

# The full story of the State vs sting

Madhu Trehan's account of how Tehelka was victimised is also a cautionary tale on new India

By Nalin Mehta

**T**HELKA burst on the collective consciousness of India in 2001. The grainy footage came with the promise of taking viewers on a guided tour into the grainy underbelly of the Indian state but that was only the beginning of the story. The birth of the television sting as a tool of journalism created a new genre but it also raised many questions: from politicians (of all hues), from the state, from the journalists themselves.

But what did all this amount to? After Tehelka's 'brief moment of Camelot', the owners of Tehelka were caught up in numerous court cases and ground down. Tehelka's journalists came to be seen as heroes or villains (depending on your politics), the Commission of Enquiry into Tehelka was ultimately wound up amid bitter politicking and the sting operation was adopted as a legitimate means of journalism by other media organisations. Meanwhile, the Army officers involved were swiftly court-martialled and punished while the media, as its wont, moved on to other things. The real story of Tehelka and what it means for India lies in its aftermath: in the human stories stuck in the shadows areas — the journalists, the bribe-takers, the anonymous minions of the state who carried out shady instructions and, indeed, the innocents caught in the wake. Madhu Trehan's book is an exhaustive — sometimes very tiresome — but extremely important attempt to document this and it raises disturbing questions about the nature of modern India itself. Tehelka's story, in more ways than one, is a journey into the heart of the darkness that lies beneath the shining lights of the new India. It is a story that needed meticulous documentation.

Two decades ago, when independent television was still a distant dream, Madhu Trehan pioneered *NewsTrack* as a mechanism of zipping through the state's broadcast monopoly, to slip through the cracks of Doordarshan and the Censor Board and to beat the system at its own game. Now she tries to understand the meaning of what she has called a new kind of "kick-ass" journalism, the Tehelka brand and emergence of Tarun Tejpal. There is a delicious irony to this — the old crusader, engaging with the work of

the new one.

Trehan approaches the task like a forensic scientist, combining standard journalistic techniques with a lot of pop-psychology thrown in. There are problems with this model but she interviews everyone there is to interview, uncovers little known but revealing details and asks interesting questions. She explores the internal dynamics inside Tehelka before and after the sting; examines how Tarun Tejpal emerged as a knight in shining armour, focuses attention on the equations between Anirudha Bahal and his foot soldier Mathew Samuel, and examines why the latter sank back into obscurity.

As an exercise in journalistic history, this is important. The heart of the book though is in the painstaking documentation of the manner in which Tehelka and its

“Tehelka's story also reflects the darkness hidden in the new India”

owners were ground into the dust. Chapter 19 is chilling in its exploration of the mechanisms through which the venal and anonymous leviathan of the state can be used to bring anyone to heel. Trehan documents the progress of the numerous SEBI, Enforcement Directorate and Income Tax cases against First Global's Shankar Sharma and Devina Mehra, Tehelka's investors. As Trehan put it: India is "not a soft state. Not a hard state. But a state of the eternal maze... India is the state of the eternal Maya." Franz Kafka is a reference that is now almost standard to Tarun Tejpal's public ruminations and so it is with Trehan. Like Kafka's hero in *Metamorphosis* who wakes up to find himself an insect, Trehan argues that Tehelka's denizens, after years of legal battles, entered what she calls "Insectpur".

Tarun entered the land of Insectpur, where the majority of Indians live. Insectpur is your place in society and your state of mind that has only known the hopelessness that stems from events that are never



Trehan works like an ethnographer, investigator and journalist

within your control. You can at any moment be stepped upon and squashed, at any given time.

Tehelka had its faults — some its claims were too grandiose in comparison with what was on the tapes — and Trehan points them out in painstaking detail, but the point is that Tehelka's motives became the focus of the story after the sting. Even the Commission of Enquiry's terms of reference included this, instead of simply focussing on the money-taking that had been caught on tape. According to Trehan, the cross-questioning at the Commission is revealing. Mathew Samuel was asked 5044 questions, Aniruddha Bahal 5016, Tarun Tejpal 2149. Jaya Jaitely was not questioned by the Union of India. Bangaru Laxman was asked 186 and George Fernandes 159 questions. "Doesn't that say it all?"

Ramachandra Guha has questioned why there is too little modern political history in India. Parts of this book should be mandatory reading for students of political history. Trehan works like an ethnographer, investigator, journalist, psycho-analyst — all rolled into one. For instance, she conducts numerous interviews with Jaya Jaitely at every twist and turn in the Commission and unfailingly uncovers the myriad contradictions in her defence. Conversely, she is a bit too nostalgic about the

persona of George Fernandes. Perhaps it's a vestige of his romantic political past. With everyone else, Trehan is probing and cynical. With George, in whose house Jaya Jaitely allegedly accepted money, she does ask the right questions but her tone is sympathetic.

This book could easily have been half the size and far more effective. At the outset, Trehan outlines her writing style. Choosing to combine investigative rigour with metaphysical explorations into the meaning of truth, she adopts the mechanism of *Rashomon*, Akira Kurosawa's 1951 film that explores the impossibility of the final truth, perspective and reality. The *Rashomon* technique, in its entirety, is more suitable for a novel or a work of fiction. Using it to document an event as large in its canvas as Tehelka, ends up making the book read like a curious mish-mash of an enquiry report and a literary foray into the meanings of reality. The point is that Trehan has a great story to tell. But as she says repeatedly about journalists — "too often they get carried away by the angle" — she too gets carried away by her personal obsessions.

The Tehelka story is a milestone in modern India. Trehan is an able chronicler and there is much to find here.

(Mehta is the author of *India on Television*)

Tehelka As Metaphor  
Prism Me a Lie  
Tell Me a Truth  
by Madhu Trehan

★★★★☆

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