity of the above mentioned two linkages have been seriously eroded in the recent past with the emergence of “paid news” (wherein newspapers/media take money and plant favourable stories for the political candidates and parties) and “paid voting” (wherein the gullible illiterate/economically voters are enticed with gift hampers and cash packets worth few thousand rupees days before the polls).

The Election Commission of India, established in 1950, is vested with constitutional powers to act with independence in conducting elections in a free and fair manner. It has been doing a great job in working overtime to stop the erosion of the linkages mentioned above. Nonetheless, the realities are still working against the Nehruvian imagery of the “soul finding its utterance”

India’s democracy has registered a manifold growth in electoral terms: there were only 173 million voters in the first General Election during 1951. The polling percentage was 45%. During the last General Election in 2014, the total number of voters was 814 million and polling percentage was 66% (“India Votes,” 2015). However, despite the remarkable success story of India functioning as the largest electoral democracy, there are serious threats to the emergence of India as the largest true democracy. The threats from within India’s democracy, in the form of the self-destructive modes of linkages mentioned above (paid voting and paid news) are only two of the several villains against the emergence of India as the largest true democracy.

### **Like democracy, like newspapers**

Indian Press is the familiar tag for relating to India’s newspapers, magazines and other periodicals. The Registrar of Newspapers for India (RNI) informs in its 2014-15 report that Indian publications registered a growth of 5.8% during the year and there were 14,984 newspapers in the total list of publications (newspapers and other periodicals) of 1,05,443. (RNI, n.d.) It is not without reason that many hear the familiar statement in media circles that the Indian newspapers are enjoying a growth trajectory unlike their counterparts in the West. This is a familiar self-congratulatory note shared by the members of Indian press, particularly those who are on the side of management. What they are failing to read is that the requiem for Indian newspapers appears to be on the

anvil in view of the self-destructive modes of its operation and the growing inroads made by the Internet and mobile media. One of the self-destructive journalistic practices relates to the propensity of newspapers to either fictionalise news or cultivate strong traits of partisanship in news narratives. Fictionalising narratives is an act that is seen as antithetical to the tenets of journalism. Similar is the case of infusing partisanship in the news narratives and resorting to acts of planting “paid news narratives”. Among the several narratives employed by the members of the Indian Press during times of elections and the period between two elections, the most striking seem to be the fictionalised and partisan narrative. And the malaise seems to be acute in the case of language newspapers, especially in States like Tamil Nadu.

Walter Lippmann, the famous American journalist and press theorist of last century, left us with several relevant notions to explore and examine the intersections between democracy, elections and journalism in contemporary India. His notions such as “manufacture of consent”, “stereotypes,” “phantom public”, “unregulated private enterprise” and “objective criteria in journalism” (Lippmann, 1993, 1995, 2004) were the first to conceptualise the threats to the noble pursuits of democracy and journalism. He wished that news media follow “objective criteria” of journalism to contribute to the wellbeing of the relationships between public, media and government in USA during the World War I. He warned against the “unregulated private enterprise” and “manufacture of consent” as they would jeopardise the pursuits of democracy and journalism and only contribute to the emergence of “phantom public” (Lippmann, 1993, p.77).

Ravindran (2015) argued that the local cultural norms are the primary definers of the characteristics of the different sections of the Indian press. He observed: the characteristics of the different constituents of Indian press underscore the primacy of the local cultural norms as the primary definers of their characteristics even as the tendencies to follow the universal norms of journalism are in place, albeit ephemerally. Undoubtedly, this makes the individual entities in the canvas of the Indian press more local and less-pan Indian; more discursive and less homogenous. In the process, the canvas itself turns out to be a misnomer (p.212).

And one of the domains which is subjected to cultural domestication is what Lippmann called as “unregulated private enterprise” that seeks to “manufacture of consent.” According to Walter Lippmann (1995):

Everywhere today men are conscious that somehow they must deal with questions more intricate than any that church or school had prepared them to understand. Increasingly they know that they cannot understand them if the facts are not quickly and steadily available. Increasingly they are baffled because the facts are not available; and they are wondering whether government by consent can survive in a time when the manufacture of consent is an unregulated private enterprise (p.8).

This paper seeks to explore the linkages between threats to both democracy and journalism from a Lippmannian perspective by exploring the nature and characteristics of the partisan and fictionalised narratives and their circulation in the domains of

journalism, politics and democracy. More importantly, this paper seeks to put to test the rule of Lippmann (2004):

...the quality of the news about modern society is an index of its social organisation. The better the institutions, the more all interests concerned are formally represented, the more issues are disentangled, the more objective criteria are introduced, the more perfectly an affair can be presented as news. At its best the press is a servant and guardian of institutions; at its worst it is a means by which a few exploit social disorganisation to their own ends (p.197).

In the case of the Tamil newspapers, as elsewhere in the main category, Indian Press, the cultural domestication of Tamil press as the “unregulated private enterprise” is the probable cause for the emergence and circulation of what is antithetical to journalism – fictionalised and partisan narratives. This paper’s premise also flows from another noteworthy pointer of reference provided by Walter Lippmann to help us delineate the fictionalised and partisan narratives from the non-fictionalised and non-partisan narratives. Here, the Lippmannian framework hinges on the relationship between news and truth.

The hypothesis, which seems to me the most fertile, is that news and truth are not the same thing, and must be clearly distinguished. The function of news is to signalize an event, the function of truth is to bring to light the hidden facts, to set them into relation with each other, and make a picture of reality on which men can act (Lippmann, 2004, p.194).

Such a premise is important in the present study as partisan journalism becomes a sure possibility when the *Lippmannian* logic of news is subverted/abandoned.

There have been a number of studies on the issues of media bias and partisan journalism ever since Lippmann’s works appeared. In particular, during the past six decades, several important studies have appeared with the view to examine the relationships between the news content and the sources that seem to condition them. Key works on the processes of selection and rejection of news appeared in the wake of White’s (1950) paper on the “gatekeeper” (pp.383–391). The significant roles of “gatekeepers” these studies revealed strengthened the validity of Lippmann’s notions made during 1920s. Simultaneously, there was a trajectory of “bias” studies which first showed their presence during the late 1940s. Williams (1975) posited that there was an unsettled state in research concerning “bias” studies (pp.190-199). D’ Alessio and Allen (2000) dealt with the triad of “gatekeeping bias”, “coverage bias” and “statement bias” in their studies (pp.133-156). However, no study has attempted to use Lippmann’s framework to study the whole relationship between the constituents of democracy, in particular the relationship between the political parties and their media agents. This paper seeks to study the relationships between the constituents of democracy and elections such as political parties and their media agents in the 2016 State Elections in the State of Tamil Nadu.

Times of elections provide very meaningful contexts to study the emergence and circulation of partisan and fictionalised narratives and these are also times when the fundamentals of the relationships between “informed choices” of the electorate militate against the facts of realities as structured by the threats to emergence of a true largest democracy.

Why the notion of “unregulated private enterprise”, which Walter Lippmann posited in an entirely different context and age, is to be taken seriously in the context of the 2016 State Elections in the State of Tamil Nadu? Who are the likely contenders that might qualify as the agents of the “unregulated private enterprise” in such contexts? In what ways, these agents remain as unregulated (by the self-regulatory bodies as well as the legal/quasi-legal bodies) even as they “manufacture consent” through the content that is at once partisan and fictional?

The contextual/textual sources of the above questions and the plausible answers to them through a discursive analysis of the “choices” and “facts” conveyed by a leading Tamil daily newspaper, *Dinamalar* and the leading bi-weekly Tamil newsmagazine, *Junior Vikadan* are undertaken in this paper. These have been chosen as they hold the potential to stand in as the representatives of Indian press as the “unregulated private enterprise” as well as the sources of “choices and facts of reality” in their versions of partisan/fictional narratives. In short, an attempt has been made in this paper to understand the hitherto ignored culturally-derived categories within Indian press while studying the intersections of fictionalised and partisan narratives of both Indian Print Media and Indian democracy.

The 2016 Assembly elections in Tamil Nadu caused quite a stir among the journalists and their organisations, as it was seen as the “crucial” one, as every election in the past was labelled by the news media in the State!. Tamil Nadu is the southernmost Indian State (There are 29 States and 7 Union Territories in India) with an electoral population of 57 million voters (Population 72 million; Literacy: 80 per cent as per 2016 statistics) (Tamil Nadu Population Census, n.d.).

In the 2016 Assembly election voters cast their votes on May 16, 2016 to elect their representatives from 234 constituencies to the Tamil Nadu State Assembly.

There were three main political parties/alliances in the fray. They included the incumbent party, the All India *Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam* (AIADMK – All India Anna Dravidian Progressive Party), the *Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam* (DMK - Dravidian Progressive Party) and the *Makkal Nala Kootani* (People’s Welfare Alliance – an electoral alliance of two national level communist parties Communist Party of India (CPI) and Communist Party of India – Marxist (CPI (M) and three major State parties Viduthalai Siruthaigal (Panthers Party), *Desiya Murpokku Dravida Kazhagam* (DMDK - National Progressive Dravidian Party) and Marumalarchi *Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam* (MDMK-Renaissance Dravida Progressive Party)).

Tamil Nadu had a vibrant Social Justice Movement, Self-Respect Movement and Dravidian Movement during a good part of last century. The political party, which

emerged out of the movement, DMK, unseated the national party, Congress, in the historic 1967 State elections on the strength of the State wide anti-Hindi movement (caused by the imposition of the Hindi language in the State by the Congress government). Since then, Tamil Nadu has been ruled by either DMK or AIADMK, the State level parties.

The active fostering of the media such as films, newspapers and magazines by the Dravidian movement during the last century had a huge impact on the number and nature of ownership of television channels in Tamil Nadu, when the satellite television boom started during 1990s. The last 15 years has seen the mushrooming of television channels owned by political parties and their sympathisers. This trend, along with the growing tendency of Tamil newspapers, to be driven by the logic of partisanship has deprived the electorate of a fair and non-partisan coverage of news during election and non-election times.

While the elections in India are well regulated by the constitutionally empowered, independent agency, The Election Commission of India, which has successfully conducted several General Elections and State Elections, in a fair manner since early 1950s, the Indian news media are totally outside the framework of any regulatory mechanism in India. This profound irony of the Indian democracy stifles informed choices and drives home “manufactured choices” to the news audience who can not discriminate between their news sources and the quality of news content they get to read or watch in news media.

The Press Council of India, was established in 1966, as a legal entity to ensure standards in the functioning of print media, but it lacks powers to punish the erring newspapers and journalists. The Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI), which was started in 1997 to regulate telecom services is now looking after the regulation of television sector in piece-meal/ad-hoc manner. As a consequence, there have been serious violations of cross media ownership norms and fairness in coverage by news media. It is common for newspaper houses to own television and radio channels and film distribution companies and to have indirect ownership relations with television channels and theatres. It is common for political parties and the family members of party leaders to own television channels and exercise direct/indirect control over the newspapers.

There are also news organisations which fall outside the above dominant category of media ownership. These are owned by non-political entities, but love their partisanship in news coverage. The newspaper chosen for this paper, *Dinamalar* belongs to this category. Such papers are more problematic than the papers owned by political parties as they are unabashed in their sense of belonging to the caste that defines the ownership of the paper. *Dinamalar* and *Junior Vikadan* are owned by organisations founded by the members of the Brahmin community. While *Dinamalar's* coverage of news is generally seen as partisan across divergent content categories, its coverage of political news in general and election news in particular is emblematic of the *Brahminical* caste bias. As in the 2014 General Elections, the newspaper was going overboard in eulogising the Hindu rightwing party, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP- Indian People's Party) in its

coverage of the 2016 Tamil Nadu State elections. While it went soft in its criticism of the ruling AIADMK party, headed by a Brahmin, it had a penchant for ridiculing the other dominant political parties such as DMK, DMDK, MDMK, *Pattali Makkal Katchi* (PMK- Working People's Party), which are headed by non-brahmins.

Ever since the countdown for the 2016 Tamil Nadu elections started, *Dinamalar* brought out a tabloid size election supplement which was an embodiment of all the bad virtues of journalism as pointed out by Walter Lippmann during 1920s ("manufacture of consent", "stereotypes," "phantom public", "unregulated private enterprise" and "lack of objective criteria in journalism"). The supplement had eight pages. The first page was devoted to a partisan narrative, the second page was filled with satirical/fictional content, the third page was devoted to articles written by columnists, the fourth and fifth pages were devoted to an interview, the sixth and seventh pages were devoted to columnists and the eight page was filled with spoof content drawn from comedy tracks from Tamil films. In a limited sample drawn during the first two weeks of April 2016, the supplement had devoted four front pages of partisan narratives, which also had a penchant for fictionalising the content, to DMK; three for AIADMK; three for other parties; one for general non-party coverage.

In its issue dated 14 April 2016, the paper took the acidic dig at the DMK, headed by a non-brahmin leader, by fictionalising the alleged rift in the party between the leader of the party (M. Karunanidhi, who is in his 90s) and his son, who is a treasurer in the party, K. Stalin) in the finalisation of the candidates list. The headline of the story reads as: "Stalin Denies Seat to Karunanidhi". The first paragraph of the story reads as: The long running production, that is DMK's candidates' list was scheduled to be released yesterday. Stalin, who is the treasurer of DMK, was eager to release the list and brief the press, while going to the party office. He received a news that moment and rushed to the house of his father. He saw his father with the list. The conversation they had and the resultant anger forced Stalin to rush back to his house. What happened in between was chaotic fight. The reason for the chaotic fight is the fact that Stalin refused to concede the constituency his father demanded and the father refused to agree for the release of the candidates' list. As in other front page stories of *Dinamalar* election supplements, this story of fiction and partisanship had little or nothing to merit the traits of news Lippmann mentioned in his works. As in other front page stories of the election supplement, this did not have the name of the contributing journalist and only mentions the unprofessional tag, "Our Reporter". These stories are emblematic of the paper's penchant for non-news/fictional narrative structures and partisan coverage of election events and issues.

The other magazine under focus in this paper, *Junior Vikadan*, also had a merry kill of the reported rift between Karunanidhi and his son, Stalin, in its version of the fictionalised and partisan narrative of the issue. Its headline read as: "Karunanidhi Throws Away Pen." In a six page story, the magazine narrated the tensions in the family of the leader with regard to the list prepared by Stalin and the unhappiness of the father over the obstinate stand of his son in not accommodating the requests of his relatives, friends and acquaintances. The entire story was written in a non-news/fictional narrative style.

In one para, the story reads as: The next problem came through Karunanidhi's assistant, Nithya. Nithya wanted the allocation of Pallavaram constituency for E. Karunanidhi. But Stalin wanted Tha.Mo.Anbarasan to contest from that constituency. Stalin and Tha. Mo.Anbarasan were not willing to give up. Karunanidhi threw his pen after remarking "Can't you allocate one seat for Nithya who gave all support and assistance to me." The list could not be released on 13th morning because of this incident. Thereafter, Anbarasan agreed to change his constituency to Alandur. Throughout 13th, these emotional outbursts continued. That's why they could not release the list in the morning, as announced earlier; they could not release the same in front of the media persons in the evening, as announced later; they could only mail the list to the media.

This short exposition of the partisan and fictionalised narratives of Tamil newspapers, based on the above mentioned incident involving a major political party, is only emblematic of the deep rooted tendencies of the Tamil newspapers and magazines to work at cross purposes with the principles of objective journalism and their disservice to the cause of democracy and the cultivation of well informed electorate.

## **Conclusion**

Is there a way out from the implications of the intersections of the fictionalised and partisan narratives of Indian press? At the moment, the answer is "no" as India remains the only major democracy in the world without a dedicated and competent communication regulator for the diverse media sectors. The history of the policy lapses and inadequacies in this regard is a shocker, to say the least.

India had the constitution of the First Press Commission, in 1952. The 1954 report by the Commission paved the way for the establishment of the Press Council of India in 1966 as a quasi-judicial body with the objectives of ensuring freedom of press and censoring newspapers which indulge in objectionable content. During the period of Internal Emergency (1975-77), the Press Council of India was done away with. After the end of Internal Emergency, a new Press Council of India was constituted in 1978 (Press Council of India, 2016).

However, with 28 members, headed by a retired Supreme Court of India judge, the Press Council of India has not succeeded in changing the character of the Indian press to be of good to the cause of Indian democracy or the readers of Indian newspapers for three important reasons. Firstly, its functions do not go beyond the acts of conducting inquiries into alleged violations by the Indian newspapers and censoring them. Secondly, there is no scope in the present framework to take punitive measures against the violators as in other democracies. Thirdly, it exists as a body that is more representative of the press than the public as 20 of the 29 members (including the Chairperson) belong to categories such as editors, working journalists and owners. In this respect, it exists more as a "self-regulatory body" than as a regulator.

In view of the shortcomings of the Press Council of India's legal framework, the Second Press Commission (Nireekshak, 1978), which was constituted in 1979, recommended punitive actions by the Press Council of India against violators. The major punitive action it recommended was denying accreditation to newspapers which are found

guilty of violating the content codes. But these recommendations remain on paper and penal powers for the Press Council of India have not been granted.

Another problem stems from the lack of wisdom in India to traverse beyond the logic of freedom of press as a one-way street, as expressed in the debates and discussions on freedom of press by the Indian press and the Press Commissions and the Press Council of India. It is a one-way street as the rights are seen as exclusive to the newspapers for their good (to gather and disseminate news as a right which is guaranteed as a right to “freedom of expression” under article Article 19 (1) (a) of the constitution) and not for the benefit of the right of their readers to know about news events in a fair manner. Moreover, we are yet to look at the issues of media regulation from the perspective of communication as a human/cultural right from either side (media and audience).

With the proliferation of cable and other sectors of communication during 1990s and 2000s, the Government of India initiated a few legal measures to regulate the sectors. The Cable Television Networks (Regulation) Act 1995 (CTNRA) was ushered in to regulate the cable television sector. The CTNRA was amended in 2001. The Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) was setup in 1997 to check the chaos in the mobile market by virtue of the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India Act 1997 (with amendments in 2000) (TRAIA). In both versions, TRAI was mandated to take care of the operational parameters of the Indian Telegraph Act (1885) as well as the new telecom services such as mobile phone services, particularly the stages of licensing and tariffs. In 2004, there was a notification from Government of India (GoI) which required TRAI to look after broadcast services also. Here lies a unique case of India having a telecom regulator doubling up as a media regulator, without necessary competence.

It is a fact that both TRAI and the Ministry of Information & Broadcasting (MIB) have failed to check the content of the 847 private satellite channels (India. MIB, 2016) of different political, religious and caste denominations over the years. Among these, there are 398 news channels and 449 non-news channels (India. MIB. 2016). In addition, there are also 64 public service television channels in Doordarshan’s Direct To Home platform (MIB, GoI, 2016). Undoubtedly, the absence of a regulator to oversee the functioning of a proliferating communication domain like the Indian television sector is a serious policy lapse. One is forced to conclude that this has not warranted attention from GoI so far because of the alleged conflict of interest between the roles of Indian politicians as owners of television companies and as lawmakers.

Another issue that has been rocking the boat of freedom of expression of the public in India relates to the frequent attempts by several State governments to invoke the provision of article 66 (a) of the Information Technology Act 2000 (with amendment in 2008). Despite The Supreme Court of India judgment in 2015 *Shreya Singhal v. Union of India*, 2015 which held the arrest of persons for posting “offensive content” under Section 66 (a) of the Information Technology Act 2000 as violative of the Article 19 (1) (a) of Indian Constitution, persons get arrested for posting comments and likes on Facebook in States like Tamil Nadu (Sivaraman, 2016). On the other hand, the newspapers, channels and cable distribution companies owned by political parties and the connected families go scot free for airing offensive content in the name of news

exposes, casteist and unethical stories of crime and violence, political propaganda in the name of news programmes etc..

The way out lies in the constitution of a competent and comprehensive communication regulatory framework which can equally work against threats to freedom of expression of all kinds (not only those perceived by the media), but support the communication and cultural rights of the audience and citizens as well. With the establishment of such a regulatory framework, the threats posed by the fictionalised and partisan narratives would also disappear. More importantly, such a framework should draw inspiration from the spirit of the *Sean MacBride's Report* (1980), which argued the cause of the right to communicate for the first time in a remarkable manner. As Traber (2008) argues, citing *Sean MacBride's Report*:

In particular, the right to communicate is not the same as freedom of information, which is more likely to benefit those with more powerful (and profitable) means of information. One point often neglected in the crusade for free flow of information...is the concept, mentioned in the *MacBride Report* (p.24) and elsewhere, that the freedom to communicate implies responsibility, to use such a freedom wisely and with care. ...The media should interact in new ways with their public, making them the principal subject, rather than as objects, of their reporting. Together, in mutual responsibility, media and public can develop a political culture which is participatory and free, jointly working for the common good of all (p.197).

In short, the need of the hour in India for the votaries of a healthy democracy is the establishment of a competent communication regulator which can ensure what Traber (2008) wants media and public to develop - “ a political culture which is participatory and free, jointly working for the common good of all” (p.197).

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