

Special Section: Essays on Nationalism, Conflict and Media

Journalism Without Horizons: Media Power and the Erosion of Cosmopolitan Reporting in South Asia

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Abstract: This essay examines the structural barriers to cosmopolitan journalism in South Asia, arguing that the region's journalism must contend with three overlapping geographies: colonial cartographies, post-Partition sovereignties, and civilizational continuities. Rather than translating these layered realities, journalism has become a site where borders are rhetorically hardened by political, commercial, and platform logics. Within the sub-continent, Indian journalism occupies a dual position: simultaneously subject to structural pressures yet disproportionately influential due to scale and platform dominance. By treating ultra-nationalism as a structural feature rather than episodic distortion, the essay reveals how media organizations align editorial agendas with state narratives for survival. It shifts attention from "headline wars" to the quieter erosion of journalism's humanistic function, offering an accounting of what has been lost: journalism as a tool for translation, restraint, and moral imagination across contested borders.

Keywords: Cosmopolitan journalism, Nationalism and news media, Cross-border reporting, South Asia, Media and conflict

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South Asia is a region where borders were never merely drawn; they were argued into existence and never fully resolved. In the 1947 Partition of British India, hurried late-colonial cartography produced new states through mass displacement and violence, leaving borders that were politically sovereign yet historically unsettled (Zamindar, 2007; van Schendel, 2005). Journalism once moved among these uncertainties with a certain caution, aware that reporting conflict here required more than accuracy. It required translation, between peoples separated by sovereignty yet bound by language, history, and custom; between pasts that refused to remain past and presents that pretended otherwise (Talbot & Singh, 2009; Chatterji, 2013; Thussu, 2018).

That burden has not vanished. This essay argues that what has thinned is the willingness, or the institutional capacity, to carry it. Across South Asia, journalism has quietly reoriented itself. It has learned to speak in a way where borders are no longer explained but affirmed, where neighboring societies appear less as interlocutors than as abstractions, and where ambiguity itself comes to feel professionally suspect. This change cannot be explained by ideology alone. It reflects a convergence of incentives that reward certainty and penalize skeptical restraint. As has happened elsewhere (Ozerturk, 2022), political authorities manage access to power as a way to encourage compliant journalism. Market-driven journalism favors speed over depth, recognition over understanding (Fengler & Ruß-Mohl, 2008). Platforms reward alignment and affect over detachment or deliberation (Hastuti et al., 2025). Together, these forces have altered how journalistic authority is recognized (Maheshwari & Sparks, 2021; Aneez et al., 2019): less through judgment and verification, more through performance and positioning (van Dijck et al., 2018).

As a result of these trends in South Asia, what has been quietly foreclosed is journalism as an act of translation, restraint as a tool against escalation, and moral imagination as a means of seeing lives across borders without demanding national allegiance. In a region where memory remains easily pressed into political service and geography is unsettled, the loss of these habits carries consequences that extend far beyond the newsroom.

Cosmopolitan journalism, as theorized by Silverstone (2007) and Hannerz (1996), involves an ethical commitment to representing lives across borders without privileging national sovereignty as the primary frame of moral concern. It requires what Hannerz describes as an openness toward divergent cultural experiences—a willingness to engage with difference rather than domesticate it. In South Asia, this orientation manifested not as neutrality, which was impossible in a region where borders carried the weight of trauma and loss, but as a practiced attentiveness to how political separation and social continuity could both be acknowledged without one foreclosing recognition of the other.

Three overlapping geographies

Journalism in South Asia does not operate on settled terrain. It moves across three overlapping geographies that rarely align; each imposing contradictory demands on public narration.

The first is colonial. Borders across South Asia were drawn late, hurriedly, and with limited regard for social or historical continuity. They were administrative solutions to imperial withdrawal rather than organic settlements of political community. As a result, they remain unusually exposed to dispute, not only in territorial terms, but in memory and language. Maps here are not inert objects; they are arguments about belonging, loss, and legitimacy. Journalism inherited these borders as facts, but never escaped their contested origins (Talbot & Singh, 2009; Chatterji, 2013).

The second geography emerged from rupture. States born out of Partition have been acutely anxious about questions of territorial integrity and national cohesion, particularly along their margins. Borders became symbols not merely of jurisdiction but of survival. In Bangladesh, sovereignty itself was forged through violent birth in 1971 (Zamindar, 2007; Raghavan, 2013), leaving behind a political memory in which borders are inseparable from loss and coercion. Journalism learned, formally and informally, to affirm sovereignty rather than interrogate it, to treat borders as sacrosanct rather than historical, and to regard ambiguity as weakness. In moments of crisis, this pressure intensifies, but it does not disappear once the crisis passes.

The third geography is older and more elusive. It consists of civilizational and social continuities that long predate modern states and continue to outlive them: shared languages, religious circuits, kinship networks, literary traditions, and habits of travel and exchange. These continuities do not deny borders, but they complicate them. They routinely ignore official lines and remind people of shared worlds that predate separation (Hannerz, 1996; Thussu, 2018). They make it possible for people to recognize themselves in others officially designated as foreign. For journalism, this geography once offered a humanistic counterweight, a reminder that political separation did not erase social familiarity.

This complex and contradictory geographical context meant that journalism's most demanding labor lay in translation, rendering political conflict intelligible without flattening historical depth, and reporting sovereignty without extinguishing moral imagination.

Journalism once attempted, unevenly and imperfectly, to hold these layers together. One of the earliest examples emerged during the decades surrounding decolonization, when writers and editors across the subcontinent imagined solidarities that exceeded newly hardened borders. The Progressive Writers' Movement (Sahni, 1986), active from the 1930s through the post-Partition years, sustained cross-border dialogue through newspapers, journals, and reportage that foregrounded social

justice and human dignity over territorial anxiety. Figures such as Faiz Ahmad Faiz and Mulk Raj Anand wrote across linguistic, religious, and national divides, assuming that political separation need not foreclose moral recognition. Their journalism and literary interventions did not deny sovereignty, but they refused to treat it as the primary horizon of concern. That refusal, quiet, contested, and often punished, rested on a crucial assumption: that readers could recognize themselves in lives across borders without mediation by the flag.

Such cosmopolitan impulses were never securely housed. Vestiges remain. But, those who attempt to sustain such labor are vilified as anti-national. Contemporary journalism increasingly privileges a single geography, that of sovereign assertion, treating borders as settled facts rather than historical claims, and ambiguity as a weakness to be overcome rather than a condition to live with.

Structural pressures: Why cosmopolitan journalism collapsed

The retreat of cosmopolitan journalism in South Asia is often explained as a failure of nerve or ethics: a moral shrinking, an editorial capitulation to nationalism. Such explanations flatter journalists' sense of agency, but they misdiagnose the problem. What has occurred is less a fall than a compression. Journalism now finds itself compressed between political power, economic fragility, and technological redesign. The result is not ideological conversion, but a structural incapacity to sustain cross-border moral imagination at scale.

Politically, journalism has been drawn more tightly into projects of national legitimacy at precisely the moment when states themselves feel exposed. In a region marked by unresolved borders and asymmetric conflicts, national narratives are not merely preferred; they are firmly enforced. The growing acceptance of reciprocal blocking of neighboring countries' news websites, publicly criticized yet institutionally tolerated, illustrates how measures once treated as exceptional are increasingly absorbed into the routine management of national media space (The Wire, 2026). What distinguishes the current moment is that alignment no longer depends on overt repression. Editors and reporters internalize the logic in advance. Certain framings come to feel socially responsible, others destabilizing. Journalism learns to close ranks before it is asked to do so (Bhat, 2023; Kumar & Bhat, 2026).

Markets narrow the viable as much as politics narrows the permissible. Cross-border reporting is expensive, slow, and difficult to monetize. Its rewards are cumulative and ethical rather than immediate and measurable.

Therefore, cosmopolitan journalism in South Asian news organizations often depended on cross-subsidies (Jeffrey, 2000; Ninan, 2007), in which commercially successful reporting sustained slower or less marketable work assigned by editors who held on to the belief, never universally shared, that audiences could be educated

rather than pandered to. This labor was sustained by institutions that treated time as a resource rather than a liability. Foreign desks, regional bureaus, and editorial hierarchies slowed the movement from event to interpretation. Context was integral rather than an optional supplement.

Now, news organizations operate under chronic financial strain. With the near collapse of public-interest journalism's financial model and the platformisation of news (Mukherjee, 2019), the practices that sustained cosmopolitan coverage of South Asia have thinned and retreated. Regional specialists and foreign desks thin out, replaced by generalists calibrated for speed. Editorial style quietly favors declarative headlines over conditional ones, certainty over context. The labor of translation has come to appear inefficient. Explaining why borders were contested yielded diminishing returns. In its place emerged declarative reporting: stories that affirmed position rather than explored tension. Nationalism ceased to be episodic. It became built into the system (Rajagopal, 2001; Chakravartty & Roy, 2015): a permanent condition of news production rather than a temporary response to crisis (van Dijck et al., 2018).

In this environment, journalism learns to anticipate approval rather than test understanding. Editors recognize which frames move and which stall; reporters internalize what will be commissioned, promoted, or quietly dropped. Over time, the distinction between editorial judgment and audience anticipation blurs. Once a framing establishes itself as both politically safe and commercially successful, it acquires the authority of common sense. Alternative accounts are not rebutted; they are rendered implausible.

Unlike print or broadcast media, which operated within bounded markets and finite attention, platform economics reward viral velocity and algorithmic legibility, privileging content that travels cleanly and penalizing the friction of translation, delay, or contextual density. The time available for translation, historical, linguistic, or ethical, shrinks as news cycles accelerate and metrics reward immediacy (Rodrigues, 2019). Journalism oriented toward explaining contested histories becomes structurally ill-suited to systems that monetize speed, affect, and familiarity rather than judgment or depth. Patriotic narratives travel faster and convert more reliably into attention.

None of these shifts announce themselves as ideological (Brady et al., 2023). But together, they render ambiguity inefficient and explanation professionally risky, until borders come to feel not argued but given. Cosmopolitan reporting's marginalization feels natural rather than enforced.

What gives this shift its durability is the way these forces now reinforce one another. Political alignment improves market performance; market performance enhances platform visibility; platform visibility feeds back into political legitimacy (van Dijck et al., 2018; Zuboff, 2019). Narratives that conform to sovereign expectation are

rewarded simultaneously by access, attention, and amplification. Those that resist encounter friction at every stage of circulation.

Asymmetry and contagion: Critical incidents

These dynamics do not operate evenly across South Asia. India's media ecosystem exerts a disproportionate influence on how regional disputes are framed and circulated. Indian journalism is not exempt from the same structural pressures reshaping media across the region. But because India's media ecosystem is vast, linguistically expansive, and algorithmically privileged, its adaptations acquire regional consequence. This asymmetry is structural, produced by scale, platform dominance, and market reach. Neighboring media systems adapt defensively to this gravitational pull (Thussu, 2018; van Dijck et al., 2018). Indian journalism is thus simultaneously constrained by the same forces as its peers, yet disproportionately influential in setting the terms under which regional narratives harden.

One consequence is that minor incidents acquire regional significance before their contours are understood. In early 2024, disparaging social-media remarks by junior Maldivian ministers about an Indian prime ministerial visit to Lakshadweep ignited a platform-first crisis. Influencer-anchors and celebrities transformed the spat into a performative boycott, while traditional newsrooms followed viral cues rather than setting terms of interpretation. The pattern illustrates what Tufekci (2017) identified in networked protest movements and what Udupa (2019) observed in Indian digital nationalism: once platform dynamics dominate, journalism loses its capacity to mediate. It can only transmit contagion.

A different pattern appears in Nepal during flare-ups over border maps. Complex historical disputes are rapidly converted into viral cartography—assertive visuals designed for circulation rather than explanation. These flashes draw their charge from memories of a pre-1816 territorial imagination, before colonial compression fixed Nepal's subordination within a regional order that still shadows contemporary claims. Newsrooms compete to produce declarative representations of sovereignty, while the older work of contextualizing shared histories recedes. Questioning timing or political utility becomes a test not of accuracy, but of patriotism.

The most consequential illustration emerged in January 2026 in relations between India and Bangladesh. Online agitation within India, triggered not by an interstate dispute but by the inclusion of a Bangladeshi player in an Indian Premier League franchise team owned by a Muslim Indian film star, was rapidly reframed as a matter of national propriety. News debates and influencer commentary laundered domestic exclusion into external sensitivity, hardening borders rhetorically (Reuters, 2026). The subsequent removal of the player did not resolve the episode so much as ratify the viral framing, leaving Bangladesh to respond to a climate not of its making. The damage was not spectacular, but cumulative: a thinning of trust, hardened

public attitudes, and a quiet erosion of Indian soft power, with diplomacy arriving late to a conversation already settled through repetition and alignment.

These are not discrete failures. They illustrate a shared structural logic: media systems adjusting to asymmetry by hardening their own stories. The impact on relations between peoples is cumulative rather than immediate. Neighboring societies come to appear less as historically entangled communities than as symbolic antagonists, useful for domestic mobilization, stripped of social depth (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017; Banaji & Bhat, 2019; Freedom House, 2024).

Thin countercurrents and fragile residues

The liquidation of the cosmopolitan horizon is not a historical inevitability. As mentioned earlier, South Asia's media history contains thinner counter-currents of regional humanism that once moved through journalism and literary life, never dominant, never secure, but institutionally visible and morally legible.

War, censorship, exile, and the consolidation of national media markets steadily narrowed the space in which such practices could be sustained. In the decades between the Progressive Writers' Movement and the digital age, cross-border journalism survived primarily in academic exchanges and diaspora publications (Bose, 2011), largely invisible to mainstream media markets.

Yet the impulse resurfaced intermittently, often in altered institutional forms. In the early 2010s, legacy media themselves attempted a top-down experiment in humanistic engagement. *Aman Ki Asha* (Hope for Peace), a joint initiative of India's *Times of India* and Pakistan's *Jang Group*, sought to mobilize commercial scale in the service of people-to-people diplomacy (Rid, 2020). For a brief period, it created a curated buffer zone within which cultural exchange, joint reportage, and restrained political commentary were possible. Its decline was instructive. The project proved commercially fragile and politically exposed, revealing how high-velocity platform logics render slow peace-building both risky and dispensable. What collapsed was not goodwill, but institutional patience.

Other countercurrents took shape closer to the ground, often outside metropolitan newsrooms. In India, *Khabar Lahariya*, led by rural women reporters, built a journalism rooted in local accountability rather than performative loyalty. Reporting in vernacular languages and grounded in lived experience, it resisted nationalist spectacle not through overt opposition but through method (Sinha & Malik, 2020): proximity, persistence, and attention to everyday injustice. Its significance lies less in scale than in discipline. It demonstrates that humanistic journalism need not announce itself as cosmopolitan to function as such.

Taken together, these cases trace an arc rather than a movement. South Asian media history records a gradual narrowing of horizons: from mid-century literary internationalism, to institutional peace-building experiments, and finally to dispersed, practice-based refusals in the digital present. Cosmopolitan journalism in the region was never a Western import. It was a regional tradition: thin, uneven, and chronically under-housed.

What survives today are residues rather than infrastructures. A bilingual newsletter. A photo essay that lingers on aftermath rather than provocation. A delayed report that names civilians where slogans would suffice. These gestures do not restore what has been lost. They function instead as acts of discipline (Thomas, 2010): professional refusals undertaken without expectation of scale, protection, or reward (Chadha, 2024). This suggests not that humanistic journalism was defeated by stronger arguments, but that it was deprived of the institutional time, editorial authority, and economic patience it required to endure.

Conclusion: Holding the line without horizon

In this reading, the retreat of cosmopolitan journalism in South Asia is not a moral lapse. It is a structural transformation that cannot be reversed through better intentions or renewed courage alone. What has been lost is not simply a genre of reporting, but a habit of orientation: the capacity to translate across borders without first demanding allegiance. The disappearance of horizons does not, however, mean the disappearance of responsibility or agency. Journalists continue to work inside constrained architectures, but can make small, cumulative decisions about language, framing, and silence. These decisions rarely cohere into a movement, and they do not restore what once existed. They can function instead as small acts of restraint: choosing not to inflame, allowing a headline to wait, naming civilians where slogans would suffice.

What persists of cosmopolitan practice today carries forward a professional memory of what journalism once understood itself to be, by individuals and small collectives without expectation of scale or protection. Such practices do not challenge the system; they endure at its margins, preserving habits of restraint, translation, and hesitation that would otherwise disappear entirely. Their value lies not in their capacity to overcome the mainstream, but in their refusal to let structural necessity become moral finality. Absent changes in the conditions that reward speed, alignment, and affirmation, cosmopolitan journalism survives not as a recoverable form but as a marginal practice: necessary, fragile, and insufficient.

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