



The *Washington Post*'s Rajiv Chandrasekaran interviewing Iraqis

COURTESY RAJIV CHANDRASEKARAN

■ COVER: SOUTH ASIANS IN THE MEDIA

PRINT JOURNALISM: RISING STARS

South Asian print journalists' dual heritage works in their favor but one of the biggest frustrations for them is the limited networking opportunities. Nevertheless, many of them are thriving and contributing to prestigious U.S. media outlets.

BY RICHA GULATI

Chances are that you don't pay much attention to bylines in your newspaper. Next time, take a closer look. The names of many writers may sound more familiar than you think. They are of South Asian lineage.

People of Indian sub-continent origin are making great strides in nearly every profession in the U.S. Print journalism is no exception and a small group of South Asian print journalists is thriving and contributing to several prestigious U.S. media outlets. One of the prominent members of this group is Rajiv Chandrasekaran,

who became Assistant Managing Editor of the *Washington Post* at the young age of 32. Chandrasekaran wanted to work at a newspaper ever since he was in the 5th grade. "I credit my desire to reruns of a 1970s television show called *Lou Grant*, which followed the life of a curmudgeonly city editor," he says. "Working at a newspaper seemed pretty cool."

Chandrasekaran started a newspaper at his middle school and served as editor-in-chief of his high school and college newspapers. Yet, despite his obvious passion for writing, he admits that not only did his parents regard journalism as a hobby, he too thought that he would pursue a career in science. "As a college freshman, I majored in chemical engineering, thinking it would make my parents happy. As it turns out not only did I hate it, I also wasn't very good at it," he admits.

Science was a struggle but managing the *Stanford Daily* was not. After his sophomore year, he decided to follow his

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heart and pursue journalism. An internship at the *Washington Post* led to a full-time position and he worked his way up the ladder from the Metro Section to foreign correspondent, covering everything from the Olympics in Sydney to the war in Borneo, where he would literally see heads on stakes being carried around by fighters. Chandrasekaran eventually found himself in Baghdad in 2003, often in dangerous circumstances, covering the American occupation of Iraq for 18 months. A subsequent book and fellowship was followed by a senior position in the *Post* hierarchy.

Chandrasekaran regards his foreign correspondent years as the equivalent of a graduate education in journalism. "I was immersing myself in other cultures, learning about other political systems, and doing all of the reading one might do for a masters in Asian studies, and more," he says. He honed his writing craft not in the classroom but at student newspapers. As a result, he believes a degree in English or journalism is no substitute for the rigors of on-job training. "You learn journalism by actually doing it, not by taking lots of communications or English classes," Chandrasekaran says. "Many of the best journalists are experts in the fields that they are most passionate about – be it arts or sciences – and have the ability to ask the right questions and write clearly."

Renu Rayasam, associate editor of *Money and Business* at *U.S. News and World Report*, agrees that studying journalism in a class does not necessarily lead to writing success. "It's more important to be able to cover topics without preparation, ask the right questions and analyze issues," she says, noting that her own background is in political economy. In her opinion, many managers in journalism care more about finding a business reporter who is well versed in business matters or a health reporter with a biology background than someone with a journalism degree.

Dr. Darshak Sanghavi is proof that a journalism background, while helpful, is not as necessary as passion and industry knowledge for a successful writing career. The Harvard-trained pediatric cardiologist is currently an assistant professor at the University of Massachusetts medical center. He also regularly contributes to

the *New York Times*, *Boston Globe*, *Parents* magazine, NPR's *All Things Considered*, and the *Today Show*. Sanghavi never intended to become a writer but fell into the profession by accident.

During his first year of medical residency in 1997, the trial of Louise Woodward – a British *au pair* who was accused and eventually convicted of killing an eight-month-old baby in her charge – was going on in Massachusetts. Sanghavi was fascinated by it but considered the reporting of the medical aspects of the case to be inadequate. "I and other doctors at the hospital just knew that the kinds of injuries that the baby sustained were consistent with abuse. But the media didn't get the medical facts right when reporting the story," he says. Thinking that his medical training made him uniquely qualified, Sanghavi decided to report on the story himself.

He made use of elective coursework to interview the lawyers, doctors and cops involved in the case. Confident that it was a good story, Sanghavi sent it off to the *New Yorker*, but breaking into the profession proved more difficult than he had imagined. The *New Yorker* – like most other big magazines he pitched to – rejected his article and it eventually ran in a small-

COURTESY VIKAS BAJAJ



Vikas Bajaj, a business reporter for the *New York Times* finds stories about the sub-continent's economy compelling

er magazine. However, a chance meeting with a literary agent soon after landed him a book deal, which led to other great opportunities. Most importantly, the first writing attempt uncovered his latent passion and cemented his desire to dedicate part of his professional career to writing.

One benefit of a dual career is that Sanghavi does not have to look far for ideas. "I have a unique window into people's lives since patients confide in doctors," he says. Patients' stories give a unique lens into what issues people are thinking about when they are most vulnerable. The challenge, according to him, is to balance the scientific accuracy with good storytelling.

For South Asian journalists, heri-

Renu Rayasam, associate editor of *Money and Business* at *U.S. News and World Report*, says that writing success depends upon ability to cover topics without preparation, asking the right questions and analyzing issues.

COURTESY RENU RAYASAM



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tage, too, can be a source of ideas. The time is ripe for stories about South Asia as it is commanding more attention than ever. Vikas Bajaj, a business reporter for the *New York Times* since the summer of 2005, says he finds stories about the sub-continent's economy compelling. Bajaj, who covers the housing and financial market beat, recently interviewed Muhammad Yunus, the founder of Grameen Bank and 2006 Nobel Peace Prize winner. Bajaj says he hopes to spend more time covering the region. "It's a story that's not going away," he says emphatically.

Dual career or not, many journalists wonder about print media's future in the face of declining readership due to the rise of internet. Chandrasekaran's job description acknowledges this challenge as one of his responsibilities is to co-ordinate *Post's* multi-media strategy. Rayasam has already experienced the profession's volatility, despite her young age. The first magazine she worked for folded soon after she left it for graduate school. The experience briefly rattled her confidence in writing being a viable career.

Nevertheless, Chandrasekaran firmly believes that newspapers are safe for a foreseeable future. "The format may be slightly different and it might be smaller, but there will always be a need for news," he says.

A frustration for South Asian journalists may not be the recent cutbacks to print journalism jobs but limited networking opportunities. "Writing is a hard profession," Sanghavi says, "that pays little and requires a great amount of networking, which is difficult since the South Asian American journalism community is

small." He still believes that his first article was good enough for the *New Yorker*, but he could not get guidance on how to get it to the right person.

Rayasam also believes she had limited mentoring from successful South Asians in the field while deciding on a career. "I was always interested in writing, but somehow never thought to work at the college paper, which helps young writers hit the ground running," she explains. "If you are not surrounded by [practicing journalists], you just don't think that the doors are open to you."

Resistance at home can also be a source of conflict. Bajaj says that his parents were initially resistant to his desire to be a journalist and worried about, "how I was going to eat and live." He thinks their hesitation came because they did not know any successful writers.

South Asian journalists may not be able to get much mentoring from their community but their backgrounds provide many advantages. Chandrasekaran credits his Indian background to helping locals open up to him when he worked as a foreign correspondent in Iraq. "In Iraq, people have a very positive image of Indians and I always got a very warm reception because of that," he says. "It has given me a degree of access, which I wouldn't have had," he explains. "I look like a dark-skinned guy from Basra and that's helpful because I don't stick out, I blend in."

Rayasam, too, feels that she has been a beneficiary of diversity efforts at news organizations. In fact, she feels that her gender and age – not her ethnicity – present challenges. "It is sometimes difficult to

COURTESY DR. DARSHAK SANGHAVI



Dr. Darshak Sanghavi believes that one benefit of a dual career is that he does not have to look far for ideas as he gets them from his patients.

convince top business executives to talk to me and take me seriously at first because I am a young woman," she says.

The South Asian Journalist Association (SAJA) is addressing these issues by creating a networking forum, which includes a growing group of successful South Asian American journalists. Bajaj – who is a board member of SAJA – says, "it has made [South Asians] part of the mainstream and given us a sense of community, which did not exist before the organization came along." ■

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FROM MONTHLY COLUMNS TO COFFEE TABLES

Pressures of meeting deadlines for an article or a column can be intense but journalists who also author books often say that book writing may be the hardest writing assignment they face. Rajiv Chandrasekaran recently published his first book titled, *Imperial Life in the Emerald City*. The book looks at the world inside Iraq's green zone and the failure of the American effort to occupy and govern Iraq in the crucial first months of the war. Despite his insider's knowledge and access to the subject, he found writing the book a daunting task. "The longest piece I had ever written for the *Post* was 5,000 words, and here I needed to churn out 100,000 words, without a working model for the experience," he explains.

Dr. Darshak Sanghavi also believes that writing his book, *A Map of the Child: A Pediatrician's Tour of the Body*, was harder than his newspaper articles. "At the time of writing the book, I was a full-time pediatrician at a Navajo Reservation with my wife. It was easy to procrastinate since the deadline seemed distant," he says. However, as the deadline approached, he began to live constantly with the draft. The months of hard work certainly paid off. Sanghavi believes that writing a book separated him from the journalist pack. Glowing book reviews led to his monthly column at the *Boston Globe*. ■

– R.G.