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The Press System in Bangladesh

By

M Tawhidul Anwar
Bangladesh has now turned into a highly interactive society. The just concluded parliamentary election provided evidence that even the most sensitive press of Bangladesh could hardly sense the fast changing public opinion.

In the first place, the dailies played safe by reporting speeches and meetings of political contenders with identifiable slants commensurate with the policies of the papers. The weeklies followed them up with clear predictions of even seat counts. Based on these reports and predictions, the elite thronged to the party which, as if, was just going to form the government. Weeks after, the disillusionment came when the popular verdict proved all press predictions and opinion polls to be wrong.

The embarrassment caused to the journalists is not the contention of this paper, the concern is that the state of the press in Bangladesh still suffers from a sort of a pluralistic ignorance about people's aspiration allowing thereby a dual climate of opinion — one at the press level and the other at the level of the common men and women. In other words what the press predicted, the people proved them wrong. It has now become an eventual play of the people over the press.

Just a few months ago the scenario was different. It was a habitual play of the power over the press. The press criticised an airy thing called 'society', it assaulted the weak but always had to worship the powerful. Radio and television which remained a 'captive press' only did the worshipping. They had to toe where the power treaded.

The dailies and the weeklies divided among them two peculiar role positions. The dailies had four sacred cows in the President, his family, his real power base and his clique. Some of the weeklies had none. They went all out for exposure. Desktop publishing has made the birth of a weekly less costly and hence the enterprising young people took this venture with some measure of social commitment to expose even at the cost of closure of the weeklies. This courage on the part of the weeklies and compromise position of the dailies had one thing in common. Both tried to serve the city-centered political and administrative elite at the cost of understanding the society which lay in the villages.

The popular verdict in the cities also proved another thing. The press even did not know what the city dwellers were thinking about whom to vote, far less assessing the realities in rural areas. When the voting trend was almost evident by the all night broadcast during the counting hours, a daily next morning went to that extent of showing the led as leading. This cannot be passed for an innocent pluralistic ignorance of the press. This cannot also be the policy of the paper. This could be a sort of ego-satisfaction of the journalists at the desk.

If we go into meticulous details of the contents of newspapers, there are evidences of divergent news treatment in a newspaper depending on who is sitting at the desk. This subjective tilt in objective reporting is yet another reason why the press often falters in portraying the realities at the popular level.
There are a lot more misconceptions bedeviling the press. The dailies, as if, are to report events only, the weeklies eventualities; events can even be distorted far far beyond slanting; eventualities cannot, as if, be reported without being subjective. Again, subjective reporting can also be passed for opinionated write up. In the name of exposure, the journalists, as if has the right to invade privacy.

The Press Council, a quasi-judicial body, looks after repairing the damages caused to images. But the annoying thing is that the repair is too very cursory pitted against the damages which are too heavy. The Council censures, admonishes and can never stop recurrence of the same commission or such commission to others. Suggestions are that the Council takes up more responsibilities in a full judicial capacity to, punish, not merely censure or admonish, those found wronging while reporting. The debate revolves round the easy reach and quick dispensation of justice.

In fact, a phobia-chain is working. Government says the press people are irresponsible; they are atrocious. They take liberty for licence. So there should be some mechanism to make them responsible. The journalists say they are not enjoying adequate freedom to write what the ordinary people do not see. The editors speak of the growth of the institution of editorship. The proprietors have their 'interests which go beyond journalism'.

Article 39 of the Constitution says the freedom of the press is guaranteed subject to 'any reasonable restriction imposed by law' in respect of the security of the state, friendly relations with foreign states, public order, decency or morality or in relation to contempt of court, defamation or incitement to an offence.

To date, there are about twenty-five restrictions which curtail freedom of the press without being identified as reasonable. Two of them were abused and hence the union leaders say they must go.

The recent commission reviewed the Printing and Publication (Declaration and Registration) Act of 1973 and the Special Powers Act of 1974. Both were partially repealed. The government now cannot restrict the registration of newspapers by any individual and a non-journalist cannot be an editor. Relating to restrictions of the freedom of press, censorship or pre-censorship by the government has gone and newspapers cannot be closed down by an administrative order.

On the face of it, the journalists, the editors as well as the owners have been protected, but the fear of atrocity in guise of exposure by the press remains for the people.

The Press Commission of 1984 recommended amendment to the Press Council Act, 1974 to empower the Council "to recommend" in appropriate cases suspension of accreditation of journalists, public sector advertisements, postal concessions and the like to the offending publications. The Commission hopes to see newspapers under joint stock company, trust or cooperative, repeal of some of the black laws, growth of editorial institutions, and cessation of preferential treatment to certain newspapers in the distribution of advertisements.

Recent debates consider the 1984 recommendations about the press system to be too simplistic and in some cases contradictory. It has accepted 'reasonable restrictions' in the form of laws to ensure the growth of 'a responsible press'. It, in fact, warned that the journalists must 'be careful' to exercise professional privileges and instructed the editors to function 'within the limits of the agreed owner-editor relationship'. By an innuendo the Commission showed its preference to the practice of development journalism when it recommended that the press should be viewed as a development messenger. Sensing that the Commission report was going to be an elitist document, the professional representative on the Commission provided supplementary notes of concern where it was stated that 'the precedence is for freedom, responsibility
follows. To talk of responsibility before freedom might be seen as a subterfuge to gag the press*. One member did not sign the report. The report thus carried some disjointed aspirations to serve the masters, not the mission. Tax holiday to allow the press to grow as an industry was sought in complete disregard for the mission that it should stand for.

Coming from the depth of the missionary zeal of the pioneering stage and passing through the institutional stage of their increased circulation and influence, efforts to take the press to the coveted corporate stage are fewer. We conceive of an industry with a mission.

At the moment one mission of the press should be the practice of democratic culture in the country. The caretaker government since the fall of the erstwhile tried to introduce rationing of radio and television time to major political parties, allowing the dailies and weeklies even to criticise the government of the Acting President. Institutional groups and press associations are mounting pressure to see the captive electronic press free from the fold of the information ministry. This is a move toward some corporate structure of the electronic media. Entrepreneurs are also showing interest to see alternative competitive channels by the side of the state-run radio and television to allow an outlet of creative people and a diversity in news and views.

In the making of such a corporate structure or competitive set-ups for the electronic media, it is feared that the essence of such a venture contributing to the practice of democratic culture will first be misunderstood by the government and the bureaucracy. It is here that the print media should act as one of the pressure groups to help free the electronic media from captivity. The combined strength of a free print and electronic press should provide fresh nutrient to the sustenance of democracy in Bangladesh.

In the print media, some changes have already taken place in their ownership. Beside the papers with absolute political tilts, we are currently undergoing two discernible experiments. Journalism graduates are turning into potential owners and editors of papers and agencies with a recruitment policy for trained hands and secondly, senior journalists are organising joint stock companies for investors with a recruitment preference to journalism graduates. Both are working well. These experiments have however posed a challenge to papers under proprietorship and trust due mainly to the exodus of good hands from these papers to earn both honour and emoluments. This is only the beginning of the process as the popular papers are still those who are harping on religious sentiments or chauvinism. The fallacy remains to be that the prestigious papers in Bangladesh are not popular. The new experiment hopes to gain high circulation by selling news and views, not by dishing out crude sentiments. This experiment has already succeeded in increasing the readership of the weeklies.

In this continuous see-saw in the system of press in Bangladesh, most dominant doctrines have already been tried. Though the current exercise in the system is that of press pluralism, in a crisis of confidence the practice of this doctrine in the past only aggravated the situation by unholy weightage to feuding sides. A socially responsible press only saw never emphases with frequent administrative changeovers. Authoritarian control only got the pressmen a chance to be united around a successful struggle for economism. In authoritarianism before the authority had been established, the author had to go.

The press in Bangladesh has seen all of these doctrines in exercise. In effect it always felt the acute symptoms of being caught between the pull of the lustful power of formal structures, the bemused politicians, the otherwise ingenuous planners and functionaries and the ever struggling people. The end result was that whatever the situation, the country must run, and in the absence of popular verdict at regular intervals, the existing formal structure always found an easy access to power. The press could not
help resolve this basic problem in polity. Only during the last upsurge, the newspapers by deciding not to come out till the autocratic regime goes added strength to see the advent of democracy. And now that a democratic government is installed, the press is trying to open up a process of popular mobilisation in respect of issues against the process of the accumulation of power so that some semblance of integration of these two processes can be found. It is currently involved in debating on the form of government.

As the last popular verdict has to some measure resolved the crisis of confidence, press pluralism as a doctrine of press system is being tried once again. Formulae are being perfected through either annulment or repeal of black laws. The miranda, in this case a democratic culture, should not then be a far cry for the press to emulate so that the nation can also share the same with them and add to the democratic process in Bangladesh a solid philosophical foundation of tolerance that the religions of our soil taught us.

References