



MEDIA HARIVANSH

Old School is the Right School

TEXT: MANNIKA CHOPRA

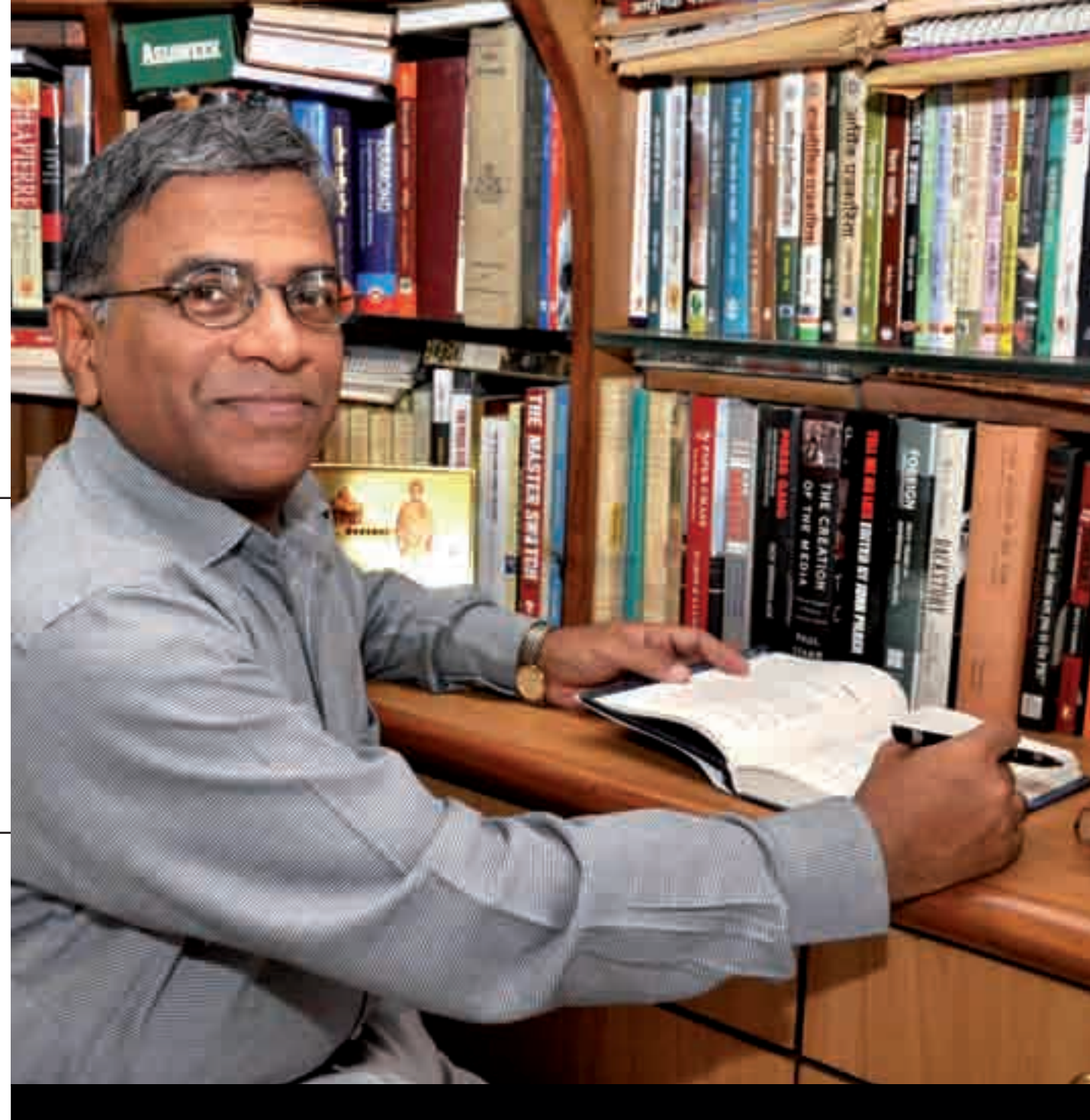
A determined editor from the Hindi belt creates a movement not a newspaper

Can any list of India's leading editors and the name Harivansh will be somewhere near the top. The bespectacled, unassuming editor of *Prabhat Khabar* embodies the journalistic values of the old school: an irreverence for power, a strong belief that media is a tool for social and political change and a conviction in the Gandhian principle that it is readers who are the masters and the market is not the king. In an era when sensationalism masquerades as news; when celebrities make it to headlines more often than development issues; where a witty phrase can be shrunk to 140 characters, 56 year-old Harivansh is an anachronism.

But he is a successful anachronism. As he himself says, *Prabhat Khabar*, tucked away in central Ranchi,

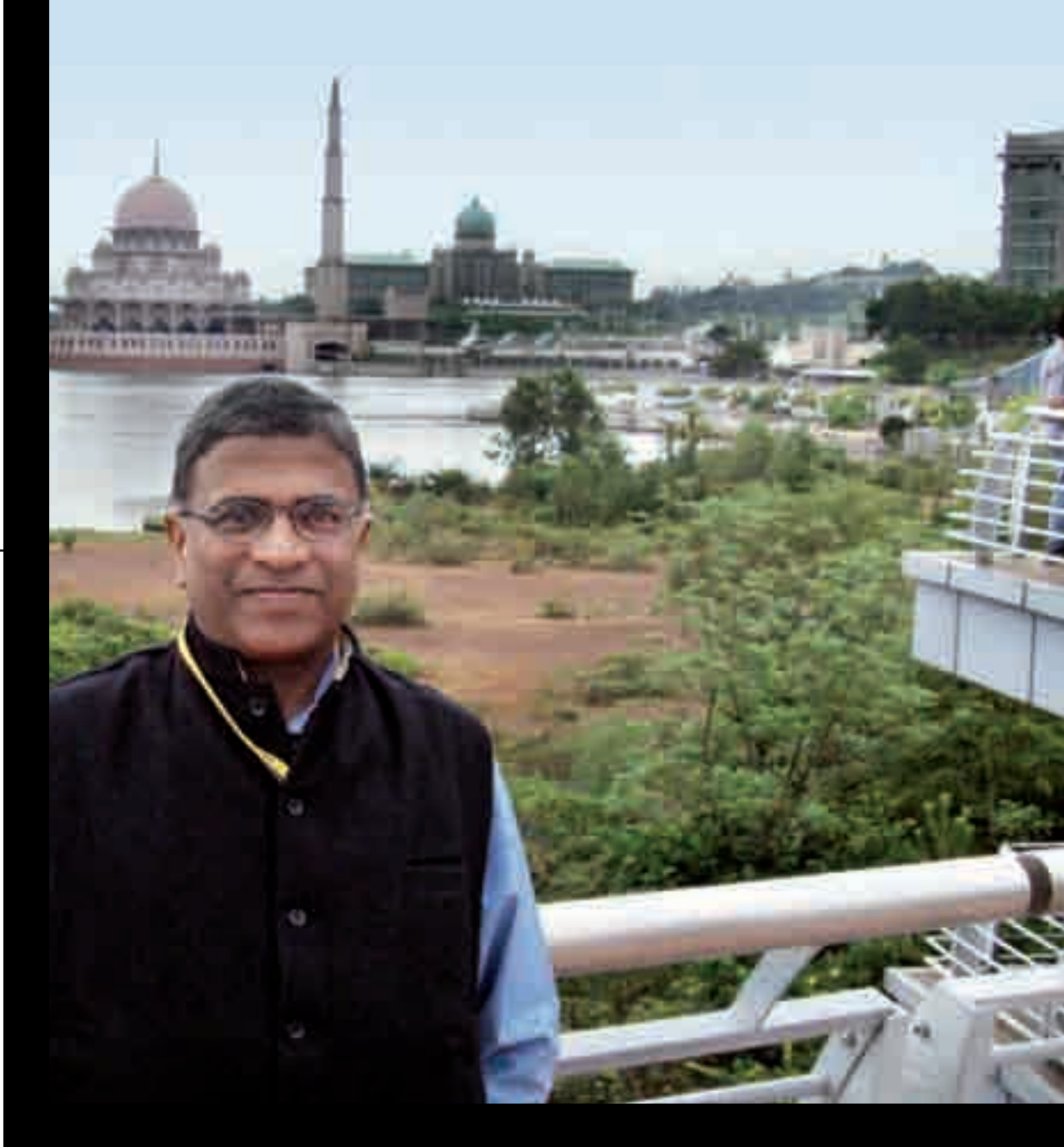
the capital of Jharkhand is an "experiment in today's journalism." At the helm of the paper since 1989, Harivansh has seen the Hindi paper grow from a shoddily produced, eight-page daily, with a circulation of 600 brought out by an outdated printing press into one published from 11 centres, with 60 editions and an audited circulation of 700,000 making it the eighth-largest Hindi paper in India and number one in Jharkhand.

In essence, the daily's story is the story of one journalist's determination to create, as its motto says, 'a movement not a paper.' Brought up in rural India, a former lecturer and bank officer, Harivansh opted for journalism as a chosen career path. Trained under iconic journalists like Dharmveer Bharati and S.P. Singh and hugely influenced by Jaiparakash Narain, a political leader and noted social reformer, Harivansh took up the challenge to edit *Prabhat Khabar* bought by the Kolkata-based business group, Usha Martin. It was, well



The newspaper is committed to the common man which is why we have an emotional bond with our readers.





“ Such reader interaction through these people’s forums was a new experience for us too. We also learnt along the way. ”

wishers said, a misguided leap of faith. With poor infrastructure the paper’s catchment area was south Bihar — perhaps one of the most backward areas of the country. But the pessimism was misplaced.

The root of *Prabhat Khabar’s* success has been its emphasis on the core values of journalism: looking with compassion and clarity at the life of the common man. The ideal people’s spy in the corridors of power, Harivansh has ensured that during the last 22 years the activist-paper exposed scams that have brought down politicians, reported on under-development resulting in a Supreme Court intervention and busted drug rackets. The paper even created a mass movement for the separation of a new Jharkhand state from Bihar which finally came about in 2000.

Harivansh’s pro-people approach runs counter to the over-processed, glossy, corporate-soaked tabloid strategy followed by other Hindi national dailies which are mopping up advertisements but leaving readers cold. “It has been a conscious decision not to follow the ‘lifestyle’ journalism that was adopted by the mainstream media. The paper is committed to the common man which is why we have an emotional bond with our readers,” says Harivansh.

On a shoestring budget he has put into place a modern newsroom, upgraded production technology, the paper’s design and layout and linked centres

through a computer network. He has also introduced the idea of ‘reader involvement’ in developing editorial content. Journalists organise regular readers’ meets in towns and villages in which people explain what they want to see in the newspaper. “Such interactions through these people’s forums was a new experience for us, too. We learnt along the way,” he explains.

The strategy has paid off. The paper has more than held its own against established Hindi dailies from large media groups whose aggressive marketing strategies have included distributing expensive gifts to enhance circulation and cutthroat cover prices. Circulation has increased dramatically and by 1996 the paper has been running without financial support from Usha Martin and launched several editions.

Alongside, there has been some inclement weather like the expected political pressure. Harivansh has 30 court cases lined up against him. Five years ago, there was even a chance that the paper’s ownership would change leaving its editor in a vulnerable position.

But the turbulence has passed. With a stronger bottom line, Harivansh is able to commit editorial resources for newsgathering that will make any accountant cringe. This son of a farmer clearly believes that, for the future of journalism, the old school is the right school. ■

More on Harivansh at www.prabhatkhabar.com