

think!

VARIETY

STORIES ABOUT A CHANGING INDIA

**MALINI AGARWAL'S**  
fashion/gossip blog  
MissMalini has  
over 10,000  
followers



**SAHIL RIZWAN'S**  
The Vigil Idiot, which  
reviews films via stick-  
figure webcomics, has  
over 6,000 fans



**GAURAV MISHRA'S**  
Gauravonomics has  
over 10,000  
followers



**MANSI PODDAR & KANIKA PARAB**  
of Brown Paper Bag now get  
exclusive invitations to openings,  
sometimes even before the press



**ARNAB RAY'S**  
politically incorrect  
current affairs blog  
Greatbong gets  
over 1.5 lakh page  
views per month



ILLUSTRATION: SHRIKRISHNA PATKAR

# OPINION LEADERS @BLOGSPOT.COM

**COMING OF AGE** Indian bloggers are shaping opinion on everything from travel to fashion and current events, increasingly acting as an alternative to the old media

**Bhairavi Jhaveri**  
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Pawan Sarda (30), a Nagpur-based instructor in creative thinking, spends an hour or more reading blogs every morning and only 30 minutes browsing through newspapers and magazines.

"All media outlets offer the same superficial coverage in different colours. It's suffocating," she says. "Blogs offer a fresh perspective on the issues. They make me think."

One of Sarda's favourite blogs, Greatbong (www.greatbong.net) by Arnab Ray, is far from politically correct, and is thus more frank and more real, says Sarda, who also follows blogs like India Uncut by Amit Varma, voted one of the 50 most influential people in India by Businessweek magazine in 2009.

Neither Ray nor Varma has any official standing in the news business. Just like a number of other Indian bloggers — covering everything from fashion to lifestyle, films and sport — have no official standing in their fields.

Nonetheless, they are finding lakhs of followers — for two reasons: They offer much greater immediacy, and they are not bound by the norms of objectivity and restraint that rule coverage in the traditional media.

As a result, they not only inform, but also shape opinions. And, as these bloggers come into their own — travel blogger Aparna Roy, for instance, was recently among just six people from the Asia-Pacific region picked for a first-ever bloggers' junket to Wales — and Net penetration increases, young urban Indians are turning to these new opinion leaders for opinions and advice on everything from current affairs to eating-out options and fashion trends.

"In other media, you only get to read about current affairs," says Delhi-based HR consultant Gautam Ghosh (37), who subscribes to about 600 blogs and now spends just 15 minutes on the daily newspaper and close to 40 minutes everyday scanning blogs. "But blogs like Gaurav Mishra's Gauravonomics touch upon how the social web is changing us as people

## Blogging can take you places, literally

She has jumped off cliffs, lived in caves and travelled across continents on a shoestring budget. And last month, **Aparna Roy's** (30) zest for travelling and blogging got her an invitation to a blogathon, a junket for travel bloggers.

Organised by Visit Britain to promote Wales as a tourist destination in Asia and Australia, only six bloggers from the Asia-Pacific region were picked for the five-day tour.

For Roy, a B-school graduate who is national brand manager for an energy drink and began blogging in 2005 on her first backpacking trip through Europe, the tour has also



been a mark of recognition for her blog, backpackingninja.com, which gets close to 50,000 visitors a year from around the world.

"I make sure to use very simple language, because you want to make a foreign country seem accessible. And I always try to make it funny, so that it is entertaining," she says.

and is based on learnings derived from Mishra's own career path, which, as a fellow marketer, I find extremely valuable. I won't find those kinds of details in the papers."

For the bloggers, these massive followings — US-based research scientist Ray started blogging back in 2004 and now has over 6,000 followers and gets over 1.5 lakh page views per month, while Gauravonomics has over 10,000 followers — are translating into real-world celebrity status.

Radio jockey Malini Agarwal of fashion blog missmalini.com and Payal and Priyanka (who go only by their first names) of highheelconfidential.com were invited to cover Mumbai's Lakme Fashion Week in March, and were seated in the second and third rows, next to some of the top fashion editors in the country. Agarwal also has a column in a Mumbai tabloid.

Kanika Parab (27) and Mansi Poddar (28) of lifestyle blog-turned-website Brown Paper Bag (bpbweekend.com) get exclusive invitations to pub, club and restaurant openings — sometimes even before the mainstream media — and host their own exclusive and much sought-after gourmet dining events.

Following the success of his blog, Arnab Ray has written a book titled *May I Hebb Your Attention Pliss!*, published by Harper Collins in March. Amit Varma's

first novel, *My Friend Sancho*, was on the long list for the Man Asian Literary Prize in 2008.

And the fans keep pouring in, and not just from across India.

Sahil Rizwan's film review webcomic, The Vigil Idiot (www.thevigilidiot.com), has 4,000-odd fans on its Facebook page and 2,000-odd followers on Twitter.

"Even film magazines and spoofs on music channels don't match up to Rizwan's style," says Kunal Joshi (24), a Detroit-based PhD student.

Adds UAE-based Nidhi Sudhan (31): "The stick figure sketches and his take on plot flaws, spoofs and stereotypes espouse a point of view on Bollywood films that I can really relate to."

Adds Canada-based NRI Shefali Joshi (21), who logs on to highheelconfidential.com for updates on desi fashion trends: "I haven't seen many other Indian fashion blogs written with such wit; it's also very realistic."

For BPB girls Kanika and Mansi, who have worked hard to keep their identity secret, the real coup has been their friends' friends recommending that they follow the blog.

"It's really funny, and flattering, when people we meet through friends recommend that we subscribe to Brown Paper Bag's weekend guide, not knowing that we're the ones who run it," says Kanika.

## QUOTE UNQUOTE

**Blogs are a medium you can't ignore today, and are very important in lifestyle journalism. Many of those who follow our industry visit sites like MissMalini and highheelconfidential. And these bloggers are capable of putting up posts and updates as the even unfolds, which is great.**

SUJAL SHAH, vice-president and head of fashion for event organiser IMG

**Greatbong is a thinker's blog. [Arnab] Ray is not only very honest but also has an in-depth knowledge of US policies, J&K matters, even movies. What he says makes a lot of sense. I have to know what he thinks on a current subject after I have got my news from other sources.**

PRIYANKA CHATURVEDI (31), Mumbai-based recruitment consultant

**There is also some amount of censorship in newspapers, which is why I turn to current affairs blogs from guys like Ramesh Srivats [rameshsvrats.net], who to me is the granddaddy of puns.**

DEEPAK GOPALAKRISHNAN (26), Mumbai-based business developer

**I go by what the BPB [Brown Paper Bag] girls recommend because my sensibilities match theirs.**

ANURADHA NATH (34), Mumbai-based IT professional

# Capturing the great unwashed

**FABIEN CHARUAU**, a French engineer and photographer, has made Mumbai his home. An ongoing exhibition is his tribute to small-town Indians

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Thirty-six-year-old Fabien Charreau is contemplating going "the South Indian way" and changing his name to Ch. Fabien. "Even the French can't pronounce my name," he says. "Or, I can take my wife Mona's last name. Fabien Gandhi... has a nice ring to it, does it not?"

The fact that this Frenchman from Brittany is considering, albeit laughingly, a South Indian honorific is an indication of how well he knows his India.

Fashion photographer, former engineer and now an artist with a critically acclaimed exhibition, Charreau has been in the country for 15 years and now considers Mumbai home.

Over the past two years, he has travelled across the country, taking photographs of small-town residents in large and small cities. "I'm curious to know how people live, what do they do inside their homes, how they eat, what they see, how they make love," he says.

As he speaks, his curiosity is palpable — not the curiosity of an intrusive neighbour, or even a detached artist, but the curiosity of someone who wants to learn and imbibe.

"I just want to fit in," he says.

In many ways, Charreau is a typical Frenchman. His English gets heavy around the 'R's, he stretches his 'E's a bit, and his words push up against each other. But he would rather be called an Indian. "Small things, like people asking me how long I have been here, remind me constantly of how I am seen as an outsider," he says.

It's only when they hear that he has been in the country since the mid-1990s, has been married to an Indian for six years, and has worked in Bangalore for four that they realise that Charreau now has roots in India.

What isn't immediately visible, though, is how badly Charreau wants to be Indian. For a Frenchman who came to IIT-Delhi as an exchange student for a few months in 1995, the transformation has been dramatic.

"Once I was done with my course here, I returned home to finish my engineering degree. But I couldn't stay away," he says. Charreau returned to Delhi, mainly for his Indian girlfriend ("not my wife," he clarifies), began studying Hindi and decided he did not want to leave.

He then found a job with a French multinational corporation in Bangalore, where he met and began working with renowned fashion photographer Prabuddha Deshpande.

Now, his yen for photography has spawned his first solo photo exhibition — a collection of 15 photographs called The Great Unwashed, and another, of 47 photographs, called Stumble Asleep.

The Great Unwashed is a set of photos of men from what Charreau calls the moffusil or small towns, caught unawares in natural "poses". The latter is a collection of photo-



**Fabien Charreau (above) is as much a Bombayite as he is a French person. This makes him both an insider and an outsider and that duality makes his photographs different.**

NARENDRA YADAV, artist

graphs with a loose narrative structure — Charreau begins each series with a photo of people sleeping; the images that follow represent the dreams they could be having.

"I was scared that I would face people who would say I am just another foreigner shooting India and wonder: 'What does he know?'" says Charreau.

But Charreau counters that by giving precedence to emotions over intellect.

"It's all very messy. I just go in there with my small camera and shoot. I'm biased and I'm distorting my frames with my biases," he says. "I didn't intellectualise my project. I'm working purely with my emotions and feelings. The 'dreams' in Stumble Asleep, for instance, are less the thoughts of the sleeping people and more my projections."

He wants the audience to react with their biases too. And they have.

"The Great Unwashed reexamines the pejorative title given to the masses by focusing on the grace and sensuality of the Indian male body. There's a feminine softness and fluidity to their bodies, alongside a strident virility, which I find very beautiful," says Charreau.

One online forum has slammed a photograph in Charreau's exhibition of a bashful young boy surrounded by bare-chested men on the banks of the Ganga.

Some members of the forum felt the photograph of a child has no business being there. Others said there was nothing sensual about the depiction of the child — that the realism of the photo reminded one of the naked bodies we see in the streets every day.

Charreau admits to having been shaken by the criticism.

"I was in fact portraying the underlying violence of the male body, especially in the way we handle children by pushing and shoving them around," he says, referring to the frame, in which one of the men has grabbed the boy by the arm. "But... this discomfort is precisely what I want to generate. I want all kinds of reactions from my viewers."

(The Great Unwashed & Stumble Asleep is on at the Matthieu Foss Gallery, Ballard Estate, till October 1)



Wrestlers in Kolhapur, part of the Great Unwashed collection of photographs.

# Misinterpreting religion: hate mongering and other sins

with malice towards one and all



KHUSHWANT SINGH

Nine years ago, a pilot belonging to a radical Muslim terrorist group rammed his plane into a skyscraper in New York killing himself, all the passengers and many hundreds in the skyscraper. Understandably, all Americans were deeply upset and developed acute Islamophobia. Now some Muslims want to build an Islamic Centre including a mosque near the

site of the tragedy. Don't they realise it will become an eyesore to most Americans? Or have they gone mad?

Then an American Pastor in Florida announced that he would make a public bonfire of 200 copies of the Koran to mark the 9th anniversary of the bombing. Even if dissuaded from doing so, his saying he would have liked to do so was an insane thing to do. Muslim communities world over were incensed. A church was burnt in Makka and violence re-erupted in Kashmir. One can detect symptoms of madness in these acts.

Another example of insanity is the grant of a visa to Sadhvi Rithambara to visit America. Did the American embassy in Delhi not know she is a notorious hate-monger and was involved in the destruction of the Babri Masjid? They are very fussy about granting visas, but in the case of the self-styled Sadhvi, it seems to have acted irresponsibly. She appears on Indian

television as a loving mother walking with three children, displaying her massive derrière but spouts venom against Muslims. The eminent psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar has quoted her verbatim mocking Muslims beliefs and practices.

And finally the resurgence of the Bhindrawale cult among witless Sikhs. He preached hate but has become a hot-selling item of his mementos: cassettes of his speeches, enlarged photographs and "T" shirts bearing his name and sketches of his likeness are in great demand. His support for Khalistan was a betrayal of all that the ten Sikh gurus stood for and is self-destructive. It is worth noting in all these cases religion has played a negative role.

**A POLICEWALLAH SPEAKS**  
Ask any Indian: who is the most corrupt and feared person in society and nine out of ten will answer, a police-wallah — *haraam ka paisa banaata hai*



Terry Jones, the pastor who wanted to burn the Koran.

(he makes a lot of illegal money) and *danda bhee lagatta hai* (and he also wields a stick). I go along with the *aam admi's* verdict. Senior policemen are by and large not corrupt but their juniors, down to constables, make illicit money by bullying everyone they can.

Among the glorious exceptions to the general rule of corruption and bullying prevalence in the police is Ved Marwah. He has been head of police in half-a-dozen states of India — Manipur, Jharkhand, Mizoram and Bihar. He is

the most trusted adviser of the Government in matters conferring law and order. So what he says has to be heard with respect. He has spelt out his views in *Indian in Turmoil* (Rupa). I chose to read his analysis of the 10 years of turmoil in the Punjab preceding and following the advent of Bhindrawale.

While I agree that personal differences between Gianji Zail Singh, then Home Minister of the Central Government and Darbara Singh, chief minister of Punjab, contributed a great deal to the rise of Bhindrawale and the spread of terrorism in the State because of Gianji's allergy towards Darbara Singh. I do not agree with his views of the demand for a Punjabi Suba and the way terrorism spread. He gives no credit to either of the police chiefs, Reberio or KPS Gill for combating it — their names do not appear in the index. This is unfair. However, Ved Marwah deserves to be read by all who are concerned with the future of their country.

## GHOST DRIVER

Santa was taking an evening walk, when it started to rain. To his relief, a car coming slowly towards him stopped next to where he was standing. Santa opened its door and jumped in. Once inside, he realised that there was no one else in the car.

Thinking the car was haunted, Santa started screaming. Then he heard Banta's voice, "Oye Santa, what are you shouting for? Instead of sitting inside, come out and help me to push the car. I have run out of petrol."

(Contributed by Rajeshwari Singh, New Delhi)

**PAKISTAN ZINDABAD**  
Asalam Alekum, this is Pakistani Radio Broadcasting Corporation

The Sports News:  
First we'll start with the results of tomorrow's cricket match...

(Courtesy: Vipin Buckshey, New Delhi)  
The views expressed are personal