

Politics of a Tabloid and Death of an Editor:

Notes on Gauri Lankesh

Abstract

In India, media scholars who worked on the Indian language press and its role in reshaping the regional societies have often looked at the circulation figures and data that is readily available for access. For instance, works of Robin Jeffery (2003), Aravind Rajagopal (2009), Sevanti Ninan (2007) and Tabrez Ahmad Neyazi (2014) have especially brought to light some subtle and theoretical understanding of media in the regional spaces. And the methods suggested by these scholars are quite suitable to study the 'mainstream-commercial media' and its political economy.

But to conceptually engage with the 'popular' or 'tabloid' papers like Lankesh Patrike, which is often said to be 'radical' 'progressive' or 'yellow paper', one need to actually look at the diverse dialogue that popular print establishes with the ordinary people and position itself, as an alternative to the issues, forms and audiences of the journalistic mainstream. Apart from tracing the Kannada tabloid history, this personal note on Gauri Lankesh and her tabloid, tries to understand the ways in which she got engaged with the Kannada regional reading in public and broke the gender stereotypes in tabloid journalism.

Keywords: *Popular print, Tabloid press, Public Sphere, Kannada reading public.*

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dear ramesh,¹

my apologies. I should have replied earlier. I don't mind at all you asking me about the book. everything about the book is ready, cover, layout, proof, everything. A couple of more books are still in the process of getting ready. if I get covers of four books printed at the same time, I can save some money. It's just that these are very bad times for book sales. even Ankita (publisher) and Sapna (publisher) are feeling the pinch. please give me so more time.

it was great meeting you too,

take care,

gauri.

I received the above mail from Gauri Lankesh, a noted journalist who was shot dead in 2017, in connection with a publication of a book that I had translated from Telugu to Kannada. Gauri, as a daring female-editor of Kannada Weekly tabloid *Gauri Lankesh* (not *Gauri Lankesh Patrike*, as commonly referred) had been targeted for her strong resistance to the move of communal forces to divide the country in the name of religion. Even though her publication had lost its circulation and that itself was hardly

¹Before entering academic career, for a short period of time I worked with Kannada tabloid paper *Gauri Lankesh*. And even after joining the teaching profession, I was contributing opinion pieces, poetries for publication. As part of my Ph.D research on *Lankesh Patrike*, I had visited Gauri Lankesh's office several times and had discussions with her. So, the present paper is partly based on my memoir and observations of the Kannada tabloid weekly.

a threat, but she had been attacked for critiquing Hindutva groups and defending the secular and liberal values on social media platforms.

In a series of tweets, she was not only branded as Maoist sympathizer but on considering student activists Kanhaiya Kumar, Umar Khalid, Shehla Rashid and Dalit activist-turned-politician Jignesh Mewani as her adopted children and also, she was asked: 'how many husbands she has?'.² It was basically to humiliate her. Just because Gauri happened to be a woman, who was single, living alone and known for her voiced criticism of Hindutva forces, it made her a prime target. That is how her assumption of 'being a woman is security right now' went wrong.

In a democratic country, the degree of freedom to express one's political ideas and opinions largely depends upon the amount of freedom that media is granted. And the nature of democracy that prevails and ensures it, is mainly rest on the grade of free-speech that its citizens enjoy. To achieve this fundamental right in modern times, individuals and communities have fought against the traditionally powerful institutions that were reluctant to consider the demand. Even after achieving freedom of speech, however, the pattern of monitoring has been continuing in different forms. But in a country like India, where despite of constitutional sanction of rights, human bodies their thoughts and movements are being controlled by the conventionally unwritten social practices, wherein the local relations and social status of individuals decide the 'privilege' of speaking.

Though Kannada has no long history of tabloids, apparently, there were few tabloids edited by nationalists and literary stalwarts in different time period, that were not tabloids in 'western sense'. *Kidi* (spark) edited by Sheshappa is said to be

²<http://naradanews.com/2016/12/entire-administration-system-has-been-communalised-under-bjp-rule-senior-journalist-gauri-lankesh/>

popular in the 1950s. Due to the improper documentation, no information is available about the tabloid. Bringing certain respect to tabloid journalism in Kannada by launching Lankesh *Patrike* (1980) a political weekly, P. Lankesh (1935-2000), father of Gauri Lankesh, seemed to have created a 'space' for several protest movements and had influenced state politics through his publication. Perhaps, it is considered as one of the most important magazines that caught the spirit of prevailing mood and was successful in expressing it sharply without any adornment. B.V. Vyakuntha Raju's *Vaara Patrike* became fairly successful for its simple straight and serious handling of public issues. He also had edited a popular monthly *Rajupatrike*. *SuddiSangati* of Indudhara Honnapura, *Sanketha* (a fortnightly) of I.K. Jagirdar and M.B.Singh, *Manvantara* of Ashok Babu, *Mardani* of Janagere Venkataramaiah, *Hi Bangalore* of Ravi Belagere, *Abhimani* of T. Venkatesh and *Agni* by Shreedhar, are the other worthy journalistic attempts.

Like many modern Kannada writers, Lankesh had considered 'objectivity' with scepticism. Thus, to redefine an ideal Kannadiga, P.Lankesh, through his various creative mediums, as cultural critic Banajagere Jayaprakash, points out that: As a poet, playwright, filmmaker, novelist and more than that as a political thinker, he was trying to imagine a model democratic space wherein communities from different cultural, religious and social background come together and form a morally right public sphere".³ So, for Lankesh, a model Kannadiga was someone who is not an orthodox, anarchist being. An ideal Kannadiga he was portraying in his journalistic writings, was someone who is free of nepotism, communal thinking and more than this, who can lead a committed, non corrupt public life. So, tabloid as a popular medium widened his idea of a model Kannadiga and had huge influence on literary practices and politics of Karnataka.

³Personal interview, 2016.

But when P. Lankesh died of prolonged illness, his elder daughter Gauri Lankesh who was working in Delhi with an English Channel, returned to Bangalore and decided to stop the publication of the *Patrike*. But the publisher Mani, who worked with Lankesh, suggested family members to reconsider their decision. That is how Gauri entered into Kannada media sphere and *Patrike* got a new lease of life under her editorship. Her entry into Kannada press was termed a day of momentous as she was one and only female editor of a tabloid press in the state. To carry onward the legacy of her father, Gauri asked the regular contributors of *Weekly* to continue with their writings. But due to her alleged sympathetic association with the Maoist movement in Karnataka, her younger brother Indrajeet Lankesh questioned her ideological position and took over the ownership of the publication. In 2005, tabloid was split into two versions, Gauri's *patrike* was named as Ranjane (entertain), Bodhane (teach), Prachodane (instigate) *Gauri Lankesh*, while Indrajit took the original title *Lankesh Patrike*. Nevertheless, Gauri's *Lankesh* had no fixed readership, but her political affiliation with the women, dalit and progressive struggles did bring her some readers for the magazine. It also helped her to understand the social dynamics of the state from ground level. She extensively wrote on corrupt politicians, communal forces and published the stories such as '*Darodegilada BJP Galu*' (23, January 2008), (BJP leaders: started looting), for which she had to face defamation cases.

By the mid-2010, she had grown into a significant voice in regional journalism and associated herself with several political fronts such as- Karnataka Komu Sauharda Vedike, (Karnataka Forum for Communal Harmony), Citizens Initiative for Peace and Dalita Damanitara Horata Samiti and few others. As a stringent critic of Hindutva groups and supporter of anti-caste movement, she travelled extensively to report on issues from the field. By now, she turned as an activist-journalist, who stood at the front for justice and equality. In due process, she was met with criticism and failed to convert the activists of all these

fronts into readers. As a close observer and a short-term employee at Gauri's tabloid, I have seen bundles of unsold copies returning office. In fact, Gauri's publication did not run in profit because it did not publish advertisements and had very limited subscribers. I think this was the same condition of other Kannada tabloids- *Hi Bangalore* (1995) of Ravi Bealgere, *Agni* (1998) of Shridhar and *Lankesh Patrike*(1980) of Indrajeet Lankesh, but these editors in one or other way associated themselves with Kannada entertainment industry and had other 'means' of revenue to publish their tabloids. For Gauri, it was Lankesh's books (Lankesh Prakshana), *Udyoga* (Employment) and the *Guide*-a current affairs magazine in which she would provide the content 'how to crack the police exams' and 'methods to prepare for civil service interviews'. However, to me, Gauri was writing against anti-establishment editorials and on other hand was giving tips on 'how to become police' this often would appear contradictory.

In a way, though Gauri's anti-BJP, anti-Hindu, anti-Modi writings brought some popularity to the tabloid, but it failed to attain the distinctive version of what Halliday terms a 'social semiotic' (Halliday 1978,109), to reshuffle the media consumption patterns and to redefine its readership. This evidently reflected in the circulation figures of her tabloid. Moreover, her editorials on political affairs and other reports on politicians had become more personalized, intrusive, outspoken and sensationalized. Sex-scams of religious pontiffs, people in power and political scandals had become a regular feature of political reporting. In the days of 24x7 television channels, these stories of 'exposing' corrupt individuals did not interest the common readers and political news as an issue of public concern had lost its economic value. Therefore, Gauri's *Lankesh* had missed out an essential element of commercial gain; which her father P. Lankesh, skillfully balanced the content his publication with a mix of humour, poetry, politics, sports and entertainment, that are central to everyday life of common readers.

Compared to other tabloids, Gauri's tabloid was 'too political' for the semi-literate urban readers, who would prefer reading 'infotainment' in the newspapers and on their mobile screens. Due to 'commodification of news' in regional media markets, a wide range of popular tabloids and magazines have lost a major chunk of readers. Though, there are 'consumers' for increasing colloquial usages and sexualized women body in cover pages; but there was decrease in the number of readers who would prefer reading politics in tabloids. Hence, in Karnataka, despite the fact that major political tabloids (*Agni*, *Gauri Lankesh Patrike* stopped printing in 2017), were losing their readers and stopping their publication, on the other hand, the second category of tabloids-pornographic (*Police News* (1986), *Police Mirror* (1989), *Crime Story* (2012), *Crime city* (2013) and *City Police News* (1994)) are flourishing because of their slang which is not only urban-centric but also something called 'foul', 'blasphemous', 'vulgar' and 'lewd'.

As lines between political and pornographic tabloids that explicitly cover crime, rape, murder and sensationalization started blurring, editors whose publications had demonstrated some resistance and possess progressive ideas earlier, are now started expressing their concern. Especially, with the rise of the regional services of Television and arrival of internet as a means of media entertainment, it has speeded the long-term decline in regional tabloid circulations. Thus, Kannada tabloids have reduced further their coverage of public affairs in favour of giving greater priority either to political leaders or celebrity culture which had become a cultural capital for them.

So, Gauri's tabloid as a 'journalistic other', having a constant engagement with 'socio-political' norms of the readers tried to maintain a dialogue with the contemporary political trends of the state. However, commercially it did not succeed because of unfixed readership. Thus, for newsprint, and other expenses of the tabloid, she had to depend upon either book sale or sale of

competitive exam publications. As her political activism in the form of writing was critically on communal politics of right-wing groups, commenting on *Avarana*-a novel written by S.L. Bairappa, a supporter of Hindutva-agenda and her pro-Dalit and minority stand invited wrath of communal forces and she became the target of legal fight, and the Weekly spawned a series of controversies. Even, in her editorials, she had evidently written several times that those who justified the murder of M. M. Kalburgi and distributed sweets to celebrate the death of U R Ananthamurthy are trying to silence her. And it was her miscalculation that being a woman was quite useful in this situation because if a politician badmouths a woman, they will lose respect and face in the society themselves!⁴ had cost Gauri her life. With her assassination, several narratives have developed and debated at length. Now, Special Investigation team has arrested all perpetrators involved in the act. But the question remains unanswered that to what an extent the detention of communalized minds would decrease the politics of hate and let others continue journalism to question all forms of fundamentalism.

⁴See The Rediff Interview/ Gauri Lankesh, "Being a woman is my security right now" <http://m.rediff.com/news/2000/may/03gauri.htm>

ಗೌರಿ ಲಂಕೇಶ್

ಗೋರಾಪುರ ಕಂದಮ್ಮಗಳ ನೆನಪಿನಲ್ಲಿ.....

ರಂಜನೆ • ಬೋಧನೆ • ಪ್ರಬೋಧನೆ

“ ಆಮಿತ್ ಶಾ ಕರ್ನಾಟಕಕ್ಕೆ ಕಾರಿಬ್ಬತ್ತಿ ಎರಡು ಅಲೆನಾ ಆಯ್ದುಕೊಂಡು ಒಂದು ಒಂಚಗುಂ ಮತ್ತೆ ಫಿಂಪಿ ನೀಡಿ ವ್ಯಾಮಾನ್ ಕಂಪ್ಯೂಟ್ ಮಾಡಿಕೊಳ್ಳೋದು. ಮತ್ತೊಂದು ಭವಿಷ್ಯದ ಕೋಮು ಕ್ಷೋಭೆಗೆ ಅನುಮಾನವಂತೆ ವಿದ್ಯಾರ್ಥಿ ವಾತ್ಸಲ್ಯ-ಪ್ರತಿಭಾಶಕ್ತಿಗಳಿಗೆ ಕೊನೆಯಾಯಿಸೋದು.....

ಕರುನಾಡಿಗೆ ಬೆಂಕಿ ಇಡಲುಬಂದ
**ಒಂದು ಕೇಸರಿ
ಮೊಟ್ಟೆಯ
ಕಥೆ**

ಉತ್ತರ ಕನ್ನಡ
ಟಿಕೆಟ್ ಚಟುವಟಿಕೆಯ
ತಂಟೆಗೆ ತತ್ತರಿಸುತ್ತಿದೆ
ಕೇಸರಿ ಪಾಟಿಯ

ಕೊಪ್ಪಳ
ಕಾಂಗ್ರೆಸ್ ಭವ್ಯಮತದ
ಬೀಗುಡಿಗಳು

ಶಾಂತಿನಗರ
ಪ್ರಗೇಡ್ ವಿರೂಪಾಕ್ಷಪ್ಪ
ಜಿಡಿಎಸ್ ನೇರಾರಾ?

**ನಟ ಉಪೇಂದ್ರಗೆ ಒಂದು
ಬಹಿರಂಗ ಪತ್ರ**



Image of Last issue of *Gauri Lankesh*-30, August, 2017. A cover story on Amit's entry into Karnataka and rise of communal roits. And an editorial *Kanada Haage* on Hadiya's Marriage controversy.

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