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South Asian Newspapers

Irene Joshi
South Asia Librarian
University of Washington Libraries

This paper will discuss the history and geographic distribution of South Asian newspapers; the current situation in preservation and access and suggest some considerations and directions for future activities. For the purposes of this discussion, South Asia includes Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

Under the auspices of my own library and the Committee on South Asian Libraries and Documentation (CONSALD) of the Association for Asian Studies, I am compiling a union list of South Asian newspapers in libraries and archives world-wide. The information in this paper is partially based on the data collected for this project which currently lists holdings for over 2,500 South Asian related news titles.

In 1766 the first South Asia related paper The East India examiner was published in London for those heading east. One of the newest papers on the scene, The Asian age, is published simultaneously in India and London for those from the east who went west. South Asian related newspapers are published on every inhabited continent on the planet.

A quick thumbnail sketch shows the variety of news publications originating outside of South Asia proper. In 1887, in Singapore, a Tamil language newspaper, the Singai nesan was started. It is the first I have documented which was published by and for a diaspora community. Continuing east, in 1941, two Panjabi language publications agitating for Indian freedom from English appeared in Shanghai, China and were branded as subversive by the British government. In 1923, the Fiji samachar began publishing in Hindi and English for Indians living in Fiji. In 1979, Hinduism today, until recently a monthly tabloid, began in Honolulu, Hawaii. On the west coast of continental North America, ranging from Vancouver, British Columbia to San Francisco, California but starting in Seattle, Washington in 1908, circulars or news sheets were published irregularly by Indian freedom advocates. In the 1920's and 30's in the Caribbean, papers were published for Indian indentured laborers who had settled there. The father of the noted writer, V.S. Naipal, was associated with one of these papers.

In 1909 in Geneva, Switzerland, Bande mataram began publication. Its message of independence for India angered the British and it was one of many publications banned by the British government. In Berlin, between 1915-1918, a monthly Hindi language paper was published for the Indian prisoners of war. During the Second World War, Fauji akhbar was published in Cairo for Indian soldiers fighting in that conflict. In South Africa in 1903, Mahatma Gandhi started Indian opinion, the first of several newspapers he would become associated with throughout his life. In the 1930's in Mauritius, news publications flourished for resident Indians. Which brings us geographically to South Asia itself.

On the subcontinent, newspaper publication began in Calcutta in the 1780's. By the next decade publishing had spread to Chennai and Mumbai (formerly known as Madras and Bombay respectively) and by 1800 there were several dozen papers, all in English by the English and for the English. The first non-English title was an Armenian monthly, Azdarar, published in Chennai in 1794 making Chennai the birthplace of Armenian journalism. It was not until 1818, when the Serampore Baptist Mission began publishing Digdarsana, a bilingual English/Bengali paper that the languages of the subcontinent were represented. In 1822, the Mumbai samachar (Bombay samachar) began publishing in Gujarati and English. It continues to be published today, under the same title, making it the oldest continuously published paper in India and one of the oldest in the world. The first 122 years of this paper are unavailable to researchers as filming began only in 1944. A most unusual 'paper' was the Kulasa-i-akhbar-i-lateef, handwritten in Persian and read daily to Emperor Akbar Shah II. Issues from 1829 are in the Red Fort Museum in Delhi. Eventually all the languages of the subcontinent plus the colonial languages of Dutch, French and Portuguese were represented by their own papers.

According to the 1995 annual report: Press in India, today there are 31,264 news titles published in India, including 4,043 daily newspapers and 27,221 news weeklies. Ninety nine languages and dialects are represented. Hindi is the predominant language of publication (13,650 titles) followed by English (5,525), Urdu (2,353), Bengali (2,115), Marathi (1639), and Tamil (1540). Circulation figures give a slight different picture, Hindi still dominates with

nearly 30 million copies circulated followed by English. But Malayalam is third, reflecting no doubt the high literacy rates in the southern state of Kerala.

Official figures for the other countries are not readily available, but a conservative estimate would be that there are an additional 4,000 titles published elsewhere in the subcontinent, for a total of approximately 35,000 news titles published currently. North America libraries are preserving less than 2% of this production and less than 1% of the daily newspapers.

This is a capsule view of newspaper publishing in South Asia. Where are we today? I have identified 2,520 extant titles, of which 1,360 are represented by print holdings only. 1,160 titles are at least partially microfilmed. In reviewing the 1,160 papers with microfilmed holdings, it is immediately clear that four institutions have made significant contributions to preservation efforts. The British Library-India Office Collections have filmed the extensive holdings of their papers which are primarily but not exclusively English language papers from the colonial period. The Nehru Memorial Museum and Library in New Delhi has an ongoing project to microfilm papers in its collection, which largely, but again not exclusively, document the history of the freedom movement in South Asia. In the US, the Library of Congress and the Center for Research Libraries have filmed or preserved in paper a significant number of titles published mainly in the last 50 years. The Library of Congress, which is responsible for approximately 36% of all titles filmed, is, through its filming program in New Delhi, the primary supplier of film of currently published South Asian newspapers to libraries world-wide. For older titles, the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library accounts for 24% of the filming, The British Library for 15%, and all other sources combined account for the remaining 25%. For South Asia, CRL films very little itself but makes a significant contribution in preserving in paper, hundreds of unique titles and purchasing film from other sources for the use of its members. Within the Center for Research Libraries, the activities of the varied microform projects, the South Asia Microform Project, the Cooperative African Microform Project and the South East Asia Microform project are important. There are their own filming initiatives. They give financial support to other institutions and archives through the purchase of their filmed products. They encourage and facilitate cooperation with archives and libraries in their respective regions.

There have been coordinated efforts in South Africa and Singapore-Malaysia-Brunei to film national newspapers in public institutions which include South Asian titles simply as part of the national record. Individual U.S. academic libraries have filmed a random selection of titles. Usually to solve local needs, either for space or preservation. Except for efforts between CRL and Harvard, Chicago and the New York Public Library, there doesn't seem to have been much in the way of coordination of these filming activities and there has been some duplication of effort as a result.

Commercial firms, such as University Microfilms Inc. and Bennett, Coleman in Mumbai are suppliers of current films for papers of record such as The Hindu from Chennai and The Times of India respectively. There are other newspapers, in India in particular, although not as many as one might expect, whose owners are filming or planning to film their backfiles and current issues. This is a mixed blessing. A wider range of papers in microfilm will be available but they will be more expensive for libraries to purchase, particularly if these titles were previously filmed by LC or other not-for-profit organization.

There are newspapers available on the World Wide Web from most of the South Asian countries. None are the complete paper and none have backfiles that predate mid 1995. They are generally published for the diaspora community not the academic community although some have search engines available. I am not aware of any coordinated effort to electronically archive them.

An important component of access is the availability of indexing. For South Asia, it is spotty at best. Some partial indexes are available, primarily for Indian titles. An abstracting service, the Asian recorder, which has been published fortnightly since 1955 with quarterly and annual indexes can be used to partially access Indian papers. The Indian press index covered a larger number of titles in some depth but has not been published since 1986. Nexis/Lexis does not include the newspapers or press services of the area. The Times of India began supplying an index with its microfilm subscriptions only in recent years. There is no equivalent to the Times or New York Times indexes which cover the entire run of the newspaper. Current indexing for newspapers from the other countries of the area and for vernacular papers from India is virtually non-existent.

We have access, at least physically, to the papers of record which display the broad picture of national and international events. But if "all politics are local", then local news papers would be more reliable sources to show how political and social events are perceived on the local scene. In addition, events will be reported in town or provincial papers perhaps years before the national press is even aware of them.

The British recognized the importance of local events and opinions and established a monitoring system to report and translation news from the "native press". These selections or reports cover roughly the 1860's through the 1930's and provide a valuable source for local events for that time period as few of the original papers are currently extant.

While there have been several recent attempts to digest or synthesize the local press, only the Nepal press reports produced by the Regmi Research Project, has any longevity.

Libraries outside the subcontinent rarely collection newspapers beyond the national and state or provincial level. Even libraries in the South Asia do not systematically collection local papers. The National Library of India in Calcutta, receives 561 daily newspapers on deposit, only 29 are being maintained in Calcutta with an additional 19 titles being kept at the Connemara (State Central) Public Library in Chennai. All of the titles are either national papers or major state papers. No strictly local newspapers are preserved. The situation in the other countries, can only be presumed to be worse.

North American libraries should survey the geographic news coverage, to glean from the approximately 35,000 currently published news titles, those which focus on local news events and coordinate their efforts to see that access to reasonably detailed local news is available for future research needs. There are three regional South Asia library consortia and coordinating this activity should be included in their considerations. Many of the titles will be in the local or regional language. U.S. Libraries, in particular, need to lose their fear of non-English materials. More than 80% of the news publishing in South Asia is not in English. In the past Libraries have felt that use of vernacular materials was primarily by graduate students or other advanced researchers. But within this decade, undergraduates arrive at our institutions fully equipped linguistically to use these vernacular materials which form the majority of news publishing activities of the area.

I'm not suggesting that U.S. Libraries need to collect every local daily newspaper, nor even the weekly or fortnightly tabloids, but we should strive for access through some means. Currently South Asianists look to the Library of Congress and the Center for Research Libraries and I'm certain we will continue to do so, but we should also look further afield to institutions in Europe, Australia and in the subcontinent itself and identify those whose interests coincide with ours and work to establish working relationships to see that these important sources are preserved for current and future use.

Of the 2,500 hundred titles for which I have located holdings, 55% or 1,350 are not currently available in microform. Most have ceased and exist only in fragmentary runs or even single issues. Many of these holdings are in institutions in South Asia where there is, at times, a resistance to microfilming unique materials. Microfilming is preserving, but it is also replicating. An institution's funding may be based on the numbers of researchers drawn to it to use materials unavailable anywhere else. Replicating those sources is seen as having the potential to weaken or even destroy an institution's funding base by taking away its unique character. Some archives make it difficult even for individuals to obtain a complete copy of single documents, so great is this fear of replicating an archive's holdings. Projects, which from the western viewpoint look like win-win for both sides, have fallen through on just this point. Western institutions, willing to pay for filming, are like the date who has paid for dinner and the movies, they want a bit more than "Thank you, it's been a lovely evening". They want access by either owning the negatives or receiving copies for their collections. Some archives, newly introduced to capitalism, believe that there is money to be made and that we are just an extension of a former colonial power, now returned to strip mine their intellectual property and they would prefer to go it alone. And even when the situation is favorable and they are willing to allow filming, our interests may not coincide, what we are want filmed may not be what they want filmed. We need to encourage local efforts at preservation for its own sake. We should pay particular attention to smaller institutions with more limited resources, such as those in Bangladesh or Nepal and, for diaspora papers, those in the Caribbean, Mauritius and East Africa.

I would like to mention two current projects which feature cooperation between western institutions and Indian institutions. Both involved acquiring unique collections of materials which were privately owned and for various reasons became available for sale, the Roja Mutiah Tamil collection and the Urdu Research Centre collection. Neither were specifically newspaper collections but newspapers are included. The materials were purchased with funds from participating US and British libraries and agencies. The materials themselves were donated to suitable Indian institutions. This is a fine solution in those rare instances when materials become available for purchase. It requires on-the-ground knowledge, powerful powers of persuasion, superb grantsmanship abilities and diplomatic skills in cobbling together the necessary financing from libraries and foundations. The South Asia group is very fortunate to have James Nye of the Regenstein Library at the University of Chicago and that University's support of Nye's activities. This is an example of libraries supporting the "greater good" for somewhat minimal immediate local gain.

As I have indicated above, what remains in that 55% or 1,350 unfiled titles is largely bits and pieces scattered among various collections. Individually they may not have much intellectual impact nor would filming them individually have much economic appeal to commercial sources. But there are certainly a number of possible collections that could be formed that could be financially attractive and academically useful, along the lines of Research Publications collection Early English newspapers or the collection of Publications proscribed by the

Government of India edited by Graham Shaw and Mary Lloyd which includes pamphlets, broadsides, even single issues of newspapers and magazines. Some possibilities include: missionary papers, Catholic periodicals, Jewish papers, publications edited by or intended for women, sports papers, 19th century business and economic news, military papers and diaspora papers particularly those in the Caribbean, Mauritius and East Africa.

To conclude, a great deal has been done in preserving South Asian news sources, but there is still literally a world of material left awaiting our efforts.