

An online voice for a handwritten newspaper

DIGITAL WORLD
OSAMA MANZAR



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According to the *Wired* magazine, the only handwritten newspaper in the world is in India. *The Musalman* has been published daily since 1927, written in Urdu by calligraphers known as *katibs*. According to the Handwritten Newspapers Project (handwrittennews.com), the only entry from India is the *The Musalman*, as registered on 15 July 2011. But that is not true.

There is another handwritten newspaper that's not found much mention. When you search about such unique newspapers on the Internet, you won't find any website from these papers. Perhaps the only thing you may find is media coverage of these newspapers.

On 18 August, I was in Ranchi, the capital of Jharkhand, on a personal visit. I was browsing through the pages of the Ranchi edition of the *Hindustan Times* when a report caught my attention. It was about a person, a *dalit*, who has been publishing a handwritten weekly newspaper in Hindi for the past 25 years.

Gauri Shankar Rajak was born in 1930 in a family of washermen. He is barely qualified, just a matriculate. He lives in a small mud house in Dumka in Jharkhand. All his life his earnings have been through daily wages earned through washing, ironing or some menial job. In the early eighties, when Rajak was already in his fifties, some government official humiliated him when he had gone to apply for a government scheme. His conscience was not ready to be silent and suffer. He picked up an A4-size paper and started writing and pasting on walls on various events, thoughts, corruption in local areas, and, of course, his opinion about the country as what it should be. He named the newspaper *Deen Dalit* and got it registered with the Registrar of Newspapers for India on 2 October 1986.

Rajak is a great fan of Mahatma Gandhi.

Since he could not afford sophisticated printing options, *Deen Dalit* was written by hand without any layout or stylish handwriting. Rajak accumulates reports, thoughts and ideas five days in a week and puts them on paper on the sixth day and circulates them on the seventh day after getting 50-100 copies photostated. He also often sends copies to the local district collector's, the Prime Minister's and the President's offices.

But Rajak is now ill. He has contracted leprosy but has no money for medicine and hospitals. He is unable to work and his income is negligible and he lives with help from his sons. Yet, he continues to publish *Deen Dalit* with the help of an editor he has hired.

Rajak's journalistic story has been covered by other media and has reached many influential eyes and ears, including the Prime Minister's and the President's offices, but not much help or support has knocked at his door.

I got in touch with the latest journalist who had written about Rajak. This person said the only way to reach Rajak was at his home. Incidentally, we have a digital *panchayat* centre in Giridih, Jharkhand, from where I sent our local coordinator to meet Rajak and offer three things: a mobile phone so he could be connected to the world; financial support to regularly run the newspaper and sustain his family, for which he sought ₹3,000-5,000 a month; and finally, to set up a website for his paper, to which he was delighted to say yes.

Rajak's health has now improved and he gets his regular ₹5,000 a month from Digital Empowerment Foundation. And now you can read the *Deen Dalit* newspaper at <http://deendalit.in>.

I hope we take more such voices online.

Osama Manzar is founder and director of Digital Empowerment Foundation and chairman of the Manthan award. He is also member of the Working Group on Internet Governance at the ministry of communications and information technology. Tweet him @osamamanzar

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