

Immigrants With Ink in Their Blood

By **TRIPTI LAHIRI**

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At the Kalmilata grocery and fish market on Church Avenue in the Kensington section of Brooklyn, the stack of Bengali-language weekly newspapers by the cash register had been thoroughly rifled through.

A couple of copies remained of seven or eight newspapers, but one was already sold out. As customers came in asking for The Weekly Bangalee or Thikana, or to peruse the headlines about the floods and violence in Bangladesh, Mohammed Kanruzzaman, 32, regarded them benignly.

"When they come from work they stand here and read and then they go home," said Mr. Kanruzzaman, the owner of the grocery store-cum-makeshift reading room, who claims to read all of the Bengali weekly newspapers that are published in the New York area. Advertisement

That's no mean feat. In the last decade, one or two new Bengali-language newspapers have appeared every year in New York City. Out of tiny offices dotted throughout Queens, and often with minuscule staffs, almost a dozen newspapers now issue forth every week.

So now in New York City, more newspapers are printed in Bengali than in any other South Asian language. The City Planning Department estimates that there are 38,500 Urdu speakers and 47,500 Bengali speakers in the city, but Bengali newspapers outnumber Urdu newspapers two to one.

"There are certain communities that are very word-oriented, very publication-oriented," said Juana Ponce de León, editor of the Independent Press Association project, Voices That Must Be Heard, which translates articles from the ethnic press into English.

Kazi Shamsul Hoque, editor of The Akhon Samoy, agreed.

"Bangladeshis have very good reading tendencies," said Mr. Kazi, who worked as an editor of a labor newspaper in Bangladesh and now owns a wireless store in Jackson Heights. "They are buying almost every newspaper."

Exhibit A is Fazlu Haque, who was reading The Weekly Darpon on the Q train last month.

"One doesn't finish the news with one paper," said Mr. Haque, who was looking for information about a bomb explosion at an opposition rally in Dhaka. "Tomorrow I



Justin Lane for The New York Times.

Mohammed Shafayed, left, and Mohammed Kanruzzaman, looking over a Bengali-language newspaper at Mr. Kanruzzaman's store in Brooklyn.

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will buy a new one."

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The newspapers are published so that there are at least one or two fresh ones everyday, although the editors say this is accidental. The oldest of New York's Bangladeshi newspapers, Thikana, was started in 1990 by M. M. Shaheen, an immigrant who had worked as a waiter at Windows on the World and went on to run his own restaurants.

Mr. Shaheen began putting out the newspaper with the help of people who had worked as journalists in Bangladesh. Two of them, Kowshik Ahmed and Mohammad Mahbubur Rahman, now publish rival newspapers, The Weekly Bangalee and The Weekly Bangla Patrika, respectively. While none of the dozen newspapers' circulations have been audited, Thikana, which has the largest New York staff, claims a circulation of 15,000. At grocery stores in Kensington, a heavily Bangladeshi area, shop owners said that Thikana sold the best.

All of the newspapers are tabloids that feature news from Bangladesh, and most cost a dollar. Popular stories involve immigration news, stories about religious toleration or dissension, crimes against Bangladeshis and the festivities of the many regional associations.

"The main focus of these community newspapers is not the news, but the news that people want," said Abedin Quader, publisher of one of the newest papers, The Kagoj Bangla News Weekly. "What is the news value of what happens in Bangladesh and how two ministers are fighting? It's nothing. But these things are very important to those who buy these newspapers."

Some of the papers carry the syndicated advice column of a cleric in Bangladesh. Thikana has a column about Washington politics. All of the them have a literature page, which showcases poems and fiction written by the readers.

"Bengali people like literature," said Mr. Monjur Hossain, the vice president of marketing at Thikana and the owner of Darpon, Thikana's sister paper. In fact, he said, they demand it: "Otherwise it is not a full newspaper. They will say you are showing disrespect for writers."

Because of the respect Bengalis have for the written word, many writers and publishers want to be in the newspapers to increase their social standing.



Justin Lane for The New York Times

Some of the Bengali-language newspapers for sale at the Kalmilata market. After leaving work, many people "stand here and read and then they go home," said Mohammed Kanruzzaman, the owner of the store.

NYT Store



Photo: Newspaper Row, circa 1906

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