

# ‘The Business of God’-Understanding the relevance of ‘*The Speaking Tree*’, a Times of India supplement on spirituality

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## Abstract

*The ‘Speaking Tree’ is a weekly supplement that comes with the Times of India broadsheet every Sunday. Apart from this, it makes an occasional appearance as part of an article in the editorial page. The Speaking Tree largely focuses on positive issues in its attempt towards making the medium pro-active. Philosophy, Positivity, Spirituality, Motivational and Inspirational values are some of the themes that find themselves showcased in the columns of The Speaking Tree. Why does TOI, despite being a popular and the largest selling newspaper of India, feel the need to use spirituality as a tool to market itself? Has journalistic conscience finally caught up with the newspaper that most often than nought discounts any and all criticism that is aimed at the commerce/business side of the paper? A new conscience or a mere marketing gimmick, there is ample ground for exploration.*

**Keywords:** spirituality, marketing, gimmick, conscience, TOI (Times of India)

## Introduction

Newspapers in India have evolved through the ages in terms of design, layout, themes and content. Every newspaper at some point has tried to experiment by adding new sections, new columns and supplementary pages in order to widen its reach and access.

The Times of India is one of the oldest newspapers in India. It has a rich history and has contributed toward the moulding of Indian Journalism in its own unique ways. A recent development adopted by TOI has been the introduction of the supplementary- *The Speaking Tree*. This supplementary evolved from the regular column with the same name that appeared in The Times of India’s editorial pages. The supplementary was initially available for free, after which a small

price was introduced in recent times.

The supplement sees a lot of content that is based on spirituality with strong religious orientation. The present paper attempts to explore the various themes adopted by the newspaper supplement that are part of its content and tries to establish a possible link between the supplementary and the main newspaper in terms of recurrent themes if any.

## II Review of Literature

Daily newspapers have changed in many ways due to the emergence of television as a major force in news dissemination and reporting. Television's vivid imagery has changed the public's perception of the personalities and places in the news, transformed the news into entertainment, and thus altered the character of press reportage. Perhaps the most important and definitive factor in today's competitive environment is television's assertive presence that has transformed news events themselves. The evidence seems to indicate that the reader's sense of the character of the writer/news-anchor strengthens his/her attachment to the said paper/channel. The question that arises here is how strong are the links between the public and the news media? About one out of three say they would "feel lost" if they couldn't buy a newspaper or if they couldn't watch the news on TV. (Bogart, 1984)

As part of journalistic history we have seen that for centuries the content of journalism has broadened, varied and become structurally more

complex. However, what can still be observed is that journalism has had a stable and periodic structure, which has taken certain directions and waxed on certain thematic areas from time to time. The press has always taken on the form and coloration of the social and political structures within which it operates. It reflects the system of social control whereby the relations of individuals and institutions are adjusted. The understanding of these aspects of society is basic to any systematic understanding of the press. (Löhmus et al., 2013)

Occasional newspaper failures testify that mistakes are sometimes made in this business, but the upward curve of aggregate circulations is evidence of the skill of newspaper makers in answering faithfully to the wishes of readers. The old "able editor," himself a part of the social group for which he prepares his paper, and united to it by economic, political, and institutional backgrounds and training, believes that he knows through a sixth sense what his readers want, and since he himself feels the same desires and responds to the same symbols, this is often true enough. But in a more complicated society, modern techniques for the study of reader interest have afforded helpful guidance. Even editors who are somewhat contemptuous of such supposedly 'theoretical' devices are affected by them through their imitation of the successes of those who are less cynical, for imitation of successful newspaper practices is the oldest and most consistent secondary cause of general newspaper trends. (Mott, 1942)

Traditional religious authorities have regarded media with suspicion while at the same time accepting and utilising the expansive reach of media for their own publicity. For citizens, however, media representation of spirituality and social change may offer a transformative agency, through perhaps, a freeing up of constraints on religious or spiritual expression, a revelation of politics and policies and practices undertaken by national, political, economic or social institutions that contradict deeply held personal values, or even a presentation of alternative

lifestyles and beliefs. Spirituality can leverage new concerns within the social world to engender a new vocabulary for speaking about old issues, to perhaps defray the tension that marks so much religious discourse. (Hoover & Emerich, 2011)

The concept of 'convergence culture' as proposed by media scholar Henry Jenkins is helpful for thinking about spirituality and its uses. There is a strong reference to some of the ways in which individuals and communities interact with, influence and change culture through new technologies and new media. The phenomenon often termed 'convergence culture' stems from recent trends toward 'media convergence', a process by which media tools are increasingly united into singular products capable of multiple tasks. Media convergence is providing ways by which individuals see themselves and express their voices in contemporary pop culture. Now old media and new media are coming together, where grassroots and corporate media intersect, where the power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways. (Jenkins, 2006)

### III Methodology

The present study '**The Business of God'- Understanding the relevance of 'The Speaking Tree', a Times of India supplement on spirituality**, draws strength from two qualitative approaches vis-à-vis Expert interview and Content Analysis.

An expert interview is a focussed conversation between the researcher who is the interviewer and the domain expert who is the interviewee. This type of interview can be one-on-one, or held within a large group. It can be formal or informal and held over the telephone, by email, or in person.

Content analysis though conventionally considered a quantitative method has been in recent years clubbed under qualitative approaches. Since the present study is an exploratory one the content

analysis subscribed here is qualitative.

## IV Analysis

### Expert Interview

In the course of an interview with Dr Chengappa, faculty at CHRIST (Deemed to be University) Department of International Relations & Publications Bengaluru, who has put in yeoman service in the field of journalism before joining academia, a few interesting insights were brought to light. According to him, *The Speaking Tree*, has a lot of loyal followers, who look up to its invaluable lessons on life and living. Every newspaper, he says, has segments which caters to different age groups, to cater to the audience and this special supplement which relies on spirituality and religion is no different, with The Times of India, having now come up with an entire supplement on spirituality and related themes. He is of the opinion that there is a need to address the issue of readership and target audience and at this juncture it is clear that TOI sees an opportunity to reap the benefits that come as a result of meeting the demands of the audience. Dr Chengappa concurred that by catering to the needs of readers representing different religions, the newspaper manages to attract a wide spectrum of the audience.

As to whether there is a thematic link between the mainsheet and supplement, he does not believe so. "The right hand must not know what the left hand does", he says. Though both papers are produced by the same parent company it cannot be said with certainty that themes are coordinated to reflect sameness. Even if there are similarities in themes it may be coincidental and not necessarily a planned move. Some events may be of such huge significance in the history of the country that both the supplement and the main newspaper may want to encash upon it. Newspapers however, largely focus on current events and there is little chance of a link between the broadsheet and supplement. *The Speaking Tree* may be merely adding to the larger architecture and

philosophical leanings of the organisation.

### Content Analysis

The paper attempts to understand the different themes presented in the supplementary newspaper *The Speaking Tree* and also the possibility of a thematic similarity between *The Speaking Tree* and TOI main newspaper.

### Recurring Themes

Through an analysis of all the 6 editions it is observed there are some common themes that are recurrent. It can be seen that *The Speaking Tree* contains articles written by eminent spiritual leaders such as Dalai Lama and Osho (Swami Rajnish) and many others of equal eminence who write on moral and spiritual values that most of us need to inculcate into our lives. Food is another theme explored. The newspaper posits the stand favouring sensible eating, a clear way of telling its readers how nutritious food keeps the body healthy and helps to maintain the aura of a person. Food, according to the spiritual leaders, is something that is an integral part of human life. Physical well-being is another topic that is focused upon by the writers. It is important that people give primacy to their physical status and bodily health, seen in terms of maintaining body health through yoga, meditation and exercise. There are regular columns such as reviews on spiritual books, mythology-based comic strips and folk tales with morals & didactic approaches. The supplement also covers religious places around the world with reviews about such places, ranking them in order of comfort and standards provided, directions to get there, history of the place and associations with concerned religion too. Other themes are animal rights and kindness to animals, women's health and women's rights, love of fellow beings and amity amongst people as a path to a country's growth.



## Link between broadsheet and supplementary

In contrast to the expert opinion that there is rarely a thematic link between the supplement and the broadsheet, an analysis of the content of both the supplement and the corresponding broadsheet reveals a thematic link between both- faint though it is, there is a link. The contents of *The Speaking Tree* have always in some form or the other certain links to the contents of the main newspaper and the events of the week.

The first week's edition (4.12.2016) analysed here is when demonetisation and money problems were discussed in the pages of TOI in terms of scams, new laws, problems following the government move and so on, while *The Speaking Tree* complemented this with content that urged people to look beyond money and find contentment in their lives. There were articles written on finding contentment in life, asking readers if they thought they had enough in life and so on.

The second week's edition (11.12.201) happened to be the week that Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Jayalalitha passed away. The TOI newspaper covered the news of her sudden death in great detail presenting nearly a three sixty degree perspective. It was extensive since it was a huge piece of news in terms of news scale. The themes explored in *The Speaking Tree* were mostly about death and how one transcends death, which is just another step of man's journey. An attempt was made to bring in a philosophical angle to death as a contrast to the glib obsession with death that the mainsheet displayed.

Similarly, the third week's edition (18.12.2016) saw a great many financial scams being discovered, most of them involving ministers who did their best to deny it and hide behind a wall of non-communication. The same edition had the news of an Indian army 'jawan' being killed in the borders. Corresponding to this theme of scams in the main newspaper *The Speaking Tree* addressed the issue of

corruption and its evil effect on people, the breakdown of the moral fibre of people and intense greed. There were articles that were nationalistic in fervour trying to instil strong patriotic feelings in the minds of the people.

The fourth week's edition (25.12.2016) published on Christmas day saw many articles in both TOI and *The Speaking Tree* related to the Christmas spirit in some form or another, vis-a-vis-Christmas décor, the Palm of Life relevance of Christmas, Christmas characters and so on.

The fifth week's edition (1.1.2017) of TOI dealt with the political upheaval in Uttar Pradesh (UP) and the shaky position of former chief minister Akhilesh Yadav in the imminent state elections. From local UP controversies, to political shenanigans, to the prospects of political parties in the up-coming state elections in UP- all were covered with the usual diligence to detail. *The Speaking Tree* explored power positions of people in a society, how generation gap created problems in human relationships and generally relationship dynamics as a concept.

In the sixth week's edition (8.1.2017) of The Times of India there were a number of articles written on young entrepreneurs and their achievements-from their family tree and genealogy to their education and business accomplishments. *The Speaking Tree* reflected a similar trajectory in its content by talking about the contributions of select, inspiring youth of the country and their impact on the progress and status of the country.

An obvious observation that can be made from the comparative content analysis is the fact that *The Speaking Tree* tries to balance the negativities of TOI news content with positive news of its own. In other words the supplement tries to compensate for the lack of inspirational and motivational news present in the mainsheet paper.

## Advertisement Content

A point of contrast between TOI and *The Speaking Tree* is the issue of advertisements. While

the TOI main sheet is generally flooded with more number of indiscriminate advertisements in almost every page, the supplement has few advertisements in comparison.

The nature of products too vary between the two mediums. While almost anything (within reason) can get advertised in the TOI main newspaper- real estate, massage parlours, finishing schools, beauty treatments and the innumerable FMCG advertisements- the most common products advertised in *The Speaking Tree* are products that have some connection to the act of worship or related to similar activities of religious significance- Moksh Agarbatti (incense sticks), herbal products, fragrant candles, Angel Tarot Card Reading Workshop and an advertisement for *The Speaking Tree* app.

## Conclusion

*The Speaking Tree*, a supplement of The Times of India, is a newspaper that tries to cater to and address the spiritual needs of its readers. The supplement covers discourses and opinions of eminent religious leaders from various religious backgrounds.

On analysis it is clear that there are many common themes that traverse both the main newspaper and the supplement. The nature of news coverage is such that the supplement while representing a contrast in approach provides a perfect foil to the latter and thus succeeds in bringing in a perfect balance to the news content covered.

Despite the expert opinion stating a lack of thematic link between the main newspaper and the supplement, the thematic link is clearly seen in the two.

The advertising content in both the main newspaper and the supplement represent contrasting stands. While TOI is not averse to access of advertising content in its pages, the supplement is a

little more restrained in advertising products.

In a way *The Speaking Tree* does represent the conscience of the Times Group in that it is a contrast to the main newspaper's commercial approach towards doing business. It provides the much needed philosophical underpinning to the Times Group's business activities.

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