

Today that "you could pay to get yourself featured in the editorial columns of the *Times of India*, *Business Standard* and then followed this up with a detailed story explaining how you could pay a PR agency to buy editorial (not advertising) space in *Delhi Times*, *Bombay Times* and the rest".

Vinod Mehta, Ajit Bhaattacharjea and Chandan Mitra had participated in the debate. *The Statesman* had reprinted the BS piece.

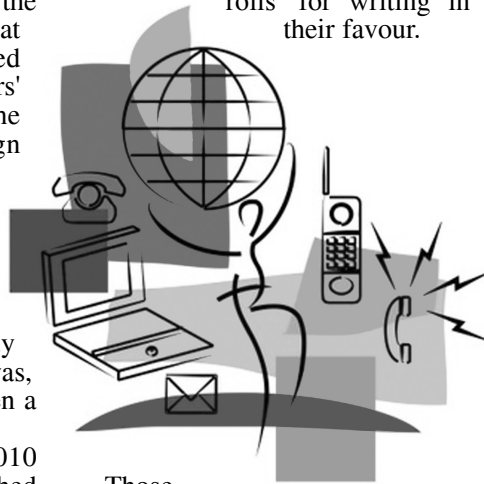
Meanwhile, another controversial issue had cropped up with several Congress as well as the BJP politicians, who had gone to Gujarat to campaign during the assembly elections, claiming that local newspapers had asked candidates to pay for reporters' and editorial coverage. The candidates' electoral campaign had to be ignored and kept out of the columns if no brief case containing a few lakhs was received. Vir Sanghvi had found this trend "even more worrying than the suggestion that you could buy your way on to Page Three. It was, in effect, the distinction between a whore and a blackmailer".

And on December 26, 2010 Sunday *Hindustan Times* published a double-column story with the three-line heading in two prominent colours 'Journalist' arrested (in red) for extortion (in black) with a two-line leg heading "SHAME (in Blue) He used to blackmail people by threatening to print about illegal activity". Simran Gupta, an alumnus of a prominent university works at a national daily and also runs a local weekly newspaper wherein he publishes information about alleged illegal constructions in the area. Gupta had demanded Rs. 25,000/- from Kasim when he was making some modifications in his house.

The point to be noted is that the habit of extorting money on one pretext or the other has not remained confined to newspaper

barons or their senior journalists only but has simmered down to insignificant locality newspapers/magazines also. The progress or deterioration cannot be judged by that of a few at the top only but from that of the masses at the grass-root levels. Applying it as a barometer one can easily surmise the fall of journalistic standards in the present-day media.

Believe it or not but this deterioration had started sometime after mid-sixties when journalists of a particular political hue had started touring a foreign country on a sponsored trip and were allegedly on their 'secret pay rolls' for writing in their favour.



Those were the mad days of "...Bhai- Bhai" politics. Subsequently, in the early seventies a western powerful country also started inviting Indian journalists in the name of professional training and on their return the DTC bus travellers were seen driving brand

Greed, be it individual, be it institutional, is the root cause. The owners of such newspapers who prostitute their pages or the journalists who work for them are not governed by professional ethics, have no commitment to truth and have no interest in the wellbeing of the country or the common people having implicit faith in their writings and making their minds accordingly. Their only aim is to make money.

This is one reason why there is no coverage of new achievements in the various fields of science because there is no payment. But there is too much coverage of religious *gurus* and their befuddling preachments (24-hour on TV) because they pay. There are identical astrological forecasts for all persons all over the world born under 12 zodiac signs defying all logic. But there is no astronomical or astrophysical news coverage. Articles on science have disappeared from newspapers and in their place we find pictures of scantily dressed models on ramps advertising certain types of panties or bras because from them comes money.

Still more alarming than prostituting the columns of a newspaper is the new trend in appointing the so-called part-time correspondents in districts and tehsils - they are not given any appointment letters but only a dubiously worded Identity Card, paid a pittance only and told to furnish Ads regularly and fend for themselves thus corrupting them.

An absolutely new trend is being seen in the recent times that old and senior journalists are obliged with plum postings and fat salaries provided they have the desired political affiliations and benefactors. All parameters for such postings are ignored for favourable writings supporting their politico-geographical, politico-religious and politico-moral patrons.

All that I want to say - and readers must try to understand a polite cough - that so much lucre worship, so much 'incestuous commerce' in the newspaper world is no good. It is sheer Barmecide. The need is not to reinvent the wheel but to just realign it. We are to only discipline ourselves a bit; reintroduce the principles of professional ethics in ourselves. We must remain the strong Fourth Estate and should not degenerate into a fourth rate estate.