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Media And Pluralism In Bangladesh

By

Akhtar Sultana
Pluralism has multiple meanings. One meaning would be different interest groups working a country, trying to persuade the government in accepting their views. It may also mean the presence of different ethnic, racial and religious groups in the country. Finally it may mean the multiplicity of ideas and ideologies in a country.

As for the first factor in the case of Bangladesh, we do not have such vested interest group as we see in the developed Western world. Bangladesh being a homogenous country, the people belong to the same race and speak the same language. Except for a small section of the people in Chittagong Hill Tracts and the Garo Hills ethnically we are of the same cultural background. As far as religion is concerned, there is pluralism. Islam is the dominant religion but we have Hindus, Buddhist and Christians in the country living in complete harmony. As for the third factor, we do have multiplicity of ideas and ideologies. There are more than 20 political parties, sharply divided into three distinct lines. The rightists—moderates and of the extreme variety, the leftists and the centrists.
The political parties in the country are the mouthpiece for ventilating the ideas and ideologies. Some of the political parties have their own newspapers. This again benefits the particular party. It places them in an advantageous position to propagate their ideologies. Some newspapers support certain political parties. This again benefits the particular party because the views that they subscribe to and their news are given more prominence than others. Then there are some newspapers totally controlled by the government. However, government control over newspapers is more flexible as compared to radio and television. The electronic media, the radio and the television are totally government controlled. Hence whatever news we receive from these media are government version, no better than press releases. Therefore I will not mention them in my discussion.

Now the question arises, what is the role of media in the society? Needless to say, the media's role is very significant. It can play a positive role and at the same time play a negative role depending on how the news is portrayed. A simple incident can be blown out of proportion, given colour and projected to the people in a distorted manner thus producing an adverse effect on the public. On the other hand the media can mellow down its tone as the situation requires, thereby reducing any chances of provocation that the news could have aroused.
Of course, the question that comes forth is that is it wrong for the media to report accurately about an event even though the issue may be sensitive enough to provoke a riot or any kind of adverse reaction? Or should the media use its discretion and play down the news? This is an ethical question, which requires balancing of social responsibility with journalistic ethics. The answer lies in balancing the two.

Due to party affiliations, we find newspapers becoming partisans. The norms of journalism, objectivity and accuracy are brushed aside to serve the party's interests. This happens more with newspapers supporting fundamentalist groups. Here I would like to cite an instance of reporting in a particular newspaper "Inquilab" on 31st October, 1990. Towards the end of 1990 a lot of public attention in Bangladesh was drawn over the issue of Babri mosque in Ayodhya, India. All newspapers in the country carried news about the Babri mosque. But the news that appeared in Jamat-i-Islam's (a fundamentalist group) newspaper, "Sangram" and another newspaper "Inquilab" which supports the fundamentalists were more pronounced. On 31st October, Inquilab came with a banner headline which translates as "Hindu extremists have destroyed Babri Mosque". It also had
a special editorial on its first page concerning the particular issue which said "We are hurt". Another 2/C headline read "Call for Jihad/Crusade against the attack on Allah's house." This news had no basis, Babri mosque had not been destroyed. There was an attempt for an attack, but it was repulsed by the troops who had been posted earlier by the Indian government apprehending such an attack. Indian troops had opened fire and even killed a few of the attackers. But this news was played down by Inquilab. This was an irresponsible act on their part. On the same day, the 31st October the minorities were attacked and some of their temples burned. Some of the political analysts described this attack on the minorities as an opportune attempt by former President Ershad to divert public attention to issues other than the strong opposition movement launched in the country for his removal. Next day, that is, on the 1st November, 1990 Inquilab did come out with a 2/C box on the top left hand corner apologizing for publishing the previous day's baseless news, for its editorial and also for the news item calling for a Jihad. Even in its apology, Inquilab did not divulge its source. But the damage had already been done. No matter how much they apologized, it cannot absolve them of their guilt. The
responsibilities of the killings, the damages to property and the burning of the holy temples rests squarely with the Inquilab. This was an instance of yellow journalism.

Universities, particularly Dhaka University in our country play a prominent role in the national politics. Student community has traditionally been very active politically. Students have been involved in all democratic movements right from the pre-liberation days. It was the students of the Dhaka University who played the leading role in establishing Bangali as one of the state languages of Pakistan. When Ayub Khan proclaimed martial law in 1958, it was the students of Dhaka University who protested. Again it was the student of Dhaka University who led the movement in 1969 for the restoration of democracy. Even during our liberation struggle the student community had been actively involved. Since the students exert such an important influence, the political parties have always been trying to get a hold on the student politics. The important political parties all have their student’s fronts. The students union elections are contested on a political basis with full support from the parent parties.

Here I would like to cite two instances, one of the Chittagong University and the other of the Dhaka University.
Chittagong University

Jamat-e-Islam's student front called the Islamic Chatra Shibir dominates the University politics in Chittagong. The ruling party, Bangladesh Nationalist Party's student wing called Jatiyatabadi Chatra Dal and the main opposition party, Awami League's student front Chatra League have been unsuccessful in their bid to wrest the political power in that campus. Inspite of the major differences, which exists among the parent parties, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and Awami League, their two student groups and some other student factions had joined hands against the Jamat's student wing, the Islami Chatra Shibir. The combined students group were successful in the student's election but their factional groupings made them weak. Against the backdrop of this situation, violence broke out on 22 December, 1991, when the Shibir boys attacked the Chattra Dal and Chatra League students which resulted in few killings and countless injuries. The next day Jamat-i-Islam's newspaper "Sangram" came out with 5/C first lead in bold letters blaming the other student groups for the incident. Furthermore, they termed the Vice-Chancellor known for anti-fundamentalist and pro-liberation views as a
supporter of former President Ershad government and held him responsible for the incident. Whereas on the other hand, Sangbad, an opposition newspaper also came out with 5/C first lead blaming the Jamat and the Shibir for the incident. Both the papers came out with editorials based on the 22 December incident. Even their editorials were according to their ideologies.

**Dhaka University**

In the Dhaka University, the political scenario is slightly different. Here the two contending parties are ruling party, BNP’s student faction JCD and the main opposition party, Awami League’s student faction Chatra League. On 27th October, 1991 there was a three-hour long gunbattle between the two factions which again led to few killings. The following day all newspapers carried the news with banner headlines of five or six columns. Here the reporting was more objective and accurate in the mainstream newspapers. Sangbad came out with an editorial on the 29th October holding the political parties responsible for the incident and asking them to bring an end to armed politics and to withdraw political affiliation from their respective student groups. Similarly, Bangladesh Observer in its editorial on the 29th October appealed to the political parties to come forward and resolve their differences.
It is true, that the more neutral, mainstream newspapers like the Observer and the Daily Star have from time to time come out with thought provoking editorials suggesting solutions. Perhaps, we need more awakening on the part of the media to realize the important role they play. How they are in a situation to manipulate and create public opinion and public pressure. They being the mirrors of society cannot afford to be indifferent. The entire society looks up to them for guidance.