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Influence Of Politics And Policies
On Journalism Values In Asia

By

M Tawhidul Anuar
Influence of Politics and Policies on Journalism Values in Asia

Bangladesh is a confluence of three dominant religions. Hinduism, a religion by practice, has taught us rhyme and rhythm. Buddhism, a religion of the sub-continent, has taught us tolerance, and Islam, a religion of protest against caste system, has taught us brotherhood.

The philosophical tenets drawn from these religions therefore recognise the diversity in cultures and religious beliefs of the country. The Constitution of Bangladesh has articulated the fundamental human rights and obligations so that all avenues of public expressions can take place in an atmosphere of a democratic society.

The Press Council has charted out 21 codes agreed upon by the cross-sections of people's representatives, the jurists, mediamen, publishers, educationists and administrative functionaries.

These are written codes mutually recognised but more often than not professionally ignored. The reason has been that the admonishing or censure as a verdict of the trial cannot bite. There are unwritten codes genealogically inherited through a temporal pathway deriving tenets from history, heritage, faith, customs and environment. So, there are social values, there are moral values, and there are cultural values.

Socially, every elder is to be respected. Culturally, every teacher or preacher is to be revered and morally and in matters of one's religiosity every person must speak the truth, or ought to do so before the court of law or to the altar of conscience or through ink or paper.

A near hermit was struggling to combine how to speak the truth and how not to hurt individuals in the same go in a society where truth is unpalatable. The struggle here is between a value laden hermit and the eroded state of social values. Perhaps this was the reason or the riddle.
for which Lao Tzu, a Chinese philosopher, who gave added meaning to Taoism, said:

He who knows does not speak.

He who speaks does not know.

Lao Tzu also said true knowledge can also be attained in a state of mental emptiness, because only in such a state one can identify with Tao (way).

Taoism though emphasised metaphysics has reconciled with the moral teachings which Confucianism emphasised. In traditional China, Confucianists incorporated many of the Taoist concepts into their system of thoughts. Three major schools of philosophy could still be discernible. They are Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. All were seeking the way to the truth. From Buddhism, the eastern part of the sub-continent, could inherit a vast resource of morals basing on the philosophy of truth, knowledge acquisition and limits of language in representing the reality. One distinct inheritance has been the poetic literary tradition of nearby China and the interactive function of poetry. Confucius spoke of the political power of poetry: “Poetry can serve to inspire emotion, to help your observation, to make you fit for company, to express your grievances.”

Wimal Dissanayake gave out some propositions of verbal communication in some of the countries of the subcontinent where he said the people talk in generalities and abstractions rather than in concrete terms. They often stress the negative aspects and this predilection is mirrored in the language they use.

Like the word 'independence' which is 'not dependence', the Bengali rendering 'shwadhinata' literally conveys, 'not subjugated by others'. In India, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, 'Aneka' is 'not one' meaning many. This negativism in language trickled through the cultural format to the playwrights, to the poets, to the writers and eventually it landed to the press which in turn negatively influence
politicians of Bangladesh. Datuk Seri Mahathir Mohammad aptly said, 'Nobody elects the press...... (but) newspapers have their own opinions. What they report is their views, not news....... Nowadays the press is said free, it is not really free. The press must be under the control of some one—the editor, the reporter, the owner or sometimes even the advertisers. So, it is not free. I have no right to give my views in the press except what is permitted by the press.' This obstinate state of the press along with the negativism inherited down the spacial and temporal lines create an aura of public opinion which is not of the public but of the press itself.

During the last Bangladesh parliamentary elections of 1991 every newspaper predicted the loser to be the winner only to be embarrassed later. The election results proved they were wrong so much so that even the seat counts they gave to project the strength of difference between the contenders got interchanged.

The embarrassment caused to the journalists is not the contention, that the press in Bangladesh suffers from a pluralistic ignorance is what annoys the readers. The press thereby allows a dual climate of opinion—one at the press level, another at the level of the common men and women. In other words, what the press says, political leaders believe, and the people prove them wrong. Written codes where the press was supposed to portray truth and accuracy, facts presented with honest intentions, made trustworthy by logical consideration, verified, undistorted, not contemptuous, not disrespectful of caste, creed, nationality and religion of any individual, community and the country all fall flat. What is ensuring is that the people, mostly unlettered, do not now allow them to be left at the lose end.

If the press is not accurate on the first place, objectivity remains a far cry. The subjective tilt in objective reporting will always be there anywhere in the press. but when it is far away from realities, the subjectivity is questioned. The birth of the increasing number of the
dailies has made the press more of an extension of political beliefs than as a part of excellence in terms of professionalism, barring a few. If we take the example of leading newspapers of Bangladesh, the Ittefaq, with the highest circulation and a tradition of a more than three decades of rough sailing, keeps some semblance of professionalism with occasional dozes of definite tilt in international politics. At home they are professional but extraterritorially they are tilted toward telling whatever good is in the West. At times this policy also confronts national interest. When the WHO went for a drug policy and Bangladesh had been tough to see spurious drugs out of market, it did not carry even the promotions from the national side. Of late, for reportage at the national level it has evolved a definite political policy too which are subtle but understandable. This newspaper which had been instrumental in making great political leaders to provide additional strength to the voice of the people against political injustice meted out at the time of a united Pakistan, is somehow maintaining some traditional values like the urge for checking facts before reporting, increasing coverage of rural news to redress their grievances and keeping editorial policy free from any unwanted bias. Playing up a story or playing it down depending on who takes over the shift is the only way that the journalists try to satisfy their political belief.

The Inqilab, which toes a religious line to accommodate the feelings of the vast majority of Muslims, chooses not to be like a crude fundamentalist. The owner is a modern man but his father, the founder, is religio-traditional. The newspaper has taken a policy to reach the readers through religion. But as the liberation struggle of 1971 took place on the basis of deprivation in matter of language, recruitment, allocation and development care with a slogan for equality that smacks of socialism which mistakenly ignored the essence of religion, this newspaper’s emphasis on religion is taken by
some as retrogressive policy. When this newspaper were a success against all odds politico-cultural expressions contrary to religious emphasis in politics started ventilating through newspapers like Bhorer Kagoj, Banglar Bani, Janakantha and Sangbad, to name a few. In these newspapers, the language is poetic, negative, and rhetoric. When the NGO activities started using the village women into their programmes in a way that was socially unacceptable at some places, protest manifestation in the localities was given louder coverage in the Inqilab to sway more readers to the paper. The Janakantha and the Bhorer Kagoj went to the other camp and launched a bigger campaign at the national level against 'Mullahs' who did some excesses here and there and against the Inqilab which was justifying the stand of the Mullahs.

The activities of the Mullahs were not rectified, their doings were amplified to a proportion where they got a hidden bonus to be united with support-coverage from a newspaper and oppose-coverage from others. The annoying thing is that no political party could take a clear stand against these few crude interpreters of religion. The fear instinct was there for all the politicians. If they speak out against these pseudo-religious people, it might erode their support from other religious majority. Things did not improve. The pseudo religious people got undue weightage in terms of coverage for and against which ultimately helped them to be reckoned with as one of the compelling political forces which can work as a political agenda for future years. A non-issue has been made as issue.

Of late, there is a tendency now working in most of the newspapers to go for a blatant support for contending parties to power. Another incident that shook the nation was concept of public trial before the concept borrowed from Bertrand Russel could be understood by even the elite. The public trial of a political leader on the question of opposing the liberation of Bangladesh took place in an open place in
Dhaka attended by political activists and sympathisers. The coverage that was given made this mock-trial almost a reality. On the advise of the trial the question of the citizenship had to go to the court which later said he is a citizen. This was contrary to the verdict of the mock-trial. Here, the society as if got divided into blocks of four—the administration, the judiciary, the divided opposition and the united position. In this case, the borrowed value of trial of war-criminals from overseas got confused with the traditionally held legal norms that the intelligentsia, the lawyers, the administration and even the judiciary were sharing.

It took nearly two years of the nerve of a democratic government with all its paraphernalia to resolve this seemingly poetic issue of a cultural forum with active support of a section of the media and parties. When the issue was ripe a leader in the mother of a lost warrior could be established against a political leader whose citizenship was being questioned in a negative mystic way. Now the politician, who was residing in Bangladesh for a decade, got his citizenship through a court verdict. The respected aged-laden lady is now dead, surely, with a heavy heart not for the verdict but for the mishandling of this state of affair by a cultural group in a poetic manner. These newspapers thrive on criticism, negativism, poetism and on the tormented state of socialism. Politics cannot influence them. They influence politics at the level of the upper echelon of politicians at the cost of understanding what really the people today want. Dr. Kamal Hossain, a jurist of international repute, said history—specificity has got us the doom. The political parties in consonance with the policies of these newspapers hardly speak definite about development and in absence of such news emanating these newspapers cover other issues inclusive of cultural and exclusive of developmental.
Yet another example can describe the state of interaction between politics and press in Bangladesh pitted against the perspective of values of the press and the politicians try to nurture or ignore.

The 1991 election gave the present government adequate seats short of only three to form a government which they got from an arrangement through sharing of women seats with a party which would not go for coalition but would only lend support for turning the tenuous majority to an absolute majority. The government is thus formed. It was a presidential form of government and the party in power had no agenda or commitment to the people to turn to parliamentary form of government, while others had such clear political agenda. The press took it up in favour of the minority parties. The parliament started discussion. The majority had to accept what the minority said. The 12th amendment of the Constitution changed the form of government. The amendment was unanimously passed and sent to a referendum where the people hardly turned up because the significance of this change of government to a parliamentary form was still unclear to even those who voted for parties having such a commitment.

Here too, the democratic values through a parliamentary form of government came to play at the state level, of course, with an arranged agreement forced upon them by the media coverage in a language understandable policy makes and unclear to the people. The values that the people be informed and persuaded was not adhered to by the media.

Of late, the media set another agenda on the issue of neutral caretaker government to look after the elections of transition between governments. A prestigious English language daily carried a study on Dhaka city professionals which showed that 82% of the Dhaka city professionals want a caretaker government before election. It was adequately given importance by the opposition and was made an issue which has still been shaking the government. On this issue 147
members resigned from the parliament throwing the government into a quagmire with options either for a fresh election or for byelections.

The government says neutrality means strengthening the Election Commission and taking hands off from effective power even with an assurance of resigning during election mouth. The newspaper which gave the initial fillip to the issue has now realised that the survey was wrong and the consequences that is left by the undue coverage is irreparable.

A recent study on the floating rural migrants in Dhaka gave out a different scenario. If 82% of the elite want a neutral caretaker government 96% of the floating population of Dhaka are posited poles asunder on this issue.

In this case, the initiator was a survey, the disseminator was the press, the agitators were the political parties, the casual injury caused was to the parliament which is now standing truncated keeping the people oblivious of the issue or the significance of it.

The constitution which saw changes in form and structure with repeated amendments is experiencing a continuous see-saw at the hands of the elite, inclusive of the media persons. The exercises galore, the people now are learning to react. Indications through another national survey are that the people detect repeated calls of strike (hartal) on this issue which immediately affect the day-labourers or daily income earners. Mahathir Mohammad rightly said “To us democracy means the welcome of the majority. While the individual must have his rights, these must not extend to the point where they deprive the majority of their rights.”

Gaurav Dalmia’s comment may be pertinent when he brings out a case of special relationship between politics and economics. He says “national energy is often spent on dividing the pie rather than on increasing the size.” He justifies saying further “unlike the West, Asia
tends to find its balance within an adaptive dominant party rather than through the competition of opposing parties."

If democracy is a cultural value to be nurtured by the politicians, if 'people be informed' is a value to be pursued by the media, and if in the name of cultural values moral ethos, derived from religions and the dominant religion at that, is ignored, the social fabrics are torn leaving the communities in disarray and then in despair. The development process is stalled. Therefore there should be a happy balance between the cultural, social and moral values. At this moment we the Asians should remember if the media and the elite are hungry for freedom, the unlettered mass also want to enjoy a spiritual height after meeting their basic needs. The first thing first: the media must honour the value of recognising the mass.

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