
A STUDY OF HOW REGIONAL NEWSPAPERS MAINTAINED THEIR CIRCULATION DURING COVID IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The covid 19 pandemic of 2019-2020 exposed the world to an unprecedented challenge of survival. While the entire world was locked down, all kinds of transportation, businesses, institutions, school & colleges, everything was closed, except the limited supply of groceries, fruits, vegetables and medicines were permitted to be produced and distributed.

Media was, though a part of the essential services, faced a unique challenge of producing the newspaper but not being accepted by people fearing that it could be a carrier of the virus too. This not only affected the sales of the newspaper, but also a huge loss of production and the major dent was on the advertisement revenues which had stopped due to closure of industries and businesses.

The overall circulations of all languages combined declined sharply especially that of the English Newspapers 1 as the urban areas had more incidents of covid 19 cases than the regional areas. This research is intended to figure out the parity of the impact on circulation of Newspapers in the Urban and Rural/Regional areas of the country. The Newspaper used as a case study in this research is of Dainik Bhaskar one of India's Largest Newspaper Group and the strategies adopted during the pandemic and how it maintained its circulation to a normal level.

It was the Intensive people connect with very high frequency of promotions using leaders, doctors, and influencers to appeal to people that newspapers are safe and are not the carriers of coronavirus based on WHO's 2 findings made the people in the Tier2 and below regain the confidence in Newspapers and hence it survived the decline.

This reinforces that immediate decisions taken on the basis of the ground realities make even large organisations jump the curve and be more agile and adaptive even in most adverse conditions.

Keywords : Covid 19, Newspaper circulation decline, WHO, Tier 2, Dainik Bhaskar

Introduction

“Napoleon feared four hostile newspapers and more than a thousand bayonets. According to him, “a newspaper is a grumbler, & censorer, a giver of advice, a regent of sovereigns, a tutor of nations.”

Abraham Lincoln the 16th US President declared that “public sentiment is everything,” and in his era nothing shaped public sentiment more powerfully than journalism. Advances in printing technology and newspaper distribution caused a rapid rise in the number and circulation of American papers.

Newspapers are the most essential part of the daily lives of its population. It is an ardent habit of reading the newspaper in the morning which is established by the fact that India is the largest market for Newspapers in the World. In India newspapers are published in 146 languages_ listed in Chapter 2 of Press in India 2019-2020, but those holding significant circulation are in English, Hindi, Marathi, Gujarati, Bengali, Malayalam, Telugu, Tamil and Kannada which is evident as they appear in the top publications in the report of Audit Bureau of Circulation chart attached in the following pages. One factor is India’s rising literacy rate, which increased to 79%. Hindi newspapers are growing the fastest, with average circulation soaring at a CAGR of 8.78% since 2006.

Economic growth has also helped India’s newspapers. While many urban Indians get their news from television and mobile. But hyper local events are only covered in the regional dailies. And, hence, regional newspapers are the only option to cater to this segment of Indian population.

Printed newspapers offer the added advantage of reliability, where network and electricity are yet to become available to all. In a stark distinction, newspapers in India are the cheapest which makes it the most affordable even to the people in the lowest strata of economy.

Indian cities are classified in Tiers from 1 to 3 as per Pay commission and from 1 to 6 by RBI based on population. Primarily business analysis Tier 1 to 3 are important to determine the potential as Tier 1 have a population of more than a million, are highly evolved in transport, education, industries, lifestyles, housing, work culture etc. These cities are the primary markets for English Newspapers. The other tiers are less developed with fewer amenities.

As per the census report, there are about 8 Tier I cities, 26 Tier II cities, 33 Tier III cities

Context


Age groups from age 12 and above are considered to be the reading universe for newspapers which is one of the oldest forms of mass communication in the world. Each newspaper strives for the loyalty of its readers by publishing credible news and views, articles, pictures, cartoons, editorials, presentation style and exclusive stories. It is one of the strongest mediums that is considered to influence public opinion and behaviour of the society.

The first Newspaper was Hickey’s Bengal Gazette published in 1779 from Calcutta now known as Kolkata. Today we have more than 19,782 newspapers registered with the Registrar of Newspaper for India called RNI in various languages including English. Out of these 1667 are English Newspapers and 8484 are in Hindi and 9631 are in other regional languages .

According to the Audit Bureau of Circulations the Top Daily Newspapers, the Regional Newspapers top the charts compared to the English which are restricted to the Tier 1 and Tier 2 Cities.

Fig 1

List of Top Newspaper that have more Regional Language Newspapers than English



AUDIT BUREAU OF CIRCULATIONS

Highest Circulated Dailies, Weeklies & Magazines amongst Member Publications (across languages)

Average Qualifying Sales Jan - Jun 2019			Publication / Title	Average Qualifying Sales Jul - Dec 2019		
Main	Variant	Total		Main	Variant	Total
Daily Newspapers (amongst member publications)						
4,188,910	384,534	4,573,444	Dainik Bhaskar (Hindi)	4,187,757	391,294	4,579,051
3,228,099	196,497	3,424,596	Dainik Jagran (Hindi)	3,379,374	234,788	3,614,162
2,452,883	187,887	2,640,770	The Times of India (English)	2,415,717	464,427	2,880,144
2,348,813	-	2,348,813	Malayala Manorama (Malayalam)	2,308,612	-	2,308,612
1,857,219	179,731	2,036,950	Amar Ujala (Hindi)	2,082,073	179,917	2,261,990
1,917,876	22,082	1,939,958	Hindustan (Hindi)	2,210,774	10,792	2,221,566
1,726,025	60,478	1,786,503	Rajasthan Patrika (Hindi)	1,648,391	140,029	1,788,420
1,656,933	-	1,656,933	Eenadu (Telugu)	1,614,105	-	1,614,105
1,513,127	-	1,513,127	Daily Thanthi (Tamil)	1,472,948	-	1,472,948
1,289,743	115,158	1,404,901	The Hindu (English)	1,176,597	239,195	1,415,792
1,285,022	-	1,285,022	Daily Sakal (Marathi)	1,263,955	-	1,263,955
1,204,549	-	1,204,549	Mathrubhumi (Malayalam)	1,230,778	-	1,230,778
1,118,207	-	1,118,207	Punjab Kesari (Hindi)	1,105,851	-	1,105,851
876,629	175,361	1,051,990	Patrika (Hindi)	890,725	204,419	1,095,144
710,456	234,765	945,221	Hindustan Times (English)	688,211	384,755	1,072,966
923,765	131,346	1,055,111	Sakshi (Telugu)	896,349	168,312	1,064,661
1,066,715	14,550	1,081,265	Ananda Bazar Patrika (Bengali)	1,026,498	20,109	1,046,607
776,897	-	776,897	Divya Bhaskar (Gujarati)	792,022	-	792,022
787,818	17,774	805,592	Dinamalar (Tamil)	745,835	22,465	768,300
622,496	117,678	740,174	Vijayavani (Kan)	640,971	116,148	757,119

Source: Audit Bureau of Circulation (in 1,000s)

Population in India is classified into Urban and Rural areas

Urban - As per the Census of India 2011, the definition of urban area is a place having a minimum population of 5,000 of density 400 persons per square kilometre (1,000/sq mi) or higher, and 75% plus of the male working population employed in non-agricultural activities.

Rural - A rural area is where the population is fewer than 1000 inhabitants and the population density is below 400 people per square kilometer.

The population distribution in Urban is 27.82% while in Rural is 72.18%. Of the 27.82% of Urban population only 4.66 % live in tier 1 towns. The Urban areas are further divided into tier 1, 2 and 3 towns mainly. Tier 1 cities defined in this category are Mumbai, Delhi, Bangalore, Hyderabad, Ahmedabad, Chennai, Kolkata and Pune

Rural Population

The livelihood of the people living in rural or tier 2 and below is primarily agricultural, working in industries and small scale businesses.

Problem

Urban population and the effect of COVID:

The world for the first time in a century saw the imposition of lock-down by the government in which everything was shut down and people were forced to stay within their homes. All business were stopped and only some of the items covered under the essential items category were permitted to be produced and distributed by following stringent covid protocols.

Though distribution of Newspapers is covered under essential services, people were scared by the unprecedented toll on lives and did not want to take any chances of the virus infection by any means and stopped taking any product that was being delivered. The density of population of the Tier 1 cities is much higher hence the incidence of the spread of covid 19 was also more pronounced. The people in the urban areas (tier 1) live in multistorey buildings governed by their management committees who were empowered to take protective measures to prevent the spread of Covid. These committees took the decision of banning all movements of its residents and the vendors including the Newspaper hawker from delivering the copies to its residents.

While the printing plants were allowed to function by following the safety protocols advised by the local bodies, the circulation of newspapers had a severe effect in such cities. Print media hit hard.

The curfew imposed during the pandemic made it difficult for the hawkers to come out of their houses. It was a daunting task of convincing them and arranging individual passes with ID cards from the local government office so that they could collect the copies from the depots and deliver them. Most of the hawker had to confront the local police almost on daily basis.

Most of the readers in metropolitan areas prefer to read the news in English. The newspapers that had a presence in these areas were gravely affected, especially the English papers. For example, Circulation Revenue of leading newspaper HT Media's revenue was down about 62% in the quarter ended March '21 from the same period in March '20. HT Media Q4 Results.

Population in the rest of India and the effect of COVID:

They live in smaller single or max 2 to 3 storey houses and not live in multistorey buildings. The people here are fully dependent on newspapers for local information as no national TV or mainstream newspaper provide hyper local news nor is the internet connectivity stable or support rich media. The cost of data is also quite higher than the cost of the newspaper.

The people in these areas prefer to read the newspapers in local languages. The regional papers thus also have a very large circulation like Hindi in the North, Bengali in West Bengal, Malayalam in Kerala, Tamil in Tamil Nadu, Telugu in Andhra, Marathi in Maharashtra.

Solution

Newspapers and their circulation:

It was a daunting task of convincing the hawker to come out during the curfew. Individual curfew passes with ID cards were sought from the local government office so that they could collect the copies from the depots and deliver them. In spite of this most hawkers had to confront the local police almost on a daily basis, where the editors had to contact the circle police stations to advise their policemen to allow the hawkers to distribute the copies.

It looks like an anomaly of the famous *dabbawalas* in Mumbai. We can correlate it with the *dabbawalas* of Mumbai and the *newspaperwalas* all over the world who are known to deliver the tiffins / newspapers to their customers on time, even in the most trying circumstances.

Steps taken by the Regional newspapers to maintain their circulations.

COVID-19 pandemic saw a sharp decline in the circulation numbers of almost all newspapers but the English dailies this decline was more pronounced as their digital versions substituted for their physical formats and the urban population almost developed the habit of reading the

epapers, while the Regional language print emerged substantially stronger and out-performing its English counterpart in terms of circulation and advertising revenues .

Regional Newspaper circulation back to normal

Steps taken by Media Houses to educate people

The effect of COVID in the regional parts of the country was lesser due to lower population density and better immunity. People were initially scared, but since the newspaper was the only mode for them to remain connected with the world and also due to inadequate telecom bandwidths which resulted in very poor experience of reading rich media on feature phones, Newspapers was the only source. The Newspapers companies used all channels to educate people that the Newspapers were safe and had almost no risk of carrying CoronaVirus using influencers like Chief Ministers (Fig 1) and Doctors (Fig 2) to issue appeals using quotes, audio bytes and video clips which were sent to Agencies and Hawkers to further relay the same to the readers.

The entire newspaper office, Press and staff maintained a high degree of sanitisation protocols, worked in batches and each batch was quarantined for 14 days before they came in next, printing plants and each copy coming out of the Press was automatically sanitised and then delivered to the circulation department. The Hawkers were also made to follow all safety procedures before the copies were handed over to them. They were given safety kits and were made to use them under supervision before they could take the copies. The circulation teams also kept a very high frequency of one to one meetings with the Agents and Hawkers to reinforce the confidence that Newspapers were safe. Each day the Editorial carried two pages of specific articles on Covid, International and National news with appeals from high profile officers from various health and administration to people educating them that newspapers were safe. With no immediate remedy for corona, it was the mask that would prevent its spread provided all people wore it. Dainik Bhaskar launched a massive campaign and coined a phrase “Abhi mask bhi vaccine hai” (meaning that mask is the vaccine for now)” through its content and redesigned masthead (Fig 3a) and emphasizing on social distancing (Fig 3b). It also went to an extent of distributing masks within its newspapers for the readers on a regular frequency so that there is no excuse of curfew.



Fig 2: Madhya Pradesh's Chief Minister's message to People
<https://youtu.be/dR9VvIWu1d8>



Fig 3: Eminent Doctors appealing to people that Newspapers are safe and do not carry Covid Virus

caption : various doctors appealing to people through their VDO clips.

<https://youtu.be/1ibDJqy3uCA>



Fig 3a - Dainik Bhaskar redesigned Mast Head appealing people to wear mask
<http://35.244.50.178/mpcg/index.php?mod=1&pgnum=13&edcode=120&pagedate=2020-10-09>



Fig 3b - Dainik Bhaskar redesigned Mast Head emphasize social distancing

The people had newspapers as the only credible medium to know what was happening around due to Corona which made them read the newspapers daily and kept the circulation of the newspaper in the Regional areas at normal levels and also grew in some states.

Table 1 - Comparative circulation revenue of Hindustan Times English Daily, Dainik Jagran and Dainik Bhaskar Hindi Dailies

Publication	Q4 FY 2019-20	Q4 FY 2020-21	Variance
Hindustan Times ¹⁶	13	5	-61.53%
Dainik Jagran ¹⁷	18	15	-16.66%
Dainik Bhaskar ¹⁸	120	110	-8.33

<https://jplcorp.in/new/pdf/JPLINVESTORPRESENTATION31052021.pdf>

If we take an example of Newspapers in Regional Areas, Dainik Bhaskar - Hindi, the highest circulated newspaper in India, mostly maintained their revenues during the pandemic.

Conclusion

The pandemic was unprecedented and unexpected, it is the human's trait of Survival for Existence that makes us take challenges of any proportions and Survive.

The medical and health workers had the challenge to save each life and they were innovating and experimenting with new versions of medicines and were successful in creating a vaccine to counter the new disease in the shortest time in the history of medical science.

The newspapers were also striving each minute to find out ways to keep their audiences informed and remain connected to them. The English dailies could only regain a little circulation as their readers switched to other medium mainly because of the restrictions of movements and deliveries of the newspapers, dense population, higher incidence of infections and reluctance of the populace to consider that the newspapers are safe, but in the similar circumstances the Regional Newspapers could regain and maintain their normal circumstances primarily because of the people connect and perseverance. The regional population is considered to be decisive and play a very major role in the economy of the country. These regions have been a very high focus area of all businesses for their growth.

Dainik Bhaskar Group, which had realized this potential years back and have developed

strategies for growth have its presence in both Urban and Rural areas making it the largest Newspaper Group of the country and the 3rd largest in the world. Dainik Bhaskar deployed the bi modal strategy of complimenting its Physical and Digital version of the information by completely revamping its mobile application. Huge investments and efforts were done to ensure that the application coverest the smallest and deepest hyper local area so that even a person staying in the remotest area could get the news of his area. One of the technological feats that achieved this success was the application also runs in a low network / 2g connectivity. The editorial teams worked seamlessly to provide the latest news by updating the news as it happened. This strategy worked to the best advantage of the company and soon as the covid period started phasing out the circulation of the newspaper almost normalised

In the detailed study of Dainik Bhaskar's strategy in maintaining the circulation, one thing that stood out was the unbeatable enthusiasm to overcome the challenge and its faith in the people with whom they maintained an unfazed connection at all times.

With 280 million people yet to become literate and largely in the regional areas, Newspaper is still the more economical, credible and reliable means of daily information.

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