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Profile Interview: Stories that need to be told in India

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Stories that need to be told in India

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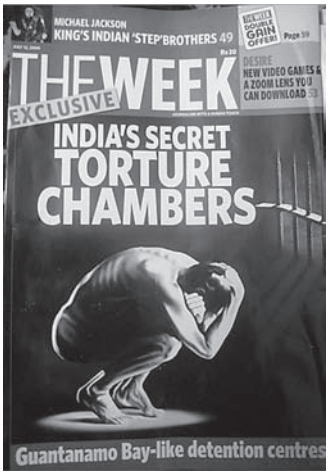
Investigative work by some of India's renowned journalists, despite their limited access to the internet in remote areas, is still conducted in the tradition of working the streets, tenacious research, going undercover, negotiating the multi-layered bureaucracies, and engaging with the grassroots and often inaccessible sources. Among the well-known investigative journalism in India is the exposure of entrenched corruption in the Ministry of Defence by the English-language news site, *Tehelka.com* in 2001. A team of Tehelka journalists, disguised as arms dealers with hidden cameras, met with senior politicians and army officers to do a deal on procuring 'thermal imaging binoculars'.

Known as 'Operation West End', [1] *Tehelka* exposed the culture of corruption among senior defence ministry officials and army officers. The exposé led to the resignation of the Defence Minister. A significant journalistic and public interest outcome. But the investigative methods by *Tehelka*, which was re-launched as a weekly print publication in 2003 with the support of its subscribers and donors, stirred criticisms of its ethical practice. Does *Tehelka's* journalistic motives justify its methods, the spycams, the entrapment?

The essence of investigative journalism is this: journalists are morally obliged to expose, in the public interest, all forms of abuse of public office and misuse of public funds. The ends sometime do justify the means especially where governments are steeped in corruption and human rights abuses by those in power. From this essence springs the intangible rewards of investigative journalism -- the gratitude from victims of injustice, acknowledgement from unknown readers on the street, and the knowledge that good journalism can make a difference in keeping governments accountable and honest.

Here, we seek inspiration from journalists who are driven by a passion to see justice being done, and publications that operate on the principle of 'journalism with a human touch'. *The Week*, one of India's oldest English-language news magazine, which started in 1982, operates on this ideal. The magazine, based in New Delhi, represents the much less publicised achievements of Indian journalists who continue to keep the issue of corruption, human rights abuse and aberrant practices alive in public and private discourse.

I caught up with *The Week's* senior roving correspondent, Syed Nazakat (right), who visited Australia in June 2010 on a diplomatic



journalism fellowship, which involved meetings with the Ministry of Defence in Canberra, academics and a profile interview with then Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd. Syed has won numerous journalism awards, the recent one in July 2009 for his exposé of India's version of Guantanamo, published in *The Week*. The cover story exposed how security agencies in India were secretly running a network of illegal detention facilities around the country to hold terror suspects. Syed's investigation was nominated for the Daniel Pearl Award for Investigative Journalism in Geneva in April 2010. He was also nominated for one of India's prestigious journalism award, the 'Media Citizen Karmaveer Award', [2] for his 'citizen action and relentless efforts for social justice'.

Syed began as a reporter with an English newspaper in Srinagar in Indian-Kashmir where he was always "surrounded by difficult situations". He said: "Kashmir was [and is] a conflict zone. At times you are the first and the last person on the street, and whenever there is a bomb blast, a grenade attack or a gun-battle between Indian troops and separatist militants, instead of running away from killings and tragedies, you find yourself often chasing the bloody gun battles.

"There was always this curiosity to reach closer to the story, to the spot, to the death. I remember when I first saw the bullet ridden bodies I cried. But then years later I found myself unable to mourn death and tragedies. Another death had just became another story."

Syed later joined a weekly broadsheet, *Sahara Time,* in Delhi where he covered "a prestigious beat" - India's foreign ministry, which took him to other parts of India and abroad. After a short stint in 2007 in Bangkok as news editor for the Asian News Network, when he traveled to Laos, Cambodia, Philippines, Hong Kong and India on assignments, Syed returned to Delhi to join The WEEK as its senior roving correspondent.

What is your normal day like as an investigative journalist at The WEEK?

I mainly report on defence, strategic affairs, security, terrorism and human rights issues. As I'm working on many story ideas simultaneously, any fresh development decides my engagements for the day. I particularly follow news relevant to my beat. I take notes of fresh developments and keep a notebook. Before leaving for office I make calls to my contacts and sources. And if they have any fresh details or information to share, then I fix appointments with them. While working on major stories I always try to avoid long chats on the phone. Many people [sources] don't feel comfortable talking over the phone. I'm also aware that it is normal practice for authorities to tap the phone of journalists. To protect my story and sources I prefer to meet in person. While in office, I check my inbox for new mails and respond, if possible, immediately. I do attend the daily press conferences and briefings, and, if time and deadline permit, I try to meet new people every day. At the end of day the aim is to develop, nourish and maintain as many sources as possible. Before retiring to bed, I briefly note down the day's work and list tomorrow's engagements.

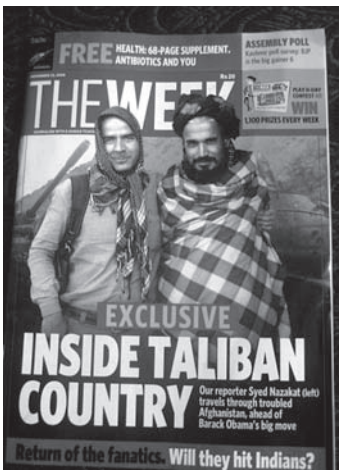
What drives your investigative work?

I believe the focus of our work should always be the common people and their interest. In every story I pursue, my aim remains to seek information and truth. I am aware at the heart of our profession is the obligation to the truth and loyalty to the readers (citizens) and we must serve as an independent monitor of power. If there is one thing I have learned it is that our attention, hard work and little bit of journalistic struggle can create a space for informed public discussion and debate.

What type of stories are most personally rewarding?

I try to put my best effort for every story I pursue. However, there are some stories that I always cherish. I can recall three such stories. First, my story on the earthquake in Kashmir in October 2005. I was in my apartment in Delhi when earthquake hit. My editor rang me and said I should go to cover the earthquake. I packed my stuff, took the first flight to Kashmir. Instead of staying in Srinagar, we decided to go to Uri, a last border town before the Line of Control (LoC) that divides Kashmir into Indian Kashmir and Pakistani Kashmir. It was emotionally stressful to get stories from quake survivors, and to let the outside world understand how a killer quake had changed their lives forever. In Pakistan-occupied Kashmir over 73,000 people had died while 70,000 people were severely injured or disabled and three million people were left homeless. Indian side of Kashmir also reported heavy casualties with over 1300 people killed, 6622 injured and over two lakh (200,000) left homeless.

The earthquake did not attract sustained press coverage. It had almost fallen off the international and national media reports - and the UN reported a poor response to its emergency appeal. Perhaps editors, fresh from covering the Asian tsunami, were also suffering from 'compassion fatigue'. They had quite a crude idea that the public was not interested in seeing people dying. I was fortunate my editors funded my frequent travels to cover the earthquake. I was among the few journalists that followed the story, even after many months. I remember when I went to Kashmir in April 2006 to do follow-up stories there was hardly any coverage in the national media. I profiled individuals and their struggle to rebuild their lives. The battle for survival was such an incredible story there. My earthquake story received the Ramnath Goenka Excellence in Journalism award, which is India's most prestigious award.



Second - my cover story on the resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan. The story titled "*Inside The Taliban Country*" was an eye witness account of war ravaged Afghanistan. I traveled extensively across Afghanistan and interviewed the people, politicians and Taliban commanders. Even with the best preparation, gathering news in Afghanistan is a logistical nightmare. The phone systems don't work. Common necessities, such as batteries for tape recorders and internet, are non-existent outside Kabul. It is another challenge to get information. All the politicians and government officials are living in highly guarded buildings under multi-tiered security cover, making meetings with them extremely difficult. Then there is the constant challenge to

avoid bombs, bullets and landmines. During my stay in Afghanistan a day hardly went by without the Taliban bomb or suicide attacks. I was exploring Osama bin Laden's abandoned house in Jalalabad, and in the evening the US planes dropped bombs a few miles from where I was typing out my story.

Third, my major investigative story "*India's Secret Torture Chambers*" published on July 12, 2009 was based on months of research drawn from courts and public documents, confidential sources and a remarkable number of interviews conducted in India and Nepal. The story uncovered the dark side of India's war on terrorism as it discloses for the first time how India was running a network of secret torture chambers across the country to detain and torture suspected terrorists. This covert program included secret black sites and, allegedly at one time or another, many suspected people disappeared from these secret detention and interrogation facilities. I researched and interviewed many people who had never spoken publicly before - and others with firsthand knowledge of these facilities. The story was one of the finalists for the Daniel Pearl Award for Outstanding International Investigative Reporting in Geneva. My story reached the Indian Parliament and Indian Home Minister P. Chidambaram, who told the Indian Parliament that he was looking into The Week's report on the Secret torture chambers, said that "If there is any evidence that any State Police is keeping a secret 'torture cell', you have my word that we will come down heavily and stop this practice." The government also formed an internal committee to look into The WEEK's report. The story was followed by many publications in India, Pakistan, Nepal, and as well in Europe.

What are the risks and rewards of being an investigative journalist at The WEEK?

I remember when I was working on one of the major investigative stories, my friend who was a top government official warned me not to follow the story. "It is a dangerous story. How the hell are you going to do that?" And I thought, "How the hell am I going to do it?" I've got no idea. I really didn't know how it would be possible to penetrate the wall of secrecy and then ensure my safety. I had couple of close shaves in my career while reporting on the armed insurgency in Kashmir and Afghanistan. On a visit to India-Pakistan border in Kashmir in 2002, with my Japanese photojournalist friend, Masuro Guto, we were held by a renegade militant group, Ikhwan.

Of course, there are challenges and risks because violent retribution is a common occurrence, when you expose a powerful person or government agency involved in any illegal thing or corruption. I'm aware what is happening to our colleagues in South East Asian countries, particularly in Philippines. Many journalists have been assaulted, attacked, killed. Journalism, by any yardstick, particularly if you are covering conflict or doing investigative journalism, is not an easy profession, and as professionals

we face our own share of challenges. That is why the backing of organization and support of editors is crucial for any reporter on the ground. I've been lucky enough that throughout my career I have got a great deal of support from my editors.

I think the best reward for any journalist is the feeling of satisfaction that you managed to get the story, you managed to get it published and that your work, in some ways, will help the cause of truth. And when people recognize your work it gives you a sense of belonging and encouragement that you are not alone who felt that this story needed to be told.

What can you say to your peers working in countries where governments - for example in Malaysia, Singapore, Burma – are known for clamping down hard on journalists who dare to challenge and confront the state?

Freedom of media is important for survival of a free and democratic society. It is unfortunate that journalists face pressure from the governments in many countries. It is the responsibility of media professionals to resist all forms of pressure, as far as possible. In India we have the emergency days [between 25 June 1975 – 21 March 1977] when the government curtailed the freedom of media. All the newspapers were censored. Editors were arrested. But because of few brave souls that black period in Indian history ended soon in 1977. The journalist fraternity in Pakistan has also fought for their press freedom. Today, despite many odds, Pakistan has an independent and powerful media. It is also important that journalists should be aware about rule of law of the country in which they are working. They should be aware about the specific laws and rules that regulate, control and influence media activities. The awareness about law empowers you to challenge the state in the court of law.

I remember our first meeting in April 2006 in New Delhi. You were on the foreign ministry beat for The Sahara Times. Since then you've won numerous awards for your work, which has certainly opened doors to other journalism-related career options, such as in the area of teaching and training. Do you see yourself heading that way?

Over the years I had the privilege to report on many important regional and international stories. I've reported from almost 13 countries on major issues and developments. I have gained experience in diverse fields of journalism from reporting to editing to planning editorial calendar to online journalism. I often speak to journalism students in India and abroad and do share with them my experiences and knowledge about different areas of journalism. I enjoy interacting with students and there has always been this urge to use my journalistic experiences, skills and knowledge for the benefits of students. If not a journalist, I would have been a media educator. I remain very much interested in the field of academics. I think it is a privileged profession where you are preparing a younger generation to become a good professional. If everything works according to plan, I hope to join academia at some stage of my career.

How do you think journalism students can be better prepared for investigative journalism work?

A lot of students arrive at graduate schools very excited and they want to try and do everything. Investigative journalism is a specialized field, and it takes time to develop. Unlike standard journalism, the job of investigative journalists would be to find, report and present news that others try to hide. The first challenge you will face in your career will be that the people at the centre of the story will usually not help you and may even try to stop you doing your job. That exposes the investigative reporter to a field where he has to learn how to expose incompetence, corruption, lies and broken promises. There are some basic things that aspiring investigative journalists must learn - like they should be aware about local laws that impact on their profession. It is your responsibility to inform yourself about the different legal issues. For example, in some countries, covert use of a tape recorder is illegal. In other countries access to some classified government documents can put you behind the bars for years for ten years. So it is very important that reporters, photo-journalists and editors have full knowledge of media laws. Before planning to go undercover to expose wrongdoings you should also ask yourself if you could obtain the information through straightforward means; have you exhausted all other ways of getting this information? Does the public value of this information outweigh the deception and potential violations of privacy?

A reporter should always keep his editor informed about his investigative project, the people he is meeting, when and where. The point is if something happens to you your editor and your organisation will be aware of your assignment and they will be able to defend your story and you. An investigative journalist should also take extra care to maintain and secure his reporting materials, documents, notebooks, audio recording and sensitive files. At the end of day an investigative journalist's job is to watch how well people in power perform their jobs, especially those who have been elected to public office.

Notes

[1] Details of how Tehelka journalists exposed the corruption among politicians in the ruling-coalition, are available at:
http://www.tehelka.com/home/20041009/operationwe/investigation1.htm and http://wapedia.mobi/en/Tehelka
Also read Tehelka's editor, Tarun J. Tejpal's reflection on the exposé and its impact on investigative journalism in India at: http://www.taruntejpal.com/TheTehelkaExpose.HTM

[2] http://www.karmaveer.com