

'The best profession in the world'

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THE congregation of media practitioners in the region (South Asia Free Media Conference) takes place at a time when the words "freedom" and "democracy", as understood by the book or practised on the ground, have been literally bombed out of their normative core and objective structures. The US-British invasion of Iraq, the physical occupation of that country under a neo-imperial doctrine, the second sacking of Baghdad leading to the plunder of the civilisational heritages as also the killing field in which hundreds and thousands of Iraqi men, women and children lay slain or maimed, have numbed humanity and changed the world forever. The first phase of the war is nearly over, though not conclusively in terms of its political and economic agenda or the future roadmaps to more such wars or enforced peace in west Asia or any other target country near or far afield.

The extant world order, painstakingly crafted since the Second World War, was already experiencing difficulties and hiccups in readjusting to the post-Cold War realities. Now it has been virtually smashed to smithereens, and the unipolar global village is at present standing on its head. The casualties across the board are not only freedom, democracy and the libertarian think-regime, but the media as well. If it took nearly a century to build the free media brick by brick in a large part of the globe, its architecture has come to totter in one fell swoop, because the media this time became a participant in the dynamics of the

techno-warfare and not the observer of, the witness to, and the scribe of the drastic war itself. This participation with an 'embedded' status of the global media at one end, and the contrary responses of media positioning on emotional, populist, nationalist and religious lines, at the other, have grievously undermined the objectivity of the media coverages in a polar way. Of the global media, electronic that is, the BBC and the CNN are illustrative of the partisan and selective nature of 'embedded' reportage. The global print media, however, would make a small allowance with the trifle of alternative or dissenting views on its pages. A bellicose *Economist* would not even care for such feigned niceties.

If the unilateralist invasion has damaged the global media for its 'embedded', and hence surrogate status, and produced the anti-thesis of delusional non-objectivity of lionising Saddam's unloved regime by some among others, the other bane of the global media was its dismissiveness towards the auto-reflexive anti-war mobilisation of a kind never witnessed before. Afsan Chowdhury, a probing media analyst, says in a paper presented at a seminar on the World Press Freedom Day on May 3 that the anti-war mobilisation was "much wider than expected" and "was very significant in the Western world, including the US". In his words, and we agree, "It was the single largest unity of mankind on the issue since contemporary history began, and this happened because of media linkages." But the media of the two countries that mattered chose to ignore it.

Curiously, while "reconstruction" is the buzzword now, the root villain in the causality of the neo-imperial invasion, the weapons of mass destruction (WMD), was granted abdication and allowed to disappear from the printed words or the broadcast scripts or the tele-images as conveniently as it was anointed for the purpose of the invasion. Conversely, there is also a non-objective trend in reinventing Saddam and Sons on both obscurantist and old-left lines. This deconstruction of media objectivity at the opposite ends hurts the media in the long run, though in the short run it may serve one of the polar ends to hide behind opportunistic amnesia, and to fan counter-productive passions at the other end -- in that order.

South Asian media environment

The media environment in South Asia, whether that of print or electronics, was infected by the above polarities impacting on objectivity. Historically too, the spill-over effects of the pre-and post-

partition communal divide, the high-intensity face-off between India and Pakistan over Kashmir leading to wars and insurgencies, the 20-year-long haemorrhage of Sri Lanka in Tamil insurgency-turned-fullblown-warfare, the low-intensity national minorities' insurgencies in the Indian North-East and Bangladesh's Chittagong Hill Tracts, or for that matter the Bangladesh-India discord over water sharing of the Ganges and also of other common rivers, and the demographic issue of Nepalese refugees ejected from Bhutan and lately the push-in syndrome on the Indo-Bangladesh border, entered the media domain with stridency, oftener blurring the facts on the ground.

Some of those conflicts or disputes or historical aberrations have been sought to be corrected or resolved or left to heal themselves. Whether or not satisfactorily, the CHT insurgency and Ganges water-sharing have been brought under the framework of treaties. The armed cauldron in the Indian North-East, however, persists and the Sri Lankan peace

process remains fragile. Kashmir, however, remains the hottest spot and impacts on the media environment more than anything else. The media feeds in this regard are highly partisan on both sides of the contention, and oftener enter the third country media domain in South Asia.

Praxis of press freedom

Having profiled the media as above in these seasons of drastic newsfall (the 9-11 tragedy, the war on terror, and last but not the least the Iraq conquest), it needs to be seen how some of the fundamentals in the praxis of press freedom are observed on the ground. The South Asian countries, now mostly under a representative and pluralist political order, have constitutional guarantees of free speech and free press. In this praxis, India can take pride in its longest history, followed by Bangladesh of the last one decade and earlier in late seventies, with Sri Lanka close on their heels. Even Pakistan, where the military holds the whip hand, the press is eminently free unlike the olden days. Content regulations like registration of media outlets and prepublication review have now been put behind. Post-publication punishment, considered prejudicial by the governments, and oftener meted out under criminal law, is also becoming scarcer. Use of the criminal law and unspecified charges of sedition *et al.* are abhorrent establishment practices and those can be easily reconciled under the express dictum of the civil law.

Access to information is, however, stonewalled by the bureaucratic excuse of secrecy interests. The Official Secrets Act of 1923, instituted in those days for guarding against espionage or restricting access to security installations, is used as the shield, though it has not been used for penal action for any leak of information having security implications either by the press or by an official. Nevertheless, it is strongly felt that the right of a journalist or the civil society to request and obtain documents from public institutions or, on refusal, to have access to relief from, say, an independent freedom of information 'umpire', needs to be guaranteed by law and not left to bureaucratic discretion or blanket denial.

Into the looking glass Now into the looking glass, freedom of the media is seen exactly what is in the beholder's eye. Hence, in applied journalism and not academic or clinical ones, in terms of hands-on practice with the printed word, the print-fare of the 'best' news "that is very often best presented" by Gabriel Garcia Marquez's definition, and the editorial decrees coming from the editor's tribune, means different things to different people.

To illustrate the faces in the eyes of the beholder. Only recently a Bangladeshi dignitary holding statutory high office called the populous Bangladesh print media a "rumour industry". The politicians in power routinely rant on the virtue of "responsible" and "constructive" journalism. The development partners, particularly the multilateral organisations, designate 'information' as a public goods and measure its short- and long-term input-output value on the calculus of the market and the percentage points in developmental statistics. Some donors find solace in NGO journales.

In the more abstract sense, press freedom is also seen from the instrumentalist perspective, 'in rendering, by way of expose', governmental abuse of power more and more difficult and less likely. That is what Joseph Stiglitz had to say before he parted with The World Bank and collected the Nobel award. The theoretical paradigm is drawn from the thesis of a preceptor Nobel-laureate, Amartya Sen, who says: "Countries with a free press do not encounter famines because the free press draws attention to the problem and people will view a government failure to act in such situations as intolerable".

Be those as those may, to use a cliché the boon or the bane of a free press are not necessarily axiomatic. Those vary widely and are oftener like the above perceptions or precepts, which are neither right nor wrong, or perhaps either or both. The relationship between free media and democracy is like what comes first: the chicken or the egg. But as Roumeen Islam points out in The World Bank publication, *The Right to Tell*, "it seems obvious that generally more democratic countries have freer press, but do free media promote greater democracy or does a functioning democracy promote a free media?" Although the measure may depend on many other variables quite unrelated to media and democracy themselves, we are committed to practise both media freedom and democracy and have the freedom of information by law.

The absence of freedom of information leads to the media's dependence on leaks, routinely attributed to sources speaking on condition of anonymity. This can be a two-edged sword, in the words of Stiglitz. He says, "They are an important way of getting information, that would otherwise be secret, into the public domain and an important way for government officials to shape coverage in the ways that advance their interests and causes. Hence, leaks may lead to more information but also to more distorted information."

On another plain, the absence of the above also leads to higher dependence on exogenous sources for data on public and governmental affairs and conduct like that of the Jane's weekly on military matters, Transparency International on corruption and even the BBC and the CNN, whose credibility has now come under a cloud.

In sum, governmental information under a legally-mandated disclosure and compliance regime has the highest reliability for reporting and analyses by the press to be shared with the people.

guard against networked hate journalism by stringers and legmen feeding on hate staples and living off them. Although it has abated somewhat in the last few months, the years from the mid-nineties to date saw the surfeit of it entering the media domain with calculated vehemence. The campaigns sneaking into the international press as well, say on Bangladesh, not only harms the media's objectivity but damages the victim country when anti-terror passion runs wild and becomes the most handy and convenient excuse giving the dog a bad name and then hang it. Such disinformation, when planted for material or propaganda gains at another's cost, is one of the most baneful aspects of stringer journalism.

The cocoon of terror by Bertil Lintner and Alex Perry's thriller fiction in the Time magazine are cases in point. The Reuters story, later withdrawn by the pioneer news agency of the world, and the Channel 4 episode leading to the restrictions on foreign journalists and the incarceration of two local stringers and two foreigners, since relieved, are among the unhappy episodes at both the ends of the government on one side, and the news agency and the journalists concerned on the other. While the government's reaction was knee-jerk in being heavily-handed, those episodes were directly proportional to the clandestine cooking of hate-broth.

The episodes have two lessons: one, visa facility for movements of foreign journalists into the country helps establish the subject-country's openness, and two, reduces chances of sneak entries, speculation bubbles, and fictitious journalism as those were from the world 'go'. On the positive side, the openness, though at times marred by intelligence tails, puts a premium on objectivity over disinformation or calculated hate campaigns. Phillip Bowring's reports in the *IHT* and the *South China Morning Post* and Amy Waldman's in *NYT* may not all be bouquets for Bangladesh and the government of the day, but are probing, balanced and neutral.

The visa restrictions on journalists, particularly those belonging to Bangladesh, India and Pakistan, need to be eased for the above reason. This will facilitate further media-linkages and more credible and objective news-gathering of journalists, seeking to cover one or the other country first-hand.

Through the looking glass

Now seen through the looking glass, I am made curiously by the description of a journalist by English novelist Evelyn Waugh.

His description of foreign correspondents covering a war in the fictional country of Ismailia in his 1930s novel *Scoop*, paints them in these words: "rat-like cunning, a plausible manner, a little literary ambition". It is not exactly complimentary. When rat-like cunning is stretched too far, it produces the Dhaka stringer's tale of a 5-time checking of a quote from a Minister

over telephone calls that never were. A little ambition produced the miscarriage of Channel 4's filming of a fictional Allah's party in the very heart of Dhaka and a purloined interview in which one of the two foreign contract-journalists, a UK citizen, faked herself under a *burqa*. Right to free speech is not the right to cook up white lies.

I will rather go by the conviction that print journalism is of a literary genre, though penned in a hurry. It is somewhat anti-intellectual in so far as it is governed by empiricism. It is creative and hence beautiful in so far as again, in Marquez's words, the "best news" is what is not obtained first but very often the news that is "best presented" for its news value and 'truth'.

Gabriel Garcia Marquez, who started as a journalist in the 24-hour roving academies of newsrooms, print shops, run down corner cafes and at Friday night parties, and remains a journalist, besides winning the Nobel prize for his *Hundred Years of Solitude*, calls it the best profession in the world. To quote Marquez: "Journalism is an unappeasable passion that can be assimilated and humanised only through stark confrontation with reality. No one who does not have this in his blood can comprehend its magnetic hold, which is fuelled by the unpredictability of life. No one who has not had this experience can begin to grasp the extraordinary excitement stirred by the news, the sheer elation created by the first fruits of an endeavour, and the moral devastation wreaked by failure. No one who was not born for this and is not prepared to live for this and this only can cling to a profession that is so incomprehensible and consuming, where work ends after each news run, with seeming finality, only to start afresh with even greater intensity the very next moment, not granting a moment of peace."

Having topped off my write up with Marquez's soul-lifting words, I conclude that the assembly of leading journalists from the South Asian countries must commit themselves to the security of the countries, the peoples of the region and the region itself by building the bulwark of unarmed peace and cooperation and giving life to the inert printed words.

"Not the rat-like cunning, nor the little literary ambition" -- it is the passion for truth and the romanticism of the words which one thinks are worth their weight in gold that make the true journalist run. That is the highest compensation for those who have fallen in love with it for a lifetime. It is hence the best profession in the world. Let's all make it beautiful.

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