

Media Looking Beyond Crisis?

The Urdu/Pakistani Press in New York after 9/11

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We know well by now that the origins of the crisis that we are familiar with as '9/11' predate the 11th of September 2001. We also know that the crisis continues well after the 11th of September 2001 in Afghanistan, in Iraq and in Pakistan. There has been some amount of discussion in all sorts of media in the US about the background, as well as the fallout, of 9/11 not only in New York, Washington and London, but all across the world, especially in terms of what is called the 'War Against Terror'. But one of the things that has remained outside the purview of the mainstream US media is the accumulating sense of unease and crisis within New York City, in areas like Brooklyn and Queens, where Pakistani immigrants, be they on Atlantic Avenue or in Jackson Heights, see themselves located squarely at the frontline of the skirmishes that mark the everyday domestic reality of what is called the 'War against Terror'.

Mainstream media in the US, be they the television networks – NBC, ABC, CBS, FOX, CNN – or the major newspapers, ignore the persistent assaults on the civil liberties of Pakistani immigrants in America, especially in New York. *The New York Times*, to be fair, does carry the odd report, but it does so in a way that reminds me of the way the Karachi Police (whom I often saw in action as I was growing up in Pakistan) would show up at the scene of a crime always late enough to ensure that nothing could be done, so much so that you got accustomed to presuming their complicity in the incidents that they were supposed to redress.

Since 9/11 I have been following and translating stories from seven weekly Urdu publications in New York for “Voices That Must Be Heard”, a weekly news service that puts out news compilations drawn from alternative news sources. There are almost 300 publications in New York City, including various kinds of papers and broadsheets put out by a diverse array of small, neighbourhood, ethnic, community and the independent presses. “Voices”, a project of the Independent Press Association, chooses stories from precisely such non-corporate sources. The stories that I followed and translated were of FBI/INS raids on the homes, places of work, shops, offices and businesses of Pakistani immigrants, of detentions and deportations, and of the effect of the Special Registration Law and the Patriot Act on the Pakistani community in the city.

It would be accurate to say that prior to 9/11, the Pakistani Press in New York, which has names like *Pakistan Post*, *Pakistan News*, *New York Awam* (*New York Masses*) and *Sada-e-Pakistan* (*Voice of Pakistan*) (all Urdu) and the *Muslims Weekly* (English) are generally owned by men who have other businesses which tend to be tax consultancies, real-estate brokerage and travel agencies. The papers primarily serve as public relations fronts for these gentlemen who also position themselves as ‘community leaders’. They carry reports of community events, social functions, festivals and entertainment galas. In the months that followed 9/11, however, it was this incredibly small, and often small-minded, press in New York that found itself at the forefront of having to report and highlight many issues of public interest, such as growing attacks on civil liberties, racial profiling, post war reconstruction, the effect of the crisis on the deeply interdependent nature of the world economy, capital and labour flows, migration and perceptions of ‘America’ both in this country and in others.

Whereas these papers had previously carried op-eds almost exclusively about politics in Pakistan,¹ after September 11th, one saw a surge in local reporting reflecting on FBI/INS raids, the rights of detainees (both legal and illegal), the effect of the ‘War against terror’, the local economy of Coney Island, and a new interest in the cause of civil liberties activists who were from outside the community. There was also a very vital level of op-ed writing on American foreign policy and the globalization of the post 9/11 conflict.

The Pakistani press in New York became a crucial smoke detector for something burning in US society. Topics that are currently haunting discussions in the mainstream media, ranging from the US administration’s assault on civil liberties to the subject of reconstruction in Iraq, first became visible in the Urdu press. It was there that I first read a columnist wondering why the detainees in Guantanamo Bay didn’t have rights that are available to anyone else in the territorial United States, which is essentially the question before the US Supreme Court today. Again it was in the New York Pakistani press that a writer asked a question concerning Afghanistan: “So, when will reconstruction end?”

I would like to give a more detailed sense of the news that the papers carried. Below is a selection of headlines and copy that I translated from the New York Urdu papers post 9/11.²

Authorities express surprise at the numbers of Pakistanis calling the INS on each other

M. R. Farnikh, Pakistan Post , 17 April 2002.

Ahmed Intiaz is one of those hundreds of thousands of people who come to the United States dreaming about a happy and prosperous life. Before September 11th, irrespective of his legal status, he was spending a quiet life earning an honourable living for his household.

Two months after September 11th, he was picked up from his home in New Jersey. His apartment was raided by the FBI, the INS and a squad of Special Forces. At around 2:30 a.m. his wife, three kids and himself were awakened by a continuous ringing of the doorbell. When he got out and saw the officials, he panicked. He had previously never encountered a police officer at his door. The sight of the officers of three agencies belonging to the most powerful country in the world on his doorstep completely unnerved him. The officers took him to his bedroom and searched his home for two hours. He swore upon his innocence, pleaded with them. They arrested him.

Like hundreds of those arrested, Intiaz was found to have no links with the atrocity of September 11th. Freed of terrorism charges he was transferred from FBI detention to the INS centre. There are people in the INS centre detained for seven months now, without charges, because the law allows that. Intiaz found himself charged under immigration law. He was found to be in violation of a deportation order from five years ago.

Intiaz is now facing deportation. He has only a few more days in this county.

He has recently found out why he was arrested. A few years ago an argument with a friend over a trivial matter became an open sore between them. They stopped talking and Intiaz forgot about the matter over time. Taking advantage of the post-September 11 atmosphere, the former friend told the authorities that Intiaz was engaged in suspicious activities. The authorities were on a war footing and acted so.

Who can the community of Pakistanis living illegally in the United States turn to?

M.R. Farnikh, Pakistan Post , 1 May 2002.

The White House, the Congress, and the army establishment in Pakistan are all projecting themselves as fighting the just war against terrorism. Meanwhile, it is the Pakistani community in the United States that is feeling persecuted, voiceless and abandoned.

A few days ago, at a raid on a Pakistani family living in Queens, agents explained that the head of the household's name was somewhat similar to the name of a suspected terrorist! An officer present during the raid told the family that the authorities had every right to pursue any lead in the fight against terrorism.

Protest against detentions by New York Taxi Workers Alliance, Coney Island Avenue Project, and 50 various organizations

Mohsin Zaheer, Sada-e-Pakistan, N Y, 19 June 2002.

The protest took place on June 15th on Coney Island Avenue, in Brooklyn, where high concentrations of people of Pakistani origin live. The crowd was large and diverse except that few Pakistanis attended. There were at most two dozen Pakistanis. Spokespeople from the Brooklyn Mela Committee, Pak-American Merchants Association and Makki Mosque were among those who refused to attend the march, saying that protests in their own neighbourhood bring greater risks of discrimination.

The victims of the War on Terrorism are Pakistanis living here, as the crackdown against illegal immigrants continues

Pakistan Post , 29 July 2002.

American officials are continuing their campaign against US-based Pakistanis, citizens of an important American ally in the War On Terrorism. More than 1,700 Pakistanis have been detained in this county on immigration charges; many have been deported.

The FBI and INS are focusing on Brooklyn, where Pakistanis live and their businesses are based. Authorities are knocking on Pakistanis doors late at night, questioning the residents, searching their houses and arresting those they find to be undocumented immigrants. Some report that officials are seizing even legal documents of people they question.

The special relationship between America and Pakistan

Ifti Nasim, News Pakistan, 25 September 2002.

(Ifti Nasim is a well-known humorist, Urdu poet and literary critic.)

In one of her poems, Sylvia Plath talks of a foot that was trapped in a black shoe for thirty years, poor and white, barely daring to breathe. That foot is Pakistan, which has suffered for thirty years in the black shoe of American-sponsored military dictatorships.

A Pakistani writes from an American jail

Azeem M. Mian, Pakistan Post, 9 October 2002.

A friend of the editors of Pakistan Post received a letter from Zubair Hanafi, which has been forwarded to me and I am including in this column. Zubair's address is the Brooklyn Detention Center. His prisoner number is 67898053. The letter bears an Aug. 15.

postmark, meaning the letter has taken almost two months to get to me. Let us hope that Zubair is safe, either released in the United States or deported to Pakistan.

Few Pakistanis register on first day

News Pakistan, 22 January 2003.

On the first two days of registration, few Pakistanis have showed up: forty on the first day in New York (127 in the first two days); in Chicago, 70 appeared on the first day.

An estimated 600,000 Pakistanis live in the United States, 200,000 in New York State alone. Most are undocumented, have incomplete legal status, or are under due process. If the registration requirements are enforced to the letter, an estimated 400,000 will be forced to leave the country.

Farewell United States, all hope is with Canada?

Pervaiz Ranay, Sada-e-Pakistan, NY, 12 February 2003.

Pakistanis fleeing the United States into Canada at the border at Niagara Falls are finding refuge at Viva Locasa, a church within US territory, just 15 minutes drive from the Canadian border. Most of the refugees are in terrible need since they left everything behind in their panicked flight.

Immediately following 9/11, the Urdu/Pakistani press in New York rose to the occasion. But where is the press now? How is it doing? Are they still sniffing in the wind for what has not yet appeared to anyone else? Or are these small community papers only good at the rapid, almost real-time dissemination of what a crisis feels like 'from the inside' only when the crisis is upon their heads? Further, have the intellectual and cultural horizons of the world that these papers present to their readers undergone any transformations?

In terms of cultural reporting, before 9/11 there would be no writing in the op-ed pages of almost all the Urdu press that challenged mainstream, middle-class Pakistani Punjabi social mores. There was very little that one could see reflected about the transformations in a new immigrant community, or the awareness of a new generation of immigrants, or of

second-generation Pakistani-Americans and their attitudes, and almost no new voices in the op-ed pages. In fact, more than one paper carried the prolific writings of a dead columnist. Maulana Maudoodi, a conservative intellectual and essayist and founder of the *Jamaat-e-Islami in Pakistan*, who in his lifetime wrote about everything under the sun – on marriage, death, cinema, literature, the economy, the upbringing of children, living in the west as a minority, and in the east as a majority, the separation of church and state – but who was, nonetheless, dead, was published with monotonous regularity in several of these papers.

However, it needs to be pointed out that at least two papers – *The Pakistan News* (Urdu) and the *Muslims Weekly* (English) – are positioning themselves editorially, each in different but interesting ways, to the challenges of being interlocutors in post-9/11 New York. I believe the creation and growth of these publications reflects the ways that 9/11 has forced members of the Pakistani-American community to redefine what it means to be Pakistani-American, as well as what it means to be a Muslim-American. The fact that the *Muslims Weekly* is an English language publication indicates an intention to move beyond the confines of a specifically Pakistani identity. It has an Israeli peace activist writing for it, which means that it is positioning itself in a different kind of role from what one is accustomed to seeing within the Muslim community in the United States. Its circulation jumped from 5000 pre-9/11 to 25000. Of its five paid staff, three are non-Muslim.

The Pakistan News, meanwhile, makes the effort of translating articles from the liberal English press in the United States into Urdu. Moreover, it is the first Urdu paper to give prominent column space to women (and not just in the 'Women's Pages'), to regularly publish an openly gay Urdu poet based in Chicago, and to foreground a generally liberal and progressive political/cultural agenda.

Barring exceptions like *The Pakistan News* (Urdu) and the *Muslims Weekly* (English) most Urdu/Pakistani publications in New York have not really evolved beyond the immediate need of reporting what affects the Pakistani community on a day-to-day level. Further, they are in a sense undergoing their own peculiar crisis of 'over-stimulation and under-statement', of exaggeration and exhaustion, and certainly of (self) censorship. They are not reporting on the alliances that are forming between activist and immigrant communities. The work of the New York Immigration Coalition, Asian American Legal Defense Fund, and the American Civil Liberties Union remains un-commented on, and un-analyzed. If at all it is reported, it is done so in the blandest way, by reproducing information from a press release. Nor is there any attempt to flesh out the personalities in these organizations and the issues that they concern themselves with. There was no analysis of the coalitions that made possible the Immigrant Workers Freedom Ride³ in October 2003.

The Urdu/Pakistani press in New York did ask key questions, but it has not been able to follow through on answering those questions. Severe resource constraints, which ensure that a journalist who writes for these publications never has the luxury to research and follow a story in order to write a well-rounded feature, or even keep to one beat, are certainly responsible for this state of affairs. But given that the reality that the readers of these papers face is a complex and challenging one, one hopes that at least some of the publications will find the wherewithal to evolve beyond their current limitations

This essay is based on a presentation given at the Sixth Sustainable Development Conference (11th to 13th December, 2003) organized by SDPI, Islamabad.

All translations from Urdu by the author.

NOTES

1. Mostly about the pros and cons of the Musharraf regime in Pakistan and the pronouncements from exile of the two civilian ex-Prime ministers – Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto.
2. For more information, and the full text of these articles see the archive of "Voices That Must Be Heard" (Voices), the weekly web-digest of the Independent Press Association, New York, at <http://www.indypressny.org>
3. The Immigrant Workers Freedom Ride (a campaign to endorse and support the civil liberties of all immigrant workers in the United States) ended with a huge day-long celebration of America's Immigrants in New York's Flushing Meadows Park on October 2003. More than 125,00 labour activists and community supporters joined the nearly 1,000 immigrant workers who had travelled all over the US in an unprecedented effort to put immigration issues squarely on the national political agenda for 2004 and mobilize USA-wide support for changes in immigration policies. For more information, see <http://www.ifwr.org>