

SPOTLIGHT

The content of the newspaper stand at 73 Roosevelt Avenue in Jackson Heights, a neighbourhood in New York City, is a mirror reflection of one halfway across the world anywhere in Dhaka. In place of the usual NYC newsstand fare, the *New York Post* or any of the other local tabloids, these stands proudly display an array of newspapers in Bangla. “*Bangla Patrika* and *Thikana* are a dollar each. The rest are free,” said the man operating the stand in Jackson Heights, a Bangladesh immigrant himself, going by the name Mohammad Rafiqul Islam. He runs a newspaper stand in New York City but astoundingly carries not a single publication in English. “Why bother? Nobody is going to buy an English newspaper around these parts,” said Mohammad. Shortly after wards *Bangla Patrika* too was made free.

Just a couple of blocks away from the stand is *Kabab King*—a bustling hotspot favoured for steaming trays of skewered meat and fragrant biryani. Outside the entrance are stands where customers can pick up free newspapers with titles like *Pakistan Voice* and *The Pakistan Post*. Shoppers going into the Indian supermarket Patel Brothers stop by the door on their way in, to collect a free copy of *The Indian Panorama*.



New York has 19 Bangla newspapers

These are just a few names of the South Asian newspapers that have cropped up in New York City in the past two or three decades, riding the coattails of a burgeoning immigrant population from that region. And unlike the mainstream media of their host country, these publications are not dying out. The Pew Research Center found that the total number of employees in American newspapers fell from 60,000 in 2004 to 40,000 in 2015. Ethnic media, however, continued to intensify; the number of Bangladeshi newspapers just in New York has risen from two in the early nineties to a current high of 19.

Newspapers like these are thriving without any help from the average New Yorker. These media outlets are for the frantic Indian parents who published “Groom Wanted: Brahmin, for a doctor bride,” in *Gujarat Times* to make sure their daughter's fate is sealed within the same caste. Or for the law firm whose ad text in last week's *Weekly Runner* included these words “Many years of experience in ladder, scaffolding and construction accident cases” targeting the many Bangladeshis who migrate to the US for blue-collar jobs.

Only a decade back, these media outlets could not be found in the directory. But today, they are carving a steep upward curve based on one simple business formula—they outsource their work to Bangladesh.

While few outside of the immigrant niches have heard of these publications, they are quietly bringing about a digital innovation in how to run media companies that



Bangla newspapers provide a public service to immigrant Bangladeshis PHOTO: AMIR HAMJA

THE IMMIGRANT'S FOURTH ESTATE

ZYMA ISLAM

extend far beyond the ethnic press. Jobs, like constructing the page layout, doing research, aggregating information, maintaining the online footprint, are outsourced to Bangladesh for example, saving valuable dollars.

And none of this requires anything more complicated than the conventional email interface.

It is not at all uncommon that the person picking up the call at the other end of a customer support hotline will be on the other side of the globe faking an American accent and doing the graveyard shift to simulate the 9pm to 5pm business hours of Eastern Standard Time. But getting someone in another country to do the layout of a weekly newspaper? *That* is not as common.

Thikana for example runs a fleet of six “computer operators” in an office in Panthapath. “We have been here since 1996. The office in New York sends us the news and we do the page layout here,” said Akmal Hossain, who heads the entire operation. He is the bureau chief in Dhaka. “We also have four part-time journalists to help with gathering news.”

The office is fully sustained by ad revenue from companies in Bangladesh who want to advertise to an immigrant population. This involves real estate, travel agencies, and gold jewellers. Their newspaper is one of the only ones that have a physical office in Bangladesh.

“Most of the others take on contractual freelancers who work out of their home,” said Hossain.

Take Abul Kalam, for example. He supervises a

business that is crucial for the survival of newspapers across the world.

“I oversee a news agency called News World, where I collate and aggregate news from all the major newspapers in Bangladesh and supply them around the world for a fee,” he explained. This includes places newspapers in London as well—the fees can be as little as 60 GBP and as much as 200 USD per month.

Bangla Patrika (which also has the same owner as News World) subscribes to this company for news reports from Bangladesh—a major chunk of the content of the newspaper, even though it is only circulated in the US. The newspaper has a vibrant physical newsroom in the Long Island City neighbourhood of New York.

It was the night before the weekly paper went to the press and the newsroom was abuzz at 11 pm. With the printing press warming up, none of the staff had a moment to spare for dinner. The editor strode into the newsroom with packets of packaged rice, chicken curry and watery lentils. The hungry newsroom swooped around the food for a split second and were back again at their desks the next, reading off their computer screens with their left hands while shovelling rice into their mouths with their fingers.

“I am going over content sent in from Bangladesh earlier, editing and rewriting a bit,” said the paper's news editor, Salahuddin Ahmed, in between mouthfuls of food.

Another South Asian newspaper has no newsroom anywhere, but boasts 17,000 subscribers, a bureau in Delhi, correspondents in half a dozen cities in India and a few more in Dallas, Florida and Sacramento (California).

Nowhere in the pages of *The Indian Panorama* does the address of the newsroom appear. It is not on the paper's website, its Facebook page or its Twitter profile. The closest thing to an address is a section on the bottom right of the third page that mentions a PO box number that traces back to a neighbourhood in the city called Richmond Hill.

A call made to the phone number provided was picked up by the editor himself, Indrajit S Saluja. He sounded a tad bit miffed when asked about where his newsroom is. “If you know anything about ethnic media in New York, you would know that we often do not have newsrooms,” he said. I quickly reassured him that I am by no means judging the quality of the publication because it does not have an office—if anything I am intrigued by it.

“If I give my reporters 500 USD a week here in New York City, I can get two or three people more for the same amount in India. The exchange rate makes it worth it,” said Saluja. The minimum wage of a worker in the press industry in Punjab is around 4.20 USD a day, with hourly wages often as low as fifty cents.



PHOTOS: PRABIR DAS



Copies of *Thikana* newspaper (top) published in New York; *Thikana* has a Dhaka office (above) for operations like page layout and news gathering

Accordingly, editors like Saluja can lower their expenses by as much as *eighteen* times simply by shifting their offices halfway across the world.

And by doing so, he is able to field two teams of seven people each. One is located in Bangalore in India. The other group operates in Chandigarh, the birthplace of the turbaned, whiskered Saluja.

“Even my website and online content are managed from India,” he said. And because all the interaction between colleagues is virtual, the only costs are a good internet connection and a workstation.

“In this age I don't believe we need to have a physical newsroom. All of us are in different places of the globe,” he said.

These newspapers even have their own award for journalism. The award, known as the Ippies, is given out annually by a state institute called City University of New York Graduate School of Journalism.

Bangladeshi newspapers are yet to take home a prize; in fact South Asian names are rare. In 2014, a paper called the *South Asian Times* bagged a prize for investigative

journalism into the underemployment of immigrant women, making it the first time a newspaper representing the region got awarded.

The people who read them

Bangladeshi newspapers owe their success to another simple formula—they have a fixed audience.

Their readers often have little access to the internet and have dismal levels of proficiency in English, making newspapers in their native language their one and only source of information.

According to the US Census Bureau's American Community Survey for 2011, 53 percent of Bangladeshi immigrants could speak no English at all or had less than adequate capabilities.

Ferdous Ara Begum, 60, shuffled into the Jamaica Muslim Centre, late one February afternoon in 2015. She was following up on an ad about a recently established programme for seniors at the community centre servicing the Muslim-majority Bangladeshi immigrant population. She had moved into Jamaica with her daughter, not long ago, after being freshly widowed.

get any ads, and the total worth of those ads amounted to only a meagre thousand dollars. Thus, local agencies placing ads that provide interpretations of government services make these philanthropic in nature.

“We never got any ad from any government department or state agency,” said Abu Taher, the editor of *Bangla Patrika*, despite the fact that his is one of the most popular newspapers in the community.

The Nepalese television channel White Hima, for example, broadcasts an entire series on educating immigrants about survival in the US. They have a weekly programme titled “The Interpretation” that takes a facet of US systems or institutions and explains it to the audience in Nepali—the language of the immigrants.

Anchored by a journalist named Sailesh Shreshtha, the show addresses topics like immigration, legality of status, city services, and identification documents. Past episodes introduced the Nepalese audience to the IDNYC programme, talked about a free Nepalese “curry” kitchen in San Francisco, and interviewed the first Nepalese immigrant trying to enter mainstream politics. Just by having an anchor translate systems into



The neighbourhood Jackson Heights in New York is a melting pot for all things South Asian PHOTO: COURTESY

“I saw an ad in the newspaper that you hold day-time activities for seniors,” she told an office assistant. The assistant outlined to her the details of the programme, which included physiotherapy sessions, basic medical assessments, recreation and workshops on religion.

“After my daughter and son-in-law go off to work each morning, I get extremely lonely,” Ferdous Ara said, “So I collect and read all the newspapers every day to teach myself how to get around the place.”

Her top priority is advertisements seeking babysitters. “I have taught kindergarten children my entire life. My qualifications won't be accepted in the system of this country, but I can still do a good job babysitting,” she said.

Such advertisements are usually the only way that the diaspora can get information about city services regarding health, education, transportation and legal requirements. The Center for Community and Ethnic Media found out that of the USD 18 million that the city spent in 2012 on advertising about government services, over 80 percent went to mainstream newspapers like *New York Times* and the *New York Post*. The Indian newspaper *Desi Talk* was the only South Asian outlet to

Nepali, the programme emancipated viewers about three important sectors that affect the diaspora—getting identification papers, accessing free food and learning about local politics so that they can practice democracy.

Recognising the growth of an audience that does not read Bangla, the Bangladeshi newspaper *The Runner* launched its first English edition in 2014. Whether this newspaper can transfer the business model of outsourcing work to the publication of its English edition becomes an even more pertinent question since their stories in Bangla also vary hugely from those in English. While the Bangla version of the newspaper focused on Awami League corruption for their front page, the English version's lead story was on the country's stand-off with North Korea.

The natural progression of the immigrant press in New York has historically veered towards thinning coverage of affairs back home and focusing instead on the diaspora. Not just the content, even the language has had to adapt, running English versions to cater to an audience slowly losing touch with their mother tongue. What remains to be seen is whether the business model being adopted by ethnic media will prove to be sustainable in the future. ■