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Musa, A. B. M.

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Development And Trends In Rural Mass Media In Bangladesh

By

A B M Musa

A.B.M. MUSA.

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*Bangladesh
rural communication*

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Rural Mass Media in Bangladesh

Introduction:

The rural press in Bangladesh has the tradition and historical background of one hundred years. The area that now comprises Bangladesh was once the rural hinterland of the capital of undivided Bengal. Even present capital Dhaka was then rural town. A number of weekly and fortnightly newspapers were published from Dhaka and other towns. In the struggle for independence the rural press was the only media through which political aspirations of the people were reflected. Hence weekly newspapers, mostly as tabloid sheets of two pages were published from the district towns. Notable political leaders were the editors and publishers of these news sheets. But these publications were short-lived. The editor or the publisher were often jailed or the publication would be banned. Whatever might be the fate of these publications, these periodical publications set up a tradition of rural press in Bengal, major part of which is Bangladesh. Some of these survived and some did not after independence.

It should be made clear that where we speak of rural press we refer to the daily or weekly or fortnightly publications from district towns which are in reality, extension of upgraded villages. The population that the local or rural newspaper serves is between 50,000 to 150,000 most of whom are government employees, small traders, shop-keepers, lawyers, -- and labourers in industrial towns.

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As indicated earlier rural newspapers were oft-and-on publications brought out primarily for seving political purpose. The economic viability or professionalism ~~was~~ never considered. These newspapers survived on sub(sidy in the form of contributions from political sympathesers and readers.

The situation, more or less, remained so till 1972 when the independent Bangladesh was born. In the seventies the rural press took a concrete shape with a number of newspapers circulated among the readers in district towns and the villages, Now there are 12 daily newspapers, 60 weeklies and about a dozen periodicals published from the district towns. All these newspapers and weeklies were published between 1972 to 1987.

While the total readership of daily newspapers in Bangladesh is about 5,50,000 only, the rural press has a circulation of only 25-30,000 only. The weeklies have a bigger circulation -- the combined circulation of rural weeklies are about 100,000. Two fortnightly rural newspaper(s have circulation of only two to three thousand.

Rural daily newspapers are now published from far-flung areas such as Sylhet, Mymensingh, Bogra, Khulna, Jessore, Comilla, Rajshahi and Dinajpur. The main reason that local publishers feel the need of a local newspaper is that because of poor communication system the national dailies do not reach these places in time. At some of the places such as Dinajpur morning dailies from the capital city reach in the evening to^{be} distributed on the following morning. Another consideration for bringing out a newspaper is ~~to~~

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exert influence in the local polities. So the rural press in Bangladesh, mostly comprising weeklies, are in the real sense local newspapers. While the dailies focus on national and to some extent international news, the weeklies are fully local biased dealing with news and problems of the surrounding areas. It is interesting to note that while the dailies are published from the eight district towns only, almost each and every small town or even an advanced rural habitat has one or two weekly newspapers.

Some of the weeklies are family newspapers -- some even handed over from one generation to the other. Some remained the same in format, printing and news display during three or four decades.

Professionalism:

The rural press has no professional background. In the early days some of the editors and publishers had no schooling even-- but had mastery over the language spoken by the common people. The production of the newspapers was drab and unattractive. Composed in the hand-set types and printed in manually operated machines a rural newspaper was typically rural in its appearance. The situation more or less remains so even after decades -- a few in advanced towns with electricity and other facilities being the exceptions.

There have been some efforts recently to improve the professional standard of the journalists. Press Institute of Bangladesh during the last few years arranged, with support from such organisations such as

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AMIC or PFA, training programmes for both the journalists and managerial staff of the rural newspapers. In journalism, there has been some improvement in the presentation of news and get-up, but the managerial system remains the same. This is because, the owners of the rural newspapers who look after all sides of income, expenditure and sales are less conversant with the business or commercial propositions, nor do they care about it. The rural newspaper is managed just like any other personal business establishment like small shops or factories.

Economic Viability:

Rural newspapers in most of the areas ~~are based~~^{depend} on sales and to some extent on local advertisements. As in the case of metropolitan of major newspapers in Bangladesh, the major source of advertisement is the government. In fact, 80 per cent of the advertisements are in the public sector. The government spends yearly about 20 to 30 million taka in advertisement head. As a policy, 40 per cent of all government advertisements are now distributed among the rural newspaper. This helps the rural newspapers to some extent. Following chart will explain this better.

Rural newspaper with an average circulation of 2000 copies
(monthly statement in taka)

Net income

<u>Daily</u>	
Advertisement	10000.00
Sales	45000.00
Total	55000.00
<u>Weekly</u>	
Advertisement	5,000.00
Sales	10,000.00
Total	15,000.00

Expenditure

Newsprint:	10,000.00
Printing	10,000.00
Salary	15,000.00
Rent etc.	5,000.00
Total	40,000.00
Newsprint	3,000.00
Printing	4,000.00
Salary	Nil
Other exp.	3,000.00
Total	10,000.00

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As may be mentioned there are no overhead expenses for news collection as the dailies depend entirely on the local correspondents, radio news monitoring and hand-outs. The weeklies "create" their own news or through rural correspondents who virtually work with no pay. There are even extra incomes from the sale of "newsprint quota" in the black market. Though newsprint is available in the open market, the newspapers get it at mill price which is Taka 1000.00 less per metric ton. There is no difficulty in getting the monthly quota from the mill.

As indicated in the chart above, the newspapers earn much from the sales. The economy is such -- half-demy size four page weekly sells for taka 2.00 while the newsprint costs one-fourth of that amount. Most have their own printing press, may, printing arrangement such as a few cases of hand-types and a small treadle machine either hand-operated or electrically operated; One or two compositers in some cases the owner-editor or his relatives work in the press.

The rural newspapers in Bangladesh face no financial crisis as the investment is very insignificant compared with that of a metropolitan newspapers. There is no competition for quality, nor is there any sales promotion effort. Many in the rural areas agree that there is the potentiality of more sales for a quality newspaper. But hardly anyone goes for that quality.

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None of the rural newspapers is running at a loss, nor are they making much money. However, as they are wholly dependent on government advertisement, professionalism suffers. There is no government patronisation for a daily or weekly if it does not toe the government policy.

No survey has been made whether these rural newspapers will be economically viable if they go for updating their printing facilities. With electricity now reaching each and every district or semi-district towns introduction of off-set printing is being considered by some of the well-to-do publishers. But they lack the initial capital.

New Technology:

The rural press has a long way to go in adopting new technology. Even the metropolitan or national newspapers are using out-of-date composing and printing machines. But it is possible for some of the well-to-do rural newspapers to use computers which has become cheaper and easy to handle. Two terminal and with the laser printing now costs only Taka. 200,000 to 250,000 (US\$ 6000 to US\$ 8000). It has been worked out that a one-men composition arrangement can be made by some of the newspapers. They need introduction to the new technological system and motivation. It has been assumed that the rural newspapers with less composition requirement and minimum manpower will benefit most from introduction of new technology. Some have the required capital, some can arrange bank loan or other financing with a little effort. The need is for training and motivation.

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Public participation:

The rural newspapers sell more in their area of circulation than the metropolitan national newspapers. The need for local newspapers have always been felt and that led to publication of one or more dailies or weeklies in each place. It may be interesting to note that in these newspapers except for the local or the regional news the readers get the national or international news that have already been broadcast by radio or television. In spite of that the rural newspapers have helped creating the "newspaper at the breakfast table" habit. The following chart may be interesting.

	Number of newspapers	
	<u>1972-80</u>	<u>1981-87</u>
Dailies	15 (1)	26 (2)
Weeklies	26 (1)	46 (1)

(Note: Figure in bracket English language newspapers. Others are in Bangla.)

The growth rate in 10 years is, therefore, about 60 per cent. The growth would have been more had there not been certain restrictions on getting government permission *to publish a newspaper.*

As stated earlier, the main income of the rural newspapers come from the sales. The readers, with a view to patronise the local paper, pay almost the same price -- Tk. 2.00 per copy -- for this daily or weekly though the number of pages or the format is one-fourth or even one-eighth of that of a national newspaper. The sales systems are like this -- (a) The publisher-editor distributes the newspaper to most of the shops which may be termed

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as push-sale. Then he collects the price at the end of the day or week or month. (b) He collects donations or takes loan from the shop-keeper or trader and repays it in the form of an advertisement (there is no fixed rate for these advertisements). There is, therefore, the sense of participation by the readers as well as the patrons. In the small town, where everyone knows everyone, the rural press is in read sense the community press.

Radio and TV

The state-owned radio and television reach almost every part of rural Bangladesh. There are now 5 radio broadcasting stations outside the capital Dhaka and port city Chittagong. They partly relay the national programme and partly originate local broadcast materials. But they work on the basis of a set policy framed by the government. The television programmes are centrally produced and telecast. There is no scope for decentralisation of radio and television programmes.

Folk-theatre and opera:

There was a time when, in the feudal social set-up, the folk theatre, called YATRA, and village operas, called PALA-GAAN, flourished.

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Now with lack of patronisation, and with the advent of cinemas, both YATRA and PALA-GAAN are dying arts. Still there are small groups scattered all-over rural Bangladesh who during festive seasons stage folk-theatres and operas dealing mostly with old historical events and village love stories. Government, in recent times, has been patronising some of these groups to propagate development stories, especially family planning themes.

Conclusion:

The rural press in Bangladesh is in the process of slow expansion. However, no concerted effort has been made to change the traditional publication, printing and sales processes. There is lack of professionalism, ^{but there are} ~~and~~ enough reader participation and patronisation. Economically, these newspapers are quite well-off considering the standard of living of rural people of Bangladesh.

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A. M. M. M. M.