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Status, Problems And Prospects Of The Rural Press In Bangladesh

By

Muhammed Jahangir
AN OVERVIEW

Over 570 newspapers are published in Bangladesh. But the standard of journalism leaves a lot to be desired. Journalism as a profession has not attained the expected height due to a variety of constraints including political and economic ones.

The above observation applies both to the mainstream journalism and to the rural press.

Of the total newspapers 72 are dailies, 280 weeklies, 3 bi-weeklies, 31 fortnightlies, 123 monthlies, 3 bi-monthlies, 49 quarterly, 3 half-yearlies and 8 annual publications. Of them, 328 are published from the capital city Dhaka.

The publication of newspapers from outside the capital has been on the spree for the last three or four years. The trend still persists. Papers published from outside Dhaka, except five of them, may be termed rural newspapers. The five which have not been bracketed with the rural publications are equivalent to the national newspapers in respect of the quality of journalism, circulation, influence and the contents.

There are 13 English language dailies in the country. The rest are published in Bengali. Of the weeklies 24 are published in English. The total circulation of all the daily newspapers in the country would be around one million copies.

Newspapers in Bangladesh are yet to develop as an industry. Even the newspaper owners do not consider their enterprises as profit earning projects.

Bangladesh has a dismal literacy rate of 25.8 percent. The rate of literacy is lower in the rural areas. The poor literacy rate is the cause of poor readership of the papers.

Advertisement is the main source of income of the newspapers. But Bangladesh is lagging far behind in industrialisation and trade and commerce. So the volume of ads from industrial and business sectors is not upto the mark. Moreover most of the ads are under government control. As a result most of the newspapers are dependent on government ads. The dependence on government ads on the one hand and restrictive black laws, on the other, are the main bottlenecks in the development of journalism.

Whatever may be the quality of journalism, daily and weekly newspapers are coming out from different regions of the country. The number of weeklies are more than that of dailies. It is not very easy to bring out a daily in a rural area. Most of the newspaper owners are not in a position to recruit the manpower and procure the technology needed for a good newspaper. Teleprinter services are available only in three towns outside Dhaka. This amply shows what a difficulty one has to face to bring out a daily paper in the rural area.

So when we speak of the rural press here, we would restrict it to the weeklies only.

The word 'rural' needs to be set in proper perspective. 'Rural' here does not mean village. No newspapers are published at the village level in Bangladesh. By rural newspapers we mean newspapers published from towns and cities other than the capital. These newspapers may be regarded as regional newspapers.

Most of the regional newspapers are far from practising "real" journalism. The main aim of most of them seems to be to attain success in business or attain recognition in the society. A look at their contents and standard of publication would make one feel that the editor has no special interest in presenting news. The main items of many rural weeklies seem to be a collection of news items from Dhaka dailies or news monitored from radio, or statements of local political leaders. A sizable portion of space is devoted to advertisement. It is not that there is no local news. But the space devoted to it is
the capital get importance in a newspaper published from small town like Feni or Gaibandha.

It must be acknowledged that some of them try to bring out good newspapers. Some rural newspapers are well edited. In the selection of news items they keep in mind the interest of the region. But they are few in number.

If the rural newspapers respond to recent efforts at their improvement the standard will improve. And the prospect of developing good rural newspapers will grow with the passage of time. What is necessary is correct planning, recruitment of efficient personnel and a clear perception of the goal. Only then will the rural newspapers become the companions of the readers in their day-to-day life.

I shall try to discuss here in brief the circulation, readership profile, ownership, management and manpower, sources of revenue, distribution of strategies, years of operation and problems and prospects of the rural newspapers.

CIRCULATION

The rural press does not have a good circulation. The Press Institute of Bangladesh (PIB) recently (1990) conducted a survey on rural newspapers. It sent questionnaire to the publishers/editors of these newspapers; 146 of them replied. We shall give here some data of the PIB conducted surveys at different stages.

Of the 146 newspapers surveyed four have circulation of less than one thousand copies, circulation of 64 papers varies from 1000 to 3000, 46 papers have circulation between 3001 and 5000, 16 papers have 5001 to 7000 and eight papers have circulation of 7001 to 10,000 copies.

In 1986 the PIB conducted a survey on 24 rural newspapers. The survey showed that three papers had their circulation between 1000 and 3000, five papers between 2001 and 3000, two papers between 3001 and 4000, three papers between 4001 and 5000, three between 5001 and 6000 and four papers between 6001 and 7000. Editors/publishers of other papers did not reply.

READERSHIP PROFILE

A question can be raised as to who are the readers of rural newspapers. As a clear answer is not known, nobody hesitates to print a stale news. Most of the readers of rural newspapers are primarily the readers of Dhaka dailies. It is useless for them to re-read the same things in their regional papers. Printing them means 'scissor journalism', i.e., cutting news from the Dhaka newspapers and printing them. This method cannot be supported. These types of newspapers are not at all acceptable to the readers. It is the duty of rural newspapers to find out what local subjects interest the readers and print news, features and articles on them. The focal point of the news should be a particular region—the region where the newspaper goes. That is to say the region is to be reflected.

Here are some of the findings of a survey on the newspaper readers in four upazilas (sub-districts) conducted by the PIB in 1989. Most of the 205 readers surveyed had educational qualification between grades six and twelve. Ages of the respondents ranged from 21 years to 75 years. Of the rural newspaper readers 39.5% are businessmen, 23.4 per cent service-holders, 15.6 per cent peasants and the rest are labourers, teachers, doctors and of other professions.

The survey report revealed that 31.7% of the respondents read daily newspapers regularly while the rest 68.3 per cent were casual readers. Only 10.70 per cent were regular readers of weeklies and 22 per cent were occasional readers. The remaining 67.3 per cent did not read any weekly. One thing is clear here: there are many readers of dailies, who do not read the weeklies but there are few readers of weeklies who do not read the daily newspapers.
Of the daily newspaper readers 33.84% said they bought papers of their own. Only 3.08 of the readers said they subscribed to weeklies and not any daily. The percentage of buyers of both daily and weekly papers at the same time was 21.53. Of the readers of daily newspapers 41 per cent do not buy papers. Of the casual readers of dailies 80 per cent do not buy papers. They read papers at bazaars, clubs, union council offices and at other public places.

Two thirds on 66.8 per cent of the readers spent less than an hour in reading newspapers; 30 per cent readers spent one to two hours.

OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT AND MANPOWER

In most cases the rural newspapers are 'edited' by their owners. Some owners are really interested in journalism and they perform some editorial job. They want to be trained and are concerned about the quality, circulation and image of their papers.

There are several publishers who have no profession other than publishing and editing newspapers. But in most cases the owner-editors relish the fame of being the owner and editor of a paper. For the actual editorial job a second man acts for the editor.

There is virtually no 'management' of a paper. Shortage of manpower hampers the running of the paper in a planned way. Though newsmen are the most vital part of a newspaper's manpower, few rural newspapers have a full-time journalist. In most cases, students, apprentices and relatives of the editors do the job of newsmen.

A recent PIB survey on 142 newspapers showed 46 papers had 1-5 journalists, 49 papers had 6-10, 24 papers had 11-15, 11 papers had 16-20, three papers had 21-25 and four papers had 26-30 journalists on their staff. A 1986 survey on 24 rural newspapers showed 12 papers had 1-5, five papers had 6-10, three papers had 16-20, two papers had 21-25 and one paper 26-30 journalists working in those papers.

SOURCES OF REVENUE

Circulation of the rural press is very limited and as such income from the sale of papers is also very poor. Advertisement, in fact, is the only source of income.

The 1986 survey of PIB on 24 rural papers showed that one paper had an average monthly income of Tk 3,000 (US $ 97), one paper had an income of Tk 17,000 (US $ 548), one had Tk 25,000 ($ 806), one had Tk 26,461 ($ 853), one had Tk 28,000 ($ 903), one had Tk 40,000 ($ 1290), one had Tk 70,087 ($ 2261), one had Tk 75,000 ($ 2419), one had Tk 100,000 (US $ 3226) as average monthly income. Fourteen papers did not give their figures. A paper said it did not know its income.

Besides the advertisement the rural papers get some money from commercial work at their printing presses and sale of wastepapers.

Eight newspapers said they had a monthly income of less than Tk 500 from job work at their presses. One paper earned between Tk 500-1000, one between Tk 1001-1500, one between Tk 1501-2000, one between Tk 2501-3000, one between Tk 4501-5000 and one paper earned over Tk 5000 a month from job work.

The monthly income of the 14 papers from sale of wastepapers was as follows: two paper, less than Tk 100, six papers between 101-300, one paper between 301-500, one paper between 901-1100, one paper 1101-1300, three papers over Tk 1500 from the sale of wastepapers. (One US $ then Tk 31).
DISTRIBUTION STRATEGIES

Since the circulation of the rural press is limited extensive management strategies are not needed for its circulation system. The conventional and common methods are applied in the distribution system. The newspapers use their own beat peons, hawkers and newspaper agents.

The newspaper authorities think that the circulation of papers falls and rises at different times of the year depending on situations. They say the circulation is related to the political situation and particular national or local events. During the monsoon the roads become muddy and the communication links are often snapped and this affects the circulation. The circulation again rises in the dry season, i.e., in the winter.

Some of the Publishers make efforts for increasing the circulation. They adopt various methods for it. The 1986 PIB survey on 24 papers showed three papers pursued the policy of independent and objective journalism to enhance their sales, eight papers stressed on accommodation of more and more local news, one paper published pictures, features and investigative reports, one paper gave enhanced commission to the sales agents, three papers launched subscription campaigns and three papers applied other strategies to increase their circulation. Six papers did not try any means. Three did not reply to the question regarding circulation strategies.

YEARS OF OPERATION

The 1986 survey conducted by the PIB showed that two of the 24 newspapers made their debut before independence (1971), 13 papers in the 1970s and another nine in the first half of the 80s.

TECHNOLOGY

The newspaper world in Bangladesh has experienced a remarkable technological development over the past one decade. This development, however, has been achieved mostly by the national dailies and weeklies. The hand-compose system is now an old story in the Dhaka newspapers. Phototypesetting and DTP have replaced the old methods. The rotary wave offset process has been used by the newspapers for printing for the last 35 years.

But we know printing technology and other newspaper technology in many of the third world countries have advanced even more. Compared to them Bangladesh is still lagging behind. Nevertheless, the Bangladesh press has begun using modern technology. The rural press has also been stirred to some extent by the wave of modern technology. The rural press earlier used broken types. But now-a-days some rural papers use DTP method and are printed in the offset machine. This is certainly a step forward.

The recent PIB survey on 142 papers says 129 rural papers are still hand-composed, 10 use DTP compose method, 4 use monotype compose and one is composed using the phototypesetter. For printing 131 papers use the letter press and 15 offset press; 92 papers have presses of their own while 50 do not have.

PROBLEMS

The rural newspapers are yet to build up a separate readership. There are a few exceptions no doubt. To readers of all the regions a newspaper means a daily or weekly published from Dhaka. The concept of ‘regional paper’ or ‘community paper’ is yet to develop in Bangladesh.

The rural press has to blame itself for this. Though the rural papers come out from small towns contents of those papers are not at all local. There is an abundance of national and international news in these papers. As a result the local people cannot consider those papers as local or community papers.
The rural newspapers are small in size. A tabloid size rural paper consists of four or six pages. One or two pages of the paper are occupied by advertisements. Usually the news broadcast over radio and television get the frontpage treatment. Few papers have correspondents at other places. So, interesting reports or features are rarely published. Most of them are part-timers. They do not even get this poor salary regularly. They have to work elsewhere to earn their livelihood and as a result they cannot devote their full energy to the profession of journalism.

The number of industries and business houses is very few in the rural areas. So the flow of advertisement is also very poor. The rural papers also depend on the government advertisements. The government ad bills are usually paid after a considerable delay.

There is dearth of efficient people in rural areas to hold the posts of executive editor, news editor, chief reporter or reporter. An efficient newsman from capital Dhaka would not like to work with a rural paper. Even if someone agrees to do so, the owner of the paper would not be able to give him appropriate salary.

There are also problems relating to technology. If a publisher procures a DTP and offset machine he will not be able to utilise the technology. Printing of only a weekly will not make the technology viable. Adequate job works for DTP and offset machine are not available in those areas. The machine will be lying idle and this is not acceptable economically.

Since these papers do not have a good income the commercial banks are not eager to give them loans. Even if bank loans are available the question is whether the papers would ever be able to pay off the loans along with the interest.

Not all the rural papers in the country suffer from all those problems. Despite all the constraints several rural papers have been able to show a good performance in doing business, acquiring readership and in selection of contents. But they are few in number.

**PROSPECTS**

As there is no scope for a long discussion on prospects in this paper, I shall focus on a few points only.

1. The owner publisher must have to decide that he is going to run a business project. He must examine the market, demand and viability of his venture. If the signs are positive only then he should go forward with his project. I suspect few owners in our country have published their papers this way.

2. He should bring out a community paper in the true sense of the term. It should not be an adulterated paper. It will not be difficult for a true community paper to secure readership.

3. He must have to recruit efficient manpower at appropriate salary to run his paper.

4. Composing and printing are a big problem. Few papers can invest money for modern compose and printing technology. If a central press can be set up with the help of an international agency that can be of great help to the rural newspapers. If such a press can be set up under a central organisation like the PIB the major rural newspapers can be printed from the press at a lower cost.

5. I would like to put emphasis on training of journalists and continuous monitoring of how they have been able to utilise the training. Many rural paper journalists have been trained but I suspect few of them could use the training. They should be appropriately placed through monitoring and evaluation.