

Portrait of a reporter as a dalal

Written by Administrator

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Leaks are a cure for corruption, writes **Sidharth Mishra**



These are bad times for us reporters. On coming to power, leaders of two long-drawn public movements, who were supported by the media, made their respective secretariats out of bounds for press reporters. Before I go into the merits of their decisions, let me share some anecdotes with you. My first experience with leaks occurred nearly 25 years ago. I had just started off as a mofussil reporter in Bhagalpur for the Patna edition of a national daily. Bhagalpur's protocol then still had the divisional commissioner at the helm. The gentleman then holding office, who later became a secretary to the Government of India, was bemused to meet me at a social function wondering what a "Delhi-educated young man was doing in the backwaters for peanuts as salary." He invited me for tea at his residence the next day.

In the six-months that I had spent in that office thus far, for the first time I felt a sense of elation. Till then I had not done anything exciting except write reports from press releases 'leftover' by my senior. The next day I was at Commissioner's British-era bungalow on the banks of the Ganga. I was ushered in by a well liveried 'chaprasi' and taken to a high-ceiling office. The Commissioner started with social niceties, poured tea for me and then confirmed if my boss was on leave.

Having satisfied himself he asked me to pull out my note book as he put a sheaf of paper before me. "Note down the letter number, date and name of signatory and the operative lines. Preserve them as I am not giving you a photocopy because when the story does appear, the roof is going to come down," he said and advised I should file the report before my boss was back.

Next morning on the front page of the national daily, news was carried about the Governor, who as Chancellor of state universities had ordered a Commissioner-led inquiry into charges of sexual misconduct brought against the Registrar of Bhagalpur University. The Registrar was from the 'ruling' caste and the Commissioner knew that conducting a fair enquiry without public

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pressure was not possible. The Commissioner had managed to generate that “appropriate pressure” by leaking the information real well. He indeed knew what, when and where to leak that sort of information.

About seven years later I had just been promoted as chief reporter of a Delhi-based national daily. It was baptism by fire. In less than a week of taking over, I was asked to run a campaign against now defunct Delhi Vidyut Board (DVB). As we did some stories, the DVB hit back filing a case of power theft against the newspaper. The editor reacted and ordered us to sharpen our attack.

We desperately looked for fresh arsenal to mount an attack. Our resources, however, were meagre and we were running out of steam. Thankfully, help arrived. I was sitting with a junior officer in then chief minister's office. He surprised me by checking on my vehicle number. He then called his peon and said that he should carry a package to my vehicle. Perspiring I rushed to my Maruti 800, took custody of the heavy brown-paper bag and reached office. On getting to my table I first asked for a glass of water to calm my nerves and then carefully opened the package.

In the midst of believing what I was seeing, the telephone rang. “There are just four copies of this report. One is with the CM, another with the chief secretary, one with Vidyut Board chairperson and fourth with the Power Secretary. You would not ask me who has shared the report with you,” he said and hung up. Next day we went to town quoting the SBI Caps report on why the Delhi Vidyut Board should be unbundled to bring down power theft and increase legitimate supplies. Delhi Vidyut Board's public relation officer and his deputy were in our office the next day, courting for peace. The truce did take place and not many months later, DVB was broken into three companies – the Disco, the Transco and the Genco and the private firm started a bid to buy stakes in the Disco. How one of the two power vendors in Delhi, which is also facing heat in the current leak scam, brought the culture of ‘media management’ is a story for another day. Coming back to the issue at hand, the day Aam Aadmi Party's Arvind Kejriwal took charge as Chief Minister, the Delhi government shut its doors on the media. His ministerial colleague Gopal Rai called journalist ‘dalal’ (middleman).

The likes of Shantanu Saikia, who has been arrested for leaking and selling government documents from petroleum ministry, under public perception may justify such an impression about the media, which the likes of Gopal Rai have tried to paint. And why only blame Saikia. The Niira Radia tapes revealed names of several media icons doing a lackey's job for their political and corporate masters.

However, my heart goes out to the reporters in the field, who are left facing the wrath of the likes of K Chandrashekhar Rao in Hyderabad and Gopal Rai in Delhi, with those in the government not realising that a story for a reporter is a matter of his daily bread, albeit without much butter. The poor reporter not only makes that extra effort to get the report but also battles

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the charges of being a 'dalal', without being sure about deals his editors could have cut.

Reporters are necessary for a healthy democracy. If reporters did not enjoy access to the government, scams related to the Commonwealth Games, 2G, coal blocks, the recent Moen Qureshi case and the perfidies of power companies in Delhi would have never come into public domain. Like it or not, reporters are necessary, may be a necessary evil from the government's point of view to keep it on course.

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