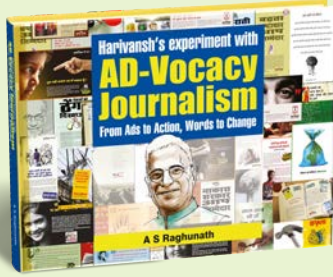


Book Review: Harivansh's Experiment with AD-Vocacy Journalism, From Ads to Action, Words to Change

Sanjay Shrotriya



When you stand firm on your spine and do not bow down to the powers that be, when you derive strength from your character - sooner or later you are bound to shine. It's when you are fearless, challenge the authorities, the people in power and do what you are supposed to do the best - Journalism - you become a brand, a torchbearer that even shows the path to others, inspires others. That's what my immediate reaction was after reading the book - 'Harivansh's experiment with AD-Vocacy Journalism, From Ads To Action, Words To Change' written by AS Raghunath. A beautiful chronicle of Prabhat Khabar's Journey under the leadership of Mr Harivansh.

Title: Harivansh's Experiment with AD-Vocacy Journalism: From Ads to Action, Words to Change

Author/Editor: A. S. Raghunath

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A. S. Raghunath's *Harivansh's Experiment with AD-Vocacy Journalism: From Ads to Action, Words to Change* presents a detailed narrative of the transformation of Prabhat Khabar, a regional newspaper published from Ranchi, under the editorial leadership of Harivansh Narayan Singh. The book attempts to situate this transformation within a broader framework of journalism that extends beyond routine reporting to embrace a more engaged and interventionist role—often articulated in the text as “advocacy journalism” or, in a more contextual sense, “समाज परिवर्तन की पत्रकारिता”.

The account opens with one of the most significant episodes associated with the newspaper—the exposure of the Fodder Scam (चार घोटाला) in the early 1990s. The book presents this as a defining moment that not only challenged the political establishment in Bihar but also demonstrated the potential of regional journalism to influence national discourse. While the

narrative foregrounds the impact of this investigative intervention, it also implicitly raises questions about the institutional context and editorial courage required for such reporting at a time when media resources were limited and political pressures substantial.

Following this, the book traces how Prabhat Khabar developed a distinct editorial identity marked by issue-based campaigns and sustained public engagement. These campaigns, as documented by Raghunath, sought to move journalism beyond the function of information dissemination toward that of social persuasion and civic mobilisation. Initiatives such as “एक दीपक अँधेरा चीर सकता है” and “एक तर्क बहस समाप्त कर सकता है” are discussed as early examples of messaging strategies that combined simplicity with symbolic resonance. They reflect an effort to communicate complex social concerns in a manner accessible to a broad readership.

A substantial portion of the book is devoted to campaigns addressing social behaviour, particularly those concerning children and family dynamics. The “बचपन बचाओ” campaign, for instance, is presented as a response to emerging concerns about digital addiction and changing patterns of childhood. Through evocative lines such as “हाथ धामने की उम्र में उँगली दिखाने लगे हैं” and “दादा-दादी से बढ़ गई दूरियाँ”, the campaign sought to provoke reflection among parents and society at large. While the book highlights the campaign's emotional appeal and public reception, it also invites readers to consider the broader question of how far journalism can or should engage in shaping personal and social behaviour.

The idea of the newspaper as an “agent of change”—“सिर्फ

दर्पण नहीं, बल्कि परिवर्तन का माध्यम”—is a recurring theme throughout the text. Raghunath suggests that under Harivansh’s leadership, Prabhat Khabar moved beyond the traditional role of mirroring society to actively participating in its transformation. This perspective resonates with certain normative traditions in Indian journalism that emphasise public service and moral responsibility. At the same time, it raises important questions about the boundaries between journalism, activism and advocacy, particularly in contexts where editorial positions may influence public opinion.

The book catalogues a range of campaigns that sought to engage citizens in democratic processes. Initiatives such as “आपका वोट, आपकी तकदीर”, “वोट दो, व्यवस्था बदलो” and “जगे झारखंड, बदले झारखंड” are presented as efforts to encourage electoral participation and civic awareness. These campaigns illustrate how journalism can intersect with democratic engagement, especially in regions where political participation may be uneven. However, while the narrative effectively documents these initiatives, it offers limited empirical assessment of their long-term impact, leaving room for further inquiry into their effectiveness.

One of the notable contributions of the book is its documentation of media practices in a pre-digital era. Many of the campaigns described were conceptualised and executed at a time when the internet was still in its infancy and the concept of “viral” communication had not yet taken hold. Despite these limitations, the campaigns relied on strong visuals, concise messaging and community outreach—elements that remain relevant in contemporary media strategies. The author occasionally suggests that such campaigns would have achieved wide digital reach today, though this remains a retrospective observation rather than a substantiated claim.

How Prabhat Khabar pioneered innovative branding experiments; how the leftover newsprints were utilised effectively for an innovative campaign; some more stirring social advocacy ideas; why our late president APJ Abdul Kalam

endorsed Prabhat Khabar; how they fought for the special status of Bihar and the then chief minister Nitish Kumar were roped in it; and most importantly, why a dreaded Naxalite (Vijay Kumar Arya) wrote a letter to Harivansh from Vishakhapatnam’s central prison in 2012? You will get to know all this and more in this book, besides a power-packed dose of wisdom, insights and adventure.

For students and practitioners of journalism, the book offers a range of insights into editorial vision, campaign design and the challenges of sustaining independent reporting. It demonstrates how a regional newspaper can build credibility and influence through consistent engagement with public issues. At the same time, the narrative occasionally adopts a distinctly appreciative tone, which may limit critical engagement with alternative perspectives. A more systematic analysis of the risks associated with advocacy journalism—such as potential biases or conflicts with journalistic objectivity—could have further enriched the discussion.

Another aspect worth noting is the book’s attempt to bridge the gap between professional journalism and public communication. By presenting campaigns in both English and Hindi—“समाज के सरोकारों से जुड़ी पत्रकारिता”—the text reflects the linguistic and cultural diversity of its audience. This bilingual dimension also highlights the importance of local idioms and expressions in shaping effective communication strategies.

Overall, Harivansh’s Experiment with AD-Vocacy Journalism serves as a significant case study of a regional newspaper’s effort to redefine its role within the evolving media landscape. It captures the possibilities of journalism as a participatory and socially responsive enterprise while also prompting reflection on its inherent tensions. The book is particularly relevant for readers interested in media studies, communication strategies and the intersection of journalism with democratic processes. By documenting the journey of Prabhat Khabar, it contributes to a broader understanding of how regional media can influence public discourse and, at times, attempt to shape social change.

About Reviewer



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Sanjay Shrotriya is a seasoned marketing and brand consultant with over two decades of experience across leading agencies and corporates, including Ogilvy, Lintas and the Tata Group. He specializes in brand communication and integrated marketing and currently advises organizations while also engaging in teaching, writing and knowledge-sharing.

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