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**Perspectives On Pluralism Issues In
The South Asian Media**

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HOLIDAY, DHAKA, BANGLADESH

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Pluralism issues have not spectacularly burst upon us in a multitude of realities or ideas - splendid or otherwise. Those have obtained either in dormancy or in simmering embers in the very society or societies which the dominant social forces tend to monopolise. Those accumulate and foster in fragments upon bits of fragments of inequities and seldom go away even in what is idealised as a representative political culture. The socialist utopia which sought to homogenise the particularities of national, class, race, gender issues, among others, within the universality of a classless eldorado, has proven self-destruct. Pluralism in neither case of two diametric versions of social order have ~~not~~ been resolved nor levelled-off. Those simply stay to be contended with, and exist in diminishment or assertion as the case may be.

In South Asia too, pluralism remains a professed problematique. If some of the South Asian nations in a post-colonial made-to-order geo-political divide had been ignoble enough not to heed pluralism issues, they have done so at the peril of state authority and territorial boundary. And those which have been noble enough to heed those and emulate pluralism in state-craft and social dynamic, they have also not found any comfort. Pluralism issues cut both ways whether in damnation or in their accommodation.

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Politics is the principal instrument of dealing with pluralism issues. But when it remains stuck to an antiquated history of imperial, colonial and communal distortions as well as obsessed with sculpting icons and inventing folklores, it clearly loses its contemporary relevance in meeting the challenge of pluralism issues galore. Neither authoritarianism nor practiced democracy has helped contain or harmonize contending pluralism issues in that order. Even now when every South Asian state is chasing a representative political order, extant politics has clearly run into obsolescence. You can't democratise an authoritarian bureaucratic state-structure with antiquated, self-beholden, narcissistic political-culture. It is true of us all --- India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal -- despite considerable differences in the stages of our respective political and institutional developments.

The media, which is a part of the superstructure -- that is of ideas and perceptions, of information and analysis -- can perhaps play a significant role in whipping politics awake to the realities of contemporary times and away from the past. The proliferation of the print media in most South Asian countries in recent times testifies to pluralism issues, plurality of thoughts and perceptions and ideas one too many. This new development has to be credibly

utilised by the media given the historical perspective of media on today's principal theme of this seminar. I will try to briefly present the historical background of it as it obtains in Bangladesh since the time of Mughal Suba Bangla.

Formal press came into being in Mughal Suba Bangla under company's rule in the early nineteenth century. The sponsors were Christian missionaries; and naturally religious debate was the dominant theme. Contending opinions started being echoed almost immediately afterwards both in Brahminical and Islamic rejoinders in rival vernacular press.

Secular English-language newspapers was essentially establishment, although a difference was also made there with separate publications by neo-Bengal intellectuals. What is note-worthy is the proliferation of the informal press, the so-called Bat-talar punthi, even before the Sepoy Mutiny, with socio-economic critiques not only of the colonials, but also of their native imitators. Patriotic and more political disaffection against colonial domination found expression in a more veiled or allegorical manner, mostly in revivalist terms, in the formal vernacular press as well. Just two decades after the crushed Mutiny, the establishment felt again so threatened by the growing animosity of the vernacular press that a Vernacular Press Act was promulgated by the Viceroy Lord Lytton in 1878 prohibiting publication of anything likely to inflame anti-

Government sentiments. English-language publications were made exempt, and as such the discrimination provided both fuel and scope for protests and submissions. Lord Lytton's liberal successor Lord Ripon repealed the Act after some five years of its introduction. But foundation was laid therein for future press control regulations and practices, from the scars of which our media life as a whole has yet to recover. Calcutta nevertheless can rightly claim to have laid foundations of a plural press in South Asia.

Regional plurality of the press in the formal sector was also a happy feature in these parts from the very beginning. One of the first vernacular newspapers came out from Dhaka. By the end of the last century, regional newspapers came out in many parts of the erst-while Suba Bangla, particularly in Bengali-speaking communities. The controls, however, remained essentially elitist, and even in the informal press, elitist obsessions filtered in and overwhelmed other ideas. By the beginning of this century, the ambitions of the middle class and anti-colonial activities dominated the press in a fairly representative reflection of various points of view in various publications. Through the nineteenth century, anti-colonial peasant movements and actions, which generally-speaking never managed to grow little beyond local sphere of influence, obtained

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practically no media support whatsoever. By the beginning of the century, media was prolific in direct or indirect appreciation or criticism of self-government pleas as well as anti-government subversions both in formal and informal sectors.

A reasonably representative ethnic press either in formal or in informal sector failed to develop, however, despite the fact that quite an articulate scheduled caste leadership began to take shape, some missionaries remained active exclusively in tribal areas, and the percentage of literacy amongst some ethnic minorities was significant compared to overall trend.

Although Urdu was much less in usage in Suba Bangla compared to Persian (Lord Bentinck's imposition of primacy of English in educational and in official communication triggered a string of protest from Hindu College pleading for retention of Persian), a significant Urdu Press developed in Calcutta and later in Dhaka. By now it is all but extinct.

Press life in Bangladesh developed with transfers of Muslim press from Calcutta and the more parochial district publications. The inhibitions imposed by massacres, mass

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exodus and violent sentiments associated with the partition of India did not for long suppress the traditional trend of plurality of the formal media in Dhaka and elsewhere in East-Bengal.

Safety Act and other restrictive press regulations specifically designed to combat what was at that time labelled under the general heading of anti-state activities did. Nevertheless, Dhaka press demonstrated a characteristic guile in managing to circumvent restrictions to express true feelings.

Dhaka press essentially drew its elan from its political commitment to a pluralist political order and a civil society. The traditional ~~pluralist~~^{MUSLIM} press soon waned with the rise of a highly-politicised and combative print media that took on the establishment on a variety of issues -- particularly political pluralism and economic disparities. It also reflected quite stridently the class issues of the time and the secular questions. The latter had a long history of peasant movements against feudalism and usurers, mostly led by Muslim [↻] ~~serfs~~ --- the last of whom has become immortal in the person of late Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani.

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Hence Dhaka newspapers of the fifties and the sixties essentially remained a forum of political dissent and pluralist ideas. The press was transparently poor in resources and technology, but was worth its weight in gold in its issue-based struggle for political freedom and economic recompense -- the two most abiding theme of politics of the time.

Even my personal involvement with print media journalism was directly proportional to my political emotions. It has been a passionate affair since, despite three closures and two imprisonments.

The post-Bangladesh press was initially obese with some exceptions like us --- please forgive my immodesty. The dissenting press -- few and far between at that time -- passionately raised their voices against what was perceived to be an authoritarian rule and hence an anti-thesis to a pluralist political order. The external factors of perceived domination by the benefactors of the 1971 war of independence and the internal factors of proto-fascism that had led to the nemesis of a one-party state, lent the dissenting media an extraordinary power of influencing the political process. But tragically politics of the time was mauled and repressed beyond recognition; and it took bloody

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-- and brutal assassinations and interventions to effect the change that is a return to political pluralism.

But it has not been one of unmixed blessings. Contrarily it turned out to be a long period of military-turned-civilianized rule for the next one and a half decade.

If the military's insertion into the civilian social structure was fortuitous in the beginning it, soon assumed permanence in Bangladesh body politic with the military's ultimate claim to a permanent role in the statecraft in a constitutional way. The claim could not materialise but subjected the nation, to a longest-lasting dictatorial / authoritarian rule that created a mini-Marcos syndrome under former President Ershad.

The press also started to get inured to the syndrome and gradually lost its elan till the raging streets whipped it awake to its obligations.

But for the exceptions of a few -- including us -- notwithstanding, the plurality of Dhaka press does not any more reflect the political passions of earlier times. Big money has entered the media and it is now a private ministry of information holding the purse-strings for the media of the 1990s.

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Yet not everything is lost in the current historical period that has seen the spectacular revival of representative political culture. And individual journalists and media are still trying to keep their nose above water and address the pluralism issues of the 1990s.

As the print-media is falling into the clutches of corporate business, Dhaka still has a powerful alternative media to reckon with. These are mostly independent papers unrelated to business interest of the promoters or the imposter - editors.

Some pluralism issues --- race, class, gender et al --- are being addressed by this alternative media. Along with it has grown some exclusive ethnic media forum pioneered by some NGOs media dealing with women and gender issues started by concerned woman activists and some professional and sectoral publication. The impact of these are growing besides whatever issues find their way into the formal media.

