

THE PIONEER

A glorious journey spanning 146 years

Pioneer Research Desk

The Mutiny was over and the British Raj had been formally installed with the Crown taking over from East India Company. The British Indian Army was now a much larger force. The size of British garrisons in upcountry 'cantonment towns' grew by the day. George Allen, an Englishman who came looking for business opportunities in Allahabad, discovered that the sahibs and memsahibs needed a newspaper of their own; the wait for *The Times*, which arrived by ship and was then sent by train to upcountry readers, was far too long.

So, George Allen decided to launch a newspaper. Thus was born *The Pioneer* in 1865. Till 1869, the newspaper was published thrice a week. In 1866, a weekly supplement called *The Pioneer Mail*, comprising 48 quarto-size pages (mostly of advertisements) was added to the paper. In 1874, *The Pioneer Mail* became *The Pioneer Mail and India Weekly News* and started to carry short stories and travel features.

Agenda—strong support for imperialism

The target readership of the newspaper during the British Raj was basically Englishmen living in India, more so those employed by or associated with the Army. The paper during that time was known for its strong support for imperialism. In 1872, Alfred Sinnett, gifted writer, became the editor of the newspaper. Although Sinnett was later known for his interest in theosophy, he oversaw the transformation of the newspaper to one of exercising great influence in British India. Another renowned writer, Rudyard Kipling worked for the paper as an Assistant Editor from November 1887 to March 1889.

Winston Churchill, who pursued a career in the Army but went on to become first a writer, then a parliamentarian and during World War II, Prime Minister of Britain, was War Correspondent of *The Pioneer* during the Second Boer War in South Africa. Later, he reported on the British Indian Army's Malakand Campaign at the turn of the 20th century for the paper.

In early-1938, political commentator, noted novelist and author of *Animal Farm* and 1984, Eric Arthur Blair, better known by his pen name George Orwell, received a letter from *The Pioneer* offering him a job as editor of the paper. On February 12, 1938, Blair wrote to the India Office in London: "My object in going to India is, apart from the work on *The Pioneer*, to try and get a clearer idea of political and social conditions in India than I have at present. I shall no doubt write some book on the sub-continent and if I can arrange it, I shall probably contribute occasional articles (to English periodicals)." Unfortunately, Blair's failing health prevented him from taking up the assignment.

During the 1930s, *The Pioneer* had great influence on the educated class of Uttar Pradesh. *The Pioneer* became noted for its politically conservative outlook. For example, the paper denounced Lord Irwin (Viceroy, 1926-31) as a 'Bolshevik' in response to the latter's moderate approach to the Indian nationalist movement. Jawaharlal Nehru, seeing the growing influence of the newspaper with its pro-British tilt, decided to launch his own paper (the now defunct *National Herald*) to counter the impact but failed to create the same magic as *The Pioneer*.

Sold to a business syndicate

The paper fell on bad times and in 1933 it was sold to a business syndicate and its offices moved from Allahabad to Lucknow. The publication of *The Pioneer Mail* and *India Weekly News* was also stopped at that time. Kipling wrote: "When, at long last, *The Pioneer* – India's greatest and most important paper which used to pay 27 per cent to its shareholders – fell on evil days and, after being bedevilled and bewitched, was sold to a syndicate, and I received a notification beginning: 'We think you may be interested to know that,' etc, I felt curiously alone and unsponsored. But my first mistress and most true love, the little *Civil and Military Gazette*, weathered the storm."

Mahatma Gandhi recounts an interesting episode involving the Pioneer when he found himself stuck in Allahabad in *My Experiments With Truth* :

"I took a room at Kellner's and decided to start work there and then. I had heard a good deal about *The Pioneer* published from Allahabad, and I had understood it to be an opponent of Indian aspirations. I have an impression that Mr. Chesney Jr was the editor at that time. I wanted to secure the help of every party, so I wrote a note to Mr. Chesney, telling him how I had missed the train and asking for an appointment so as to enable me to leave the next day. He immediately gave me one, at which I was very happy especially when I found that he gave me a patient hearing. He promised to notice in his paper anything that I might write but added that he could not promise to endorse all the Indian demands, inasmuch as he was bound to understand and give due weight to the viewpoint of the Colonials as well.

"It is enough", I said, "that you should study the question and discuss it in your paper. I ask and desire nothing but the barest justice that is due to us. The rest of the day was spent in having a look round admiring the magnificent confluence of the three rivers, the Triveni, and planning the work before me.

This unexpected interview with the editor of *The*

Pioneer laid the foundation of the series of incidents which ultimately led to my being lynched in Natal.

I went straight to Rajkot without halting at Bombay and began to make preparations for writing a pamphlet on the situation in South Africa. The writing and publication of the pamphlet took about a month. It had a green cover and came to be known afterwards as the Green Pamphlet. In it I drew a purposely subdued picture of the conditions of Indians in South Africa. The language I used was more moderate than that of the two pamphlets which I have referred to before, as I knew that things heard of from a distance appear bigger than they are.

Ten thousand copies were printed and sent to all the papers and leaders of every party in India. *The Pioneer* was the first to notice it editorially. A summary of the article was cabled by *Reuter* to England, and a summary of that summary was cabled to Natal by *Reuter's* London office. This cable was not longer than three lines in print. It was a miniature, but exaggerated, edition of the picture I had drawn of the treatment accorded to the Indians in Natal and it was not in my words. We shall see later on the effect this had in Natal. In the meanwhile every paper of note commented at length on the question.

To get these pamphlets ready for posting was no small matter. It would have been expensive too, if I had employed help for preparing wrappers, etc. But I hit upon a much simpler plan. I gathered together all the children in my locality and asked them to volunteer two or three hours' labour of a morning when they had no school.

This they willingly agreed to do. I promised to bless them and give them, as a reward, used postage stamps which I had collected."

After independence

After independence, *The Pioneer*, and its then sister Hindi newspaper, *Swatantra Bharat*, reflected the mood of the times and the aspirations of a free nation. It was published from Lucknow and Allahabad

but it was the main newspaper of Uttar Pradesh and wielded both clout and influence. Its editors were known for their intellectual attainment and respected for their integrity.

Till the 1990s, the paper changed hands several times. Sir JP Srivastava's family owned the paper for a while, before handing it over to the Jaipurias. It was during these decades that *The Pioneer* evolved from being a paper meant for the expatriate British community and the then social and political elite into a paper for Indian readers reflecting their concerns and interests. Among the galaxy of Indian editors one name stands out – that of SN Ghosh. Popularly known as 'Ghosh sahib', he steered the paper to its new identity and became the longest-serving editor of any newspaper, a fact duly acknowledged by the Limca Book of World Records.

In 1991, *The Pioneer* was bought by the Thapar Group and LM Thapar became the chairman of the newspaper with Mr Vinod Mehta as the editor. It was revamped and the Delhi edition was launched in December 1991. It was an instant hit with the national capital's thinking classes. Mr Mehta left the paper in 1995 to launch Outlook.

Journalist-owned newspaper

In 1996, Mr. Chandan Mitra, with a distinguished track record of working at *The Statesman*, *The Times of India*, *Sunday Observer* and *Hindustan Times*, took charge of the paper. Two years later, the Thapar Group decided to exit from the newspaper business on account of mounting losses and financial problems. This posed a serious dilemma to Mr. Mitra: He could either let *The Pioneer* close or keep it alive by taking it over as there were no buyers for the paper at that point of time. He opted for the latter and on May 15, 1998, *The Pioneer* became India's only journalist-owned newspaper; it still remains so.

For the following several years, Mr. Mitra struggled to keep the paper afloat but at no stage did he give up hope. Such was his credibility and reputation that senior journalists joined the paper at vastly reduced

salaries to help him tide over the crisis. Slowly but surely *The Pioneer* was rescued from near death under Mr. Mitra's leadership.

"My faith in the old dictum 'God helps those who help themselves' has deepened manifold over these five years. Miraculously, saviours have appeared at the most critical of times," recalls Mr. Mitra. "Our readers have been *The Pioneer's* greatest source of strength. We did not reduce our cover price of Rs. 2 when both the market leaders cut theirs to Re 1. And we offered just 16 pages against their 32. Still, we did not lose even one subscriber."

Today, *The Pioneer* has not only stabilised and turned the corner, it has several satellite editions. Apart from Delhi and Lucknow, *The Pioneer* is published from Bhopal, Bhubaneswar, Ranchi, Chandigarh and Dehradun. An edition was briefly launched from Kochi. CMYK Printech Ltd., the holding company of *The Pioneer*, publishes two upmarket glossy magazines: *Namaskar* (for Air India) and *Exotica* (for various 5-star hotel chains). Its website, www.dailypioneer.com, receives a phenomenal number of hits and hosts the paper's e-edition.

"Thinking Person's Newspaper"

With a pool of talented reporters, a nationwide network of correspondents and some of the best writers in English language media, Mr. Mitra has established what he prefers to call the "thinking person's newspaper". *The Pioneer* remains politically conservative and its editorial policy reflects the paper's staunch commitment to national interest. It is widely regarded, in the country and abroad, as the alternative source of information, free from any baggage or agenda.

As *The Pioneer* prepares to complete 150 years of non-stop publication, it is proud of its past and confident of its future. With Mr. Mitra as the editor, the paper will continue to play a pioneering role in journalism and continue to conquer new peaks of success.