

## **What steered me into journalism?**

Was it the alignment of stars, chance or destiny that I steered into a career in journalism? I know not. I was studying Law and Political Science, and a natural corollary would have been to join the legal profession or civil service. At least that is what my grandparents and parents thought and would have very much liked. My passion and talent for writing was always perceived as a mere hobby. There weren't any journalists, apart from a cousin, in the family. Judges, lawyers and civil servants there were aplenty.

I was keen to work while studying, something graduates in my times didn't do. J D Singh, one of the finest editors, was coming to Jaipur, my hometown, to launch an edition of The Times of India (TOI) after successfully launching TOI editions in Patna and Bangalore. It was 1985 and I had just returned to Jaipur after completing my graduation from Sophia College, Ajmer.

I met JD on a crisp cold January morning. He offered me apprenticeship. We worked from 9.30am till past midnight, learning the tricks of the trade – subbing, coining headings and sub-headings, selecting photos, reporting, making bromide pages and putting the edition to bed. At 20, it was a lot to take in, but there was a curiosity and thirst to learn and know. It was a stimulating, heady atmosphere, which sucked you into its depths -- whether it was the horseshoe-shaped editing desk or making pages or going out to interview people and tell their stories.

The tipping point came a year or so into the job. I was sent to Barmer, one of the Thar desert towns on the India-Pakistan border, to cover an indigenous tribal handicraft conference. On the opening day, I happened to meet the head of Border Security Force (BSF), who asked if I was interested in an “exclusive story”. I was still learning the media terminology and didn't realise its significance.

The BSF team was planning to raid a smuggling ring that night and he asked if I wanted to come along. On camelback, we went, in the still darkness of the desert night. The mission was a success. In the morning, carefully and dexterously, I jotted every minute detail, cross-checking facts at every step as this humble and patient officer (Late S N Jain) explained things on a huge map spread over his Barmeri carved wooden desk. I typed the story on one of the many Remington typewriters in the office. There was no spell-check or cut-paste. If we made a mistake, we had to type again. K N Prabhu, the internationally renowned cricket writer and deputy editor, edited the story and the next day it was Page 1 anchor. It was the only story spread across the back page of TOI's Bombay edition along with a huge advertisement.

The black phone in my parents' bedroom rang incessantly with congratulatory messages and how proud they were of what I had achieved – a page one Byline! This was long before satellite television made journalism glamorous. Women were largely assigned soft beats – flower and fashion shows! I have never looked back and 36 years on, I still love every minute of what I do.