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The Role Of Media Institutions In Promoting Pluralism :
Perspective From The Print Media

By

Nilratan Halder
The Role of Media Institutions in Promoting Pluralism: Perspective from the Print Media

By Nilratah Haider

The Orwellian vision of a totalitarian society lorded over by a Big Brother is fast receding in the distant horizon. If any single scientific and technological development can claim an unrivalled credit for disproving the English writer's "1984", it certainly is the media — electronic medium to be precise. Instead of becoming the unblinking eyes of the Big Brother, TV's constant prying gaze has placed all his actions under scrutiny.

No wonder, over the past few years the bastions of totalitarianism and autocracy are crumbling down like a pack of cards. Marshal McLuhan's concept of a global village, on the contrary, has irresistibly been holding good and the world today is more pro-pluralism than ever before. Notwithstanding a few isolated but highly explosive cross-currents running on the line of ethnicity and religious fundamentalism, the wind of multi-party democracy is sweeping across the globe.

When the Soviet Union came crashing, it may be due as much to its own overweight as to the glittering and free — if not promiscuous — life and jeans that made unavoidable appeal to the relatively cloistered life of the Soviet youths, thanks to the electronic box — some call it idiot box — that brings the world into one's drawing room. As an information appliance TV has done wonder in changing life in as far as Bangladesh to Bolivia or Botswana or Nepal to Norway. The Synthesizing effect is subtle, not pronounced, but it is unmistakable. Contrarily, it is a process of tribalisation too, in that oral communication withinstant visual reports, leaving small scope for imagination, takes the centre stage.

So much for the electronic medium that has been undergoing mind-boggling technological revolution. Now to turn to the print medium, the exercise may look dull, toilsome and even unrewarding. But since my subject is its promotional role in relation to pluralism (I hasten to add, particularly in the context of Bangladesh), I take the opportunity to make the issue as controversial — if not attractive — as possible; knowing of course full well that I run the risk of not doing enough justice to it.

To be fair, print medium's falling power must be acknowledged. Even in the early days of newspaper or during the subsequent period of its unchallenging supremacy, the access to this medium remained pitifully limited. In countries like Bangladesh, where about 70 per cent people above the seven-year age are illiterate, newspapers as a medium of message are useful only in a limited way for obvious reasons. Add to this the functional literacy — a level of education that renders one the ability to do simple enumeration and make sense of the contents of newspapers — and the subscribing power, along with physical constraints — like road transport and other communication facilities — in reaching the daily package of news and views to the door-steps of people, the print medium's limitations become all the more manifest.

Clearly, newspapers, magazines and periodicals are yet to become a daily necessity for the majority. The question of books on special subjects making available to them does not simply arise. Like books, the daily reading materials are still produced and sponsored by and catered for the elite and privileged classes, leaving the overwhelming majority out of the facility's bound. This is on top of the information imperialism that disproportionately determines the flow of news and views either way — from the rich world to the poor one and the vice versa.

Against such a backdrop, the print media's role in promoting pluralism in countries like Bangladesh should be made to get a realistic picture. But before entering into detailed deliberations on the Bangladesh situation proper, let me draw a few contradistinctive features of what is known as pluralism. By the very mention of this most familiar word, the primarily political connotation becomes inescapable but the nature of Western democracy largely based on two-party monopolies — as in the USA and Britain where a third party, Social Democratic Party (SDP) has recently emerged — cannot be the ideal form of multiparty choice. Such complaints have been made from different corners of the world. And this is not for nothing. Even Madan Bhandari, the redoubtable communist leader of the host nation, has made his point in no uncertain terms. The new democracy he envisions will have ensured the involvement and participation of the largely neglected segments of society, who constitute the majority of the population, according to their free and best judicious opinions, in making the choice or putting forward candidatures for the people's representatives. Entrenched power should not hold sway over qualities and merely to be, not just theoretically but in reality, educated and informed enough to form their own opinions about the candidates independently.

However political pluralism is tied to a whole lot of other diverse human societal interactions — cultural and religious ones taking a pronounced role. On the same token, the economic policies followed by a country, although having a pivotal role in ensuring the well-being of its people, have not found a fair reflection of the poor but most productive segments' opinions in shaping a pluralistic society as such. The world was once sharply divided on the line of managed, mixed and free-market economies. Today after the disintegration of the socialist states, it is mostly a free-market economy that is sweeping the board. On this most important issue, governments the world over seem to be very conservative and even autocratic. It is money power that rules and turns peoples power relatively inefficient and inoperable.

Print Media and Pluralism in Bangladesh: Glimpse from the Past

For Bangladesh it has been a hard road to democracy. The legacy of colonial rule — for two long spells — and military dictatorship has had its indelible imprints on the body politic. Pitted against overwhelming odds, the print
Ever since the first Bengali Weekly, Samchar Darpan's publication on May 23, 1818 — some consider Bengal Gazette as the pioneer, periodical published sometime between May 14 and July 9 — in the undivided Bengal, a battle line has been drawn between the progressive and conservative forces. Rangpur Bartabaha, a weekly, published between August-September, 1947, is credited to be the first newspaper to appear from the then East Bengal, now Bangladesh. During the 1857 Sepahis (soldier) Mutiny or the first war of independence against the English, this weekly started asserting its interests in politics. A press act introduced by Lord Canning to muzzle publications led to its close-down.

Then Dacca News made its appearance as the first English weekly from East Bengal on April 18, 1856. The role of this weekly can be understood from the fact that a note of warning was served on the paper for its article in its August 1, 1857 issue on the Tenure of Land by Europeans in India. So the paper wrote on August 15 in its editorial, "... the whole force of the government was next turned to crushing the most talented periodical of the day ... after a terrific struggle the editor was disarmed, British India saved."

Although the gagging act of 1857 was withdrawn in June, 1858, another act, the Vernacular Press Act was enforced on March 14, 1878 when Gladstone became the prime minister of Britain. This act was also repealed but only after a decade, when in 1885 Indian National Congress has already emerged as a political party and started criticising the British rule, harsher laws were being put in place to stop all criticisms. The list is obviously long but there is hardly any need to go into details for the formation of an idea of the incongenial environment in which the newspapers were struggling to establish their rights.

The creation of Pakistan brought no relief either for the people of the eastern wing or for the print media. In fact, the trials and tribulations suffered by both have been almost identical. Created on the basis of two-nation theory, Pakistan's only common but not cementing factor was religion. Culturally and linguistically different, its two wings spread apart by more than 1,000 miles of hostile foreign-land, Pakistan was an unviable proposition from the very beginning. Its separation was only hastened by the domineering attitude of the minority west towards the majority East. The first attack in the form of stifling the voice of East Pakistan came on its language, Bangla.

Language Movement: Historic Event

With scant respect for people's will and freedom of expression, the ruling circles in Pakistan wanted to make sure that Urdu and the culture of the western wing dominate from the very beginning. The confrontation was inevitable and the students in East Pakistan exploded in open rebellion. Thus history was written on February 21, 1952 when the students decided to break Section 144 of the Penal Code and the police opened fire on the procession, killing four demonstrators. Embracing martyrdom on the question of establishing language is a unique event in the annals of mankind and this catapulted the entire nation to a solid ground of a distinctive cultural identity. Of the leading four dailies of the time, The Azad played a landable role, supporting the language movement. The Pakistan Observer had also been promoting the cause quite strongly. But on Feb 13, a few days before the historic 21st February, 1952, this daily was ordered to close down. Both editor and owner of the paper, Abdus Salam and Hamidul Huq Chowdhury were arrested.

The other dailies that took a firm stand in favour of the Language Movement were Millat, Insaaf and Amar Desh (My Country). None of the pro-language movement papers did comply with the government directive to publish a press note on the firing incident of February 21. The weekly Sainik (Soldier) brought out an special issue. So did the weekly, "Chashi" (Farmer) and the police ringed the office in the evening to seize the equipment and printing materials. Mother tongue Bangla acted as a unifying agent during those crucial period of Bangladeshi's history. In the face of repression and harassment by the police, most newspapers and journalists stood rock-solid uncompromising on the question of language. But this is not to mean that the political views of all had suddenly transformed for a pro-East Pakistan stance.

It is in such a setting the 1954 national election was going to be held. In power at the centre was the Muslim League, the party that under the wings of Mohammed Ali Jinnah made possible the creation of Pakistan. But the West Pakistan's discriminatory policies and the sharp division created by the positions on the language issue brought the premier party's popularity almost to zero. However the Azad, Sangbad and the Morning News were staunch supporters of the Muslim League.

It is exactly at this crucial juncture The Daily Ittefaq emerged as the most vocal supporter of the cause of the Bangalees. Although the United Front, an alliance of different provincial political parties, including Krishak Sramik Party and the Awami League, in East Pakistan swept the election of 1954, it was in power for only 45 days. Then a long dark era of palace intrigue, including political horse-trading and raw greed for power, marked Pakistan's politics. The country's precipitous fall into martial law declared on October 7, 1958 was the inevitable result. It was a transition from the civil anarchy to the military one and the process was made complete by General Ayub Khan taking over from president Iskander Mirza on October 28, 1958. The constitution that could be prepared after eight long years was finally passed in 1956 but Ayub Khan's move rendered it ineffective through its suspension.

During all this time up to the imposition of martial law, the print media were subjected to a host of regulations. Some of them are — the Press and Registration of Books Act, 1867, Newspaper (Special Powers) Law 1931, State (Sedition) Law 1922, Government Information Secrecy Law, 1923, State (Defence) Law 1954, Pakistan Security Law and Provincial Security Law for People. The military government then further tightened the noose by combining the
During the tumultuous days of 1969, the Azadi played a very strong role in favour of the dissenting voices raised in this part. But reimposition of martial law by Yahya Khan did not make matters any easier for the media. However, a national election was held on December 7, 1970 under the martial law. In the election the Awami League emerged victorious but the Pakistani military rulers refused to hand over power. Now the Bangalee people responded to Sheikh Mujib's call for non-co-operation with the military rulers. The newspapers of East Pakistan, without exception, stood behind the movement and this time it was the moment of truth for those papers supporting Pakistan.

After nine months of bloody war, Bangladesh emerged as an independent state. During the war months quite a number of weekly and fortnightly newspapers and periodicals were brought out. But they were mainly time server. Jai Bangla, Mukti Juddh, Banglar Bani, Ramangan etc were brought out to keep the morale up. After independence, the newspapers faced a different challenge and this is exactly where the test of their strength was stretched to the limit.

Newspapers in post-Liberation Bangladesh

Immediately after independence, the print media, including books on war of liberation, were naturally busy taking stock of the nine months during which time 30 million people were killed, many times more displaced, infrastructures including communications networks destroyed. As the food shortage and scarcity of other daily necessities showed no sign of coming to an end, the media gradually began to shift their focus on such issues. But the greatest challenge in fact came from a section of impatient youths, who did not surrender their weapons and wanted to see their lives quickly changed for the better, and the saboteur, who wanted to prove to the world that Bangladesh as a sovereign country was not viable. This was far from a healthy trend towards pluralism.

Politics demanded sacrifice, but few were ready for it at the moment after months of suffering. A handful of newspapers and periodicals that hit the stand then can hardly claim to have raised saner voices either; on the other hand, a political polarisation was fast taking place, cashing in on the economic hardship of people, lawlessness and restlessness in society.

Some radical left parties did not want to let go this opportunity and they assembled behind Moulana Bhasani, Siraj Sikder formed the Purba Bangla Sarbabara Party to lead an armed rebellion against the government of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. On October 31, 1972, Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD) came into being with the aim of establishing scientific socialism. An open confrontation occurred on March 17, 1974 when the JSD tried to gherao the Ministry of Home. The police opened fire, killing three. The JSD now was bent on putting up an armed struggle against the administration all across the country.

The new sovereign country came under its first emergency rule on December 28, 1974. A series of events, including the 1974 floods that caused a famine, turned people against the administration of Sheikh Mujib. During this period the Ittefaq came away from its usual progressive stand and started a propaganda campaign virtually for a Mushtaque Bangla. Khondker Abdul Hamid, a collaborator during the liberation war, began writing columns in the Ittefaq and the Azadi under the pen-name Spestahboni (outspoken) and morde mumin respectively. The theme was evidently communal. The Holiday (weekly) was spreading lies, according to Facts & Documents: The Murder of Bangabandhu, often supporting the anti-liberation forces.

Against such a backdrop came the Printing and Publications Ordinance '73 followed by the Special Powers Act '74 and the Newspaper Annulling Act in June 1975. In fact, the newspaper annulment order cancelled the permission for publication of 222 newspapers of which there were 29 dailies, 138 weeklies and the rest bi-weeklies, fortnightlies and others. Four lucky dailies: The Bangladesh Observer, The Bangladesh Times, The Banglar Bani and The Danik Bangla survived. This move was tuned to the unprecedented decision taken on the political front of the country. It was the option for a one-party system called Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League (BAKSA). Certainly, there was an ideological compulsion that made Sheikh Mujib to go for the move. But it was a setback for political pluralism.

There were feeble protests, if any from a few journalist but hardly a dissenting voice was heard about the move's sagacity. After the assassination of Sheikh Mujib, on August 15, 1975, the military rule continued till July 1978 when elections were held and political parties allowed to operate with licence from the government. One positive development of this time is the restoration of the publication rights to the newspapers banned in 1975. However this period stretching from July 1978 up to March 1982, when the military once again took over, was marked by political horse-trading similar to the one in Pakistan period between 1954 and 1958. The newspapers were restored the publication right, but not the freedom conducive to what is euphemistically called "let thousand flowers bloom."
When the print media, newspaper in particular, were smarting under the cumulative effects of resource constraints and unwritten regulations, the military putch came. During this time, up to November 10, 1986, the newspapers faced a most intriguing situation. They had to pretend to be free without enjoying the right to freedom. Even after President Ershad was forced to lift martial law in November 1986, newspapers had little to celebrate. Press advices communicated over telephone did pour into newspaper offices all the time. Ershad was in power for 3,159 days and during this period, press advices were sent for 693 days. On 13 October, 1982, one such press advice was, "no reports on the strike/work stoppage could be published." After the lifting of the martial law the practice continued and another advice runs on April, 1990, "no criticism of president for this or that reason." The trend continued till his resignation on December 4, 1990. All through, the media have been locked in an uphill battle to project truth. But the print media were in a more vulnerable situation. On the one hand Ershad patronised some papers acting as a government spokesman and also pampered others for their communal and fundamental line. Inquilab, Millat and Sangram have not only served the religious fundamentalists' interests but also that of Ershad.

The task of doing objective journalism has been made further difficult because of the newspapers' ownership marked mostly by non-professionalism. In a way political freedom has been directly linked to the development of newspaper industry. In a country where 15 years out of 23 years of independence have been under the rule of military men, anything is possible other than the media flourishing to a desirable limit. People in Bangladesh have depended more on radio, particularly on foreign broadcasts, during the movement against Ershad. Just before his fall Ershad declared emergency and the newspapers faced an unprecedented situation where their publication was meaningless. From November 27 to December 5, 1990, no newspapers appeared. That stand by the journalists also goes in line with the political development then.

Today, newspapers in Bangladesh, where a democratic government is in power, are relatively free but yet to break with its past legacy. As many as 209 dailies and 644 weeklies are published in the country. If numbers are any guide, the practice of pluralism appears to be quite healthy. But the reality may be far removed from the appearance in that the government-appointed trust still manages at least two papers, the tradition of which can be traced back to the regime of Ayub Khan. As it happened then government and semi-government advertisements were distributed on the basis of loyalty to the regime. Today the situation has remained more or less the same. This strong economic leverage has been used not to the best interests of the people. The Printing and Publication Ordinance, 73 is still there although some sections of the publication chapter have been left out to retain the Special Powers Act (SPA). Then the introduction of Anti-Terrorism Act 93 does undermine the human rights situation in the country. Given such constraints the newspapers here have made tremendous contribution to the democratic aspirations of the people. Politics and media, print medium to be precise, have run parallel all through the country's history. A nation in the throes of democratic aspiration finally earned a most free and fair election on February 27, 1991. The mainstream political parties agreed on making judiciary independent and the government-run radio and TV autonomous. That agreement is yet to be fulfilled but the newspapers which started appearing in dozens during acting-President Shahabuddin's interim rule between December 1990 to August 1991, however accommodates diverse opinions with two distinctive features—pro-liberation and anti-liberation stances. Ajker Kagoj, Bhorer Kagoj, two dailies, have moreover set a new trend in Bangla journalism. So has done The Daily Star in English journalism. Despite self-censorship and some yellow journalism, the print media in Bangladesh are yet to come of age but signs are quite encouraging. Realising their full potential calls for the removal of all the stumbling-blocks in their way. As mentioned earlier, the media have remained confined within the bounds of the privileged and opportunist class and the reason is clear. They have taken the lead in politics, so the papers are yet to exploit the strength of people's power.

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