

Prem Bhatia – an editor par excellence

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My first encounter with Shri Prem Bhatia was in 1974 at a seminar I had organized at Faridabad, an industrial town in the National Capital Region. He graciously accepted our invitation sent by post and informed us that we need not bother about his travel arrangements and that he would find his way to the venue. What greatly impressed me was that he arrived at the venue five minutes before the scheduled time, introduced himself and asked if he was talking to the organizer of the function.



arriving after the scheduled time - 9.45 a.m. – was greeted with a satirical comment from the boss. These meetings were a great learning experience for his colleagues as these provided us with lots of tips about how to go about gathering information for a story and never to forget cross-checking facts.

Long nose for news

Shri Bhatia had a long nose for news. He could smell news from hundreds of miles. If I ever got a telephonic call before 6.00 a.m. it was most likely to be from the Editor-in-Chief of The Tribune who was an early riser. It could be either to congratulate me for an “interesting” story in that morning’s newspaper or a hint about major news likely to break in my beat. He would be the first to complement his reporters if they showed initiative and reached out to get news.

In 1977, when I was a lowly Staff Correspondent at a district place, I was pleasantly surprised to receive a telegram from him that read, “Well done in covering floods. Carry on the good work”. He was equally harsh if one missed stories or committed grammatical or factual mistakes in his/her reports. I would never forget his remarks on one of my lead stories that was highly appreciated for its content but went on to say, “Wrong spellings of incorruptibility are a shame”.

He was an editor who was also a teacher. He would tell his editorial staff the correct usages and mark errors and mistakes in at least one page daily for the

I, no longer, remember what he said at the seminar on the Freedom of the Press but I can’t forget that Shri Bhatia came there not as a VIP but as a professional journalist committed to a free and independent media. His informality and punctuality left an indelible mark on me. During my decade-long association with him in The Tribune, I found that on every New Year eve, he would visit the news room and cabins of all his colleagues in the editorial department to wish them a happy new year.

In 1984, we invited him to be the chief guest at the launch of Panchnad Research Institute at Chandigarh. Again, he reached the venue long before the scheduled time and waited outside the auditorium for the other guests to arrive. He was punctual to a fault and expected all those who worked with him to be on time. His thrice-a-week meetings with senior members of the editorial staff during his editorship of The Tribune used to be held at his residence. Anyone

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guidance of the newsroom and reporters. His insistence on correct use of punctuation marks became a subject of countless jokes.

The story of a professor of English who was deeply hurt not because his daughter had eloped with her lover but because there was only one 'n' in the word "running" in the note she left behind was widely circulated among the editorial staff. Some one put up an 'advisory' on the notice board in the newsroom that read: "Please leave a large number of commas and full stops with the Chief Sub for use in your stories". Once, he asked a journalist in the morning meeting about the authenticity of his report. I was taken aback for the story didn't carry any byline. I asked Shri Bhatia if he could identify the author by his style. "Few of you have any style. I identify my reporters by the usual grammatical and spelling mistakes they make", he responded with a mysterious smile.

Unearth newsy bits

Immediately after the emergency was lifted in 1977, The Tribune Trust zeroed on Shri Bhatia as the Editor-in-Chief of The Tribune group of newspapers after frantically searching for a competent editor who could compete with the Indian Express that had launched its Chandigarh edition. Shri Bhatia was told that the Trust would appreciate if The Tribune lost not more than 20 per cent of its circulation to the new competition in the market. The Trustees and the editorial staff heaved a sigh of relief to discover that the newspaper's circulation had gone up by more than 50 per cent within one year of Shri Bhatia taking over its editorship, Indian Express' massive marketing campaign notwithstanding. And this was achieved not by launching marketing campaigns but by qualitatively

improving its editorial content and motivating its senior correspondents and reporters in the districts to unearth newsy bits and do investigative stories. The Tribune under the stewardship of Shri Bhatia was transformed from a staid pro-establishment newspaper into a dynamic and genuinely objective and more readable one.

Another quality for which Shri Bhatia would be remembered by the profession is that he normally stood by his reporters whenever they came under attack from the powers that be or from the "victims" of their investigative reports. He was moderate in his criticism of the authorities in his writings, but would not kill even sharply critical reports penned by his editorial staff.

As a journalist, I had a love hate relationship with a maverick politician Shri Hardwari Lal who became Vice Chancellor of Maharishi Dayanand University. He ran the University as his personal property and was extremely annoyed with my critical articles about his authoritarian methods and irrational decisions. Although Shri Hardwari Lal was a personal friend of Shri Bhatia, he failed to persuade him to spike any of my critical stories. Shri Bhatia refused to restrain me even after the Vice Chancellor filed two defamation cases against the editor, the publisher and me. That ultimately he had to withdraw these cases is another story.

I also earned the wrath of Shri Bhajan Lal, a powerful Chief Minister of Haryana, by writing stories that made him uncomfortable. He brought tremendous pressure on Shri Bhatia to transfer me on the premise that I was running a sustained campaign against him. Not a single story penned by me exposing the then

Chief Minister's misdeeds was spiked or under-played. It went on and on for several years. Like all good things, it ended one morning. Before leaving for London on vacations, Shri Bhatia signed an order divesting me of my Haryana beat. I was told Punjab – my new beat - was more exciting and a happening state. But all of us knew the power behind this order. The Tribune Journalists Guild lodged a strong protest and we ran a sustained campaign against transfers ordered under pressure from the Chief Minister.

After his return from London, Shri Bhatia addressed a meeting of the editorial staff to explain the circumstances leading to my transfer. He told the meeting that Haryana Government had stopped giving advertisements to The Tribune thereby causing a huge financial loss to the newspaper. He asked the journalists to appreciate his problem and remember that he had nothing against the correspondent concerned. A young sub editor interrupted him saying, "Sir, you admit that you succumbed under Government pressure". Shri Bhatia was stunned and the meeting ended on a sore note.

Born on November 8, 1911, Prem, as his friends called him, began his professional career in Civil and Military Gazette of Lahore. He later worked as Political Correspondent of the Statesman and also wrote for the Guardian published from London. Later, he worked

in the Indian Express and the Times of India and was for some time the editor of INFA. He had two stints with The Tribune first as its editor in Ambala and later the Editor in Chief of the Tribune group of newspapers in Chandigarh.

He was one of the most eminent and influential journalists of his times. His writings on political and social events were marked by independence of judgment and exceptional analytical ability. He had also served the country as its High Commissioner to Kenya and Singapore. He was respected and admired by his employers as well as colleagues.

Shri Bhatia upheld the primacy of the editor and the powerful General Manager who was a former Chief Secretary of Haryana, would come down to the editor's office if he had to discuss any issue. On occasions he would force the management to spare more space for news to accommodate a major story. Although a sophisticated diplomat in full control over his language, Shri Bhatia relished hurling juicy Punjabi abuses at his close friends. Golf was his first love as a hobby and two pegs of whisky before dinner was his habit throughout his adult life. He expired at the ripe age of 83 on May 8, 1995. I miss him. He was an Editor par excellence, a guide and a good friend. He loved me like his son. In his death, I lost my father twice over.

Journalism in today's media scenario appears more as a profession than a mission. The print media is consciously oblivious to its role as Fourth Estate. To say the least, this trend is not only unfortunate but deserves to be condemned by civil society in no uncertain terms.

Justice G.N. Ray, Chairman, Press Council of India