

Let's Involve Journalists in Discussions on Professionalism in the Media

Although this may sound a little abstract and philosophical, ethics and morality form an integral part of professionalism within a newspaper organisation. Again, as many of us see it, editorial independence must grow from within, instead of being imposed from outside.

all different levels, not just on the proposed code but also on the whole range of issues facing the media. It will be a good exercise in promoting transparency and accountability, the need for which is emphasised by the press again and again where national issues are concerned.

In such a discussion which should be backed by research studies prepared by the Press Council, our overriding concern should be to

professional approach — he would unhesitatingly desist from lifting materials from foreign publications without as much as a credit, to the disadvantage of his competitors under the wholly mistaken notion that copyright of a feature used by a newspaper expires just 24 hours after its publication.

On this issue, I had a running argument with the late Hamidul Haq Chowdhury in late 1989

editor of being answerable to the company that owns the publication.

It is reported that the Press Council has taken up the question of qualifications and credentials of a professional editor. It should now go into the question of editorial independence of a publication, not just in the context of freedom from official interference but also from day-to-day interventions, going beyond the scopes of broad guidance, from the so-called owners of the publication.

Here, too, there are quite a few unresolved questions which may come into focus in our future discussion.

For instance, some ardent members of one of the journalists' unions made a case some time ago that one could qualify to be the editor of a paper only after he (or she) had put in at least 15 years in active journalism, presumably as a reporter, sub-editor or a feature writer. I was told that this was the surest way of keeping an owner out of the editor's chair!

There are a few flaws in this approach. If this principle had been applied in the past in the appointment of editors, this writer would never have the privilege of working under Abdus Salam, Altaf Hossain and Faiz Ahmed Faiz, all great personalities in the field of print media, who had little or no professional background before they took up editing three great dailies of their times.

"But the times have changed," said a journalist. "We are no longer living in the days of Abul Mansur Ahmed, Abdus Salam and Manik Mia." Then, he warned that we must do something about owners of newspapers — or their sons — sitting as *de facto* editors or as chairpersons of the Board of Editors, performing functions which still remain vague and ill-defined.

Fair enough. However, in dealing with a problem that can be tackled in so many other ways, we should not introduce restrictions which prevent people like Salam, Altaf Hossain and Faiz of the future from serving the media as editors.

So, here's only a part of the agenda for the Press Council when (and if) it is all set to promote professionalism in the media through an in-depth deliberation with journalists in the country.

AT HOME AND ABROAD

S. M. ALI

raise the level of professionalism in all different areas of print media in Bangladesh.

When I say, "all different areas", I do mean "all different areas", ranging from objective reporting and unbiased sub-editing to a newspaper's handling of advertisement, circulation and purely managerial problems. At this moment, many of these issues which belong to a grey area should at least figure in our discussion, even if we fail to reach a broad consensus on all these matters.

Few of these issues can be separated from ethics and morality, from the sense of right and wrong and even from the commitment of a newspaper to national interests. All this may sound a little philosophical and abstract, which a section of media managers may fail to apply to their commercial interests. However, journalists, especially editors, should see them as integral part of their professional attitude, without feeling obliged to sign an oath prepared by the Press Council.

For instance, once an editor develops the right mental attitude — or, what we may call, a

when I worked as the Editor of the Bangladesh Observer, I finally won the battle when Chowdhury received an invoice for a couple of hundred pound sterling from the *Independent* newspaper in London as reproduction fee for unauthorised use of some of its features by the Dhaka daily.

This issue is brought up only to emphasise how easy it is for the management of a newspaper to defy a professional norm and then to expect members of its team, especially the editorial staff, to adhere to the highest possible standard in the discharge of their responsibilities.

The problem is greatly minimised; but never entirely solved, when a newspaper is placed under the control of a professional editor. Whether or not the situation is an ideal one depends on the competence, commitment and working style of the particular editor. While he (or she) should be strong enough to stand up to the owner, if there is a single one, of the publication, there is certainly a need for the

What a Waste

To put it straight, the half-day hartal observed by the fourteen opposition parties, including the biggest one, the Awami League, was a colossal waste. It was a waste of the considerable public goodwill that is enjoyed by these parties, especially the AL. It was a waste of their organisational energy that could definitely have been better used on some other occasion. It was a waste of their political credibility, which will have suffered for continuing with the hartal, when SKOP, the main mover, withdrew. But far more importantly, it was a waste of national wealth. Through stoppage of work, we have fallen at least half a day behind where we would have otherwise been. In fact the cost is far greater because a half day is never really so. Most of the production units most likely did not open for the rest of the day. We know most offices did not. Then there is the question of wastage through destruction of property that occurred as a result of enforcement of the hartal.

The hartal was supposed to have been an expression of solidarity with the strike call of SKOP. The moment SKOP came to an agreement and decided to call off their move, the opposition, again as an expression of solidarity, should have called off its hartal. Now that it has gone on its own, how will the opposition fend of accusations that the expression of solidarity was a sham, and that it was using the SKOP call to promote its own agenda?

The opposition position, as expressed to The Daily Star by its deputy leader in the parliament, that the hartal was to demand inquiry of alleged corruption in all ministries and also to protest against government repression. This explanation is surprising, to say the least. Didn't we just have a consensus in the parliament on investigating the allegations of corruption in one particular ministry? There was a lot of back-slapping and mutual greetings and open comments about goodwill and cooperation between the treasury and the opposition benches. Is this the example of that co-operation? Commonsense dictates that we should wait and see how the special parliamentary probe body works. Perhaps all the questions of the opposition will be answered. Perhaps not. In which case the opposition can always take its point to the public. But to do so now, so soon after a consensus resolution in the parliament, begs all sorts of questions as to how seriously the opposition takes the parliament and its decisions.

The government is claiming that all this talk about corruption is without substance, and is nothing more than a political ploy. Behaviour of the opposition, like the one exhibited in calling for yesterday's hartal, almost immediately after the consensus inside the parliament, may force the public to give more credence to the government's position, than it may deserve. Behind all the rhetoric, posturing and propaganda, the public is looking for substance and meaning. Whoever will fail to provide it, will run the risk of losing credibility in the public mind.

As for the claims of political oppression by the government, we saw some nasty examples of it on 26 and 28 March last, and on the occasion of the Bangla New Year. We have written against them, and have condemned them. As for things happening afterwards, the print media has been reporting them regularly. The question is, have things come to a state that it calls for a hartal?

The Opposition did not give that impression during the just concluded session of the Parliament.

Hartal, as a political action, is a very serious one. It brings the whole society to a stand still. We will definitely take recourse to such mass actions — as we did so often in the past — if the situation calls for. Otherwise it amounts to a huge wastage of political energy and national wealth, as this hartal has been.

Better Deal for Small Farmers

Foodstamp system — one that seeks to directly help the poorest of the poor — is under consideration for introduction in the country, says a vernacular daily report. If carried on in a desirable manner, the programme surely holds the prospect of halting, if not reversing, the inexorable march of poverty in the most vulnerable segment of society, which unfortunately is the case now. Sri Lanka has introduced the system with a measure of success. There is no reason why Bangladesh will end up with different results.

The constitution of a task force with representatives from the Ministry of Agriculture and other related ministries, departments and the Planning Commission only points to the importance the government attaches to this matter. In fact, it is a tacit recognition of the hotly debated issue of the marginalisation process caused by the hasty switch-over to market economy without really creating the ground for it. The deliberations at a seminar on Friday have noted the alarming trend of impoverishment among the poor class of the people. Several other researchers also tried in vain to draw attention to the adverse impact the present agricultural policy was going to have on the small and marginal farmers.

The government realisation, although belated, that the landless and small farmers deserve a better deal is nevertheless a positive signal. Whether it can carry on with the programme or has to ultimately give in to the pressure from international donors and agencies is to be seen. But the fact that it is vigorously pursuing a policy of reintroducing subsidy on agricultural implements, so the report says, is welcome. The increasing production cost of agricultural produces has rendered farming unprofitable and whatever benefits there may be reaped by food traders and mill owners. The current prices of paddy are a case in point.

This is certainly a review of the earlier position of the government and a welcome one by all accounts. Small and marginal farmers, according to most studies, have remained the most productive class of farmers. Whatever the international financial institutes may suggest, getting them out of farming will lead to a sharp fall in production of food. The process has actually begun. But providing dole, like the foodstamp, on a permanent basis is not the answer to the problem. We are witness to the use of food for works programme for political purpose. So it is in the best of interests of all to keep the deprived majority employed and productive.

This opportunity for a relatively free discussion has been taken up by the Press Council of Bangladesh, a section of the press and, as expected, by some government leaders. In time, we hope, we will hear more views from a cross-section of media practitioners, channelled through the Council of Editors, journalists' unions and other representative bodies.

Not surprisingly, judging by conversations with several journalists, differences rather than a consensus have already surfaced over one of the major issues recently taken up by the Press Council — the formulation of a code of conduct for the fraternity. At this moment, we have no idea how many journalists here would endorse the code as "adopted" by the Council, sign it as an "oath" on the dotted line and expect it to be enforced by a self-regulatory body.

While I, for one, see no way of making such a code work, there are good reasons why the Press Council should organise a series of open discussions with a cross-section of journalists at

JAPAN and China, East Asia's two dominant powers, may soon become not only geo-political rivals but also geo-economic competitors, analysts say.

Nuclear-armed China, the world's most populous country, has long been a strategic player on the global stage. But until recently, the notion that the Chinese could give the Japanese serious competition in the economic field was unthinkable.

Grappling with its worst recession since World War II, the Japanese economic juggernaut no longer seems invincible. China, meanwhile, is enjoying a phenomenal surge of double-digit economic growth, igniting speculations it will emerge as the world's next superpower early in the 21st century.

"Relations between China and Japan are the key relationship in the region after US-Japanese relations," said Singapore premier Goh Chok Tong in a recent Tokyo meeting. "They will become even more important than US-Japanese relations in 15 to 20 years."

Asian countries are understandably keen to see that relationship develop smoothly. But many expect the two powers will compete fiercely even as they deepen their cooperation. Says economist Alan Ortiz, senior vice president of the state-owned Development Bank of the Philippines (DBP): "Asia will be the battleground where a bitter Sino-Japan economic rivalry will be played out."

By most yardsticks, China is still a midget beside Japan. China's manufacturing output, for example, stands at US\$175 billion a year, a tiny fraction of Japan's US\$1.2 trillion.

But the gap between the two economies is narrowing. This trend has been highlighted by studies of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank showing that the Chinese economy may be much bigger than previously thought.

According to the IMF's new method for computing the size of economies, which uses purchasing power parities (PPP) to take into account international differences in prices, China's share of total global output is six percent, which would make China the world's third-largest economy behind the United States and Japan.

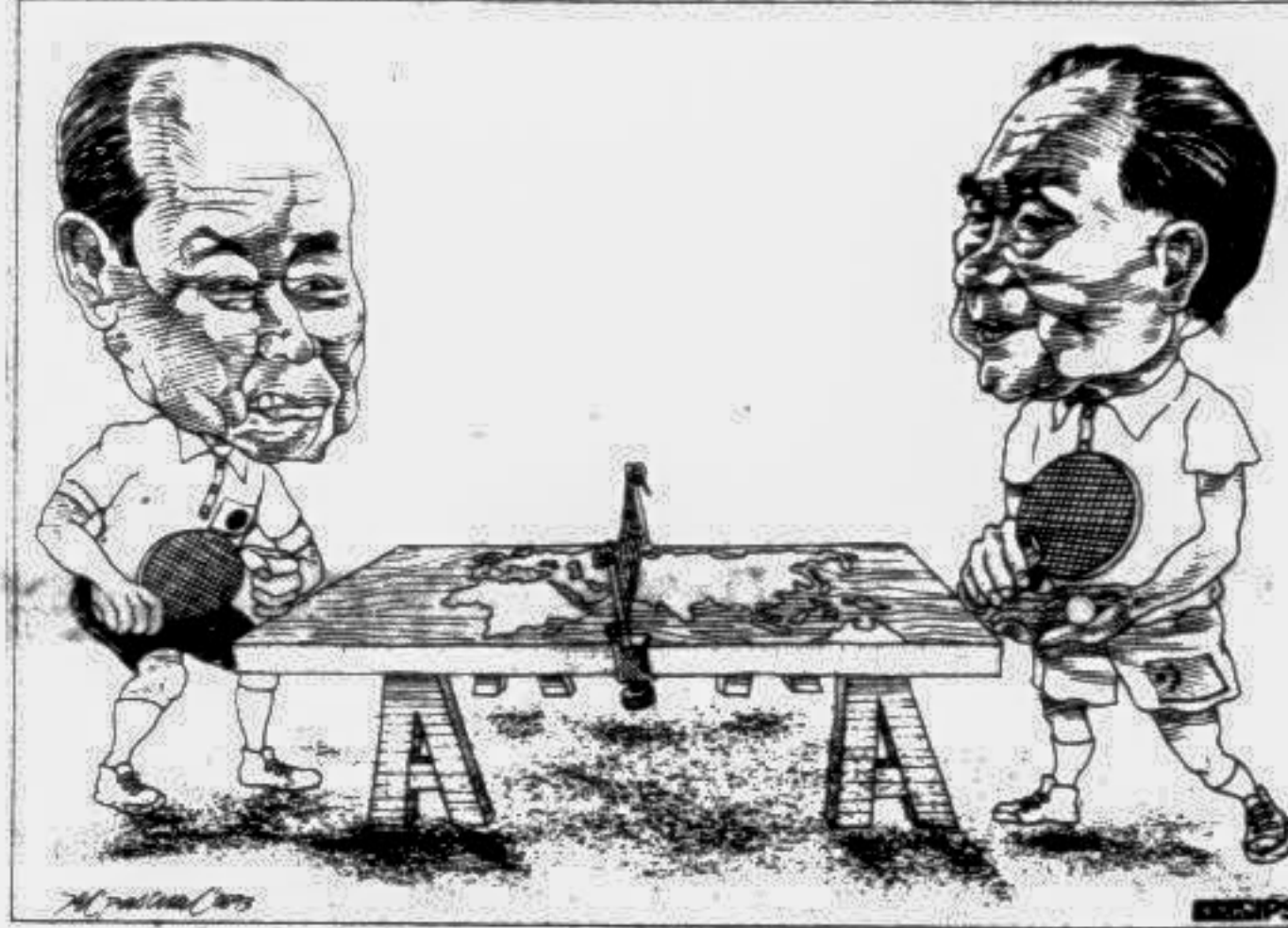
Based on the World Bank's new numbers, China is the second-biggest economy, overtaking even Japan, with a gross domestic product (GDP) of almost US\$2 trillion in 1992.

China's per capita GDP would thus be US\$1,700 versus US\$370 per capita under the present system of computing GDP, which converts its GDP into dollars at the official exchange rate. Thus, forecasts that China may become the world's largest economy anytime between 2010 to 2020 are no longer far fetched.

Unique among the world's

Battle of the Giants

China-Japan rivalry may soon extend to economic arena. Ramon Isberto of IPS reports from Manila



reforming socialist economies, China's explosive growth is being financed not only by the country's large domestic pool of savings (the Chinese are second only to the Singaporeans in Asia).

It can also draw from the "bottomless reservoir" of the 55 million overseas Chinese living in Asia, says economist Frederic Clairmont in one of his essays.

He says the 'Diaspora' — the overseas Chinese in Hong Kong, Taiwan and many South-east Asian countries — can supply 90 percent of the US\$350-400 billion that China needs by the year 2000 to meet its ambitious development goals.

The process is two-way. The regional business magazine Asia Inc recently reported that three of the top four Asian investment deals involved state-

owned Chinese companies. The China National Aviation Corp., for example, has bought into Cathay Pacific Airways. "Chinese capital is the driving force behind much of the new wave of Asian cross-border investment," the magazine said.

The "synergistic relationship" between overseas Chinese wealth and the booming mainland is creating what some call a 'Greater China'. A common Confucian culture and a nearly universal pride among Chinese in a revived, prosperous and influential China are helping build an economic community that reaches far beyond the country's borders and well into South-and North-east Asia.

But that very same territory is already 'Pax Japonica'. While Europe and North America have been struggling to achieve formal regional integration, Japan has quietly turned the region into production bases for exporting its products to Western markets.

Japanese investment in Asia soared in the second half of the 1980s when the rising value of the yen forced Japanese manufacturers to relocate plants to lower-cost sites overseas. With the yen rising even higher in recent months, pressure for more of such industrial migration is increasing. Most observers see

another wave of Japanese investment as soon as Japan recovers from its current slump.

A hefty share of those investments is expected to find their way into Asia — particularly in China, Vietnam and South-east Asia. Among other obvious reasons such as proximity, Asia is favoured because Japanese investments here are much more profitable than those in Europe or North America.

These trends means many Asian countries will be tied even more tightly to Japan in the years to come. And given its financial and technological superiority, Japan clearly has the edge in any economic contest with China. Japanese investment are sorely needed to modernise Chinese industries in so many areas.

But many Asian countries are already assuming China will be a major economic power in its own right — despite periodic threats of overheating and expected political convulsions once China's octogenarian leadership the political stage.

Said Goh: "The rise of China as an economic power cannot be stopped. China will increasingly have the means to try to reshape any international environment that it regards as threatening to its interests."

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Power failure

Sir, Power failure in Cantonment bazar area of Dhaka Cantonment has become very rampant now-a-days. In these days of scorching heat the area goes without power at least four or five times a day. This situation has developed after DESA came into existence.

Nobody seems to be bothered about the problem. Consumers occasionally lodge complaints to the local DESA authorities and the matter ends there. Since in the neighbouring areas power failure is very rare, frequent power failure in this part of Cantonment seems to be due to carelessness and inefficiency of dealing officials/personnel. May I therefore request the DESA authorities to look into the matter and save the people of heavily populated Cantonment bazar area from untold suffering.

Saleh Ahmed Chowdhury
Dhaka Cantonment

BTV's Janamat

Sir, Mr Firoz Noon's discussion serial entitled Janamat in the Bangladesh Television has been a matter of concern to an informed and conscientious citizen like me for a considerably long period of time. Once I thought that "let it go", because many things are not appropriately designed and disseminated when it deals with development communication in the BTV. But possibly this one has crossed the limits of a profes-

sional's endurance while assessing the quality of this programme.

I was wondering what good the BTV Janamat discussion serial was accruing to the family planning programmes of the country. Assessing the programme on the criteria of (i) entertainment value, (ii) disseminating effective information on the current problems of the Population Programme, and (iii) effectiveness to create demands for family planning (motivation-education), one would certainly agree with me that Janamat miserably fails to meet any of these. A sound communication programme disseminates effective and objective information to a targeted audience in order to achieve changes in their levels of knowledge, attitude and behaviour. Can Janamat programme, conducted by Mr Noon, claim success in meeting any of these criteria?

The discussants selected to participate in Janamat are perhaps neither nationally known personalities, nor do they represent the majority of the target audiences (the rural couples) whom the messages of family planning are required to be addressed to. These discussants, including Mr Noon, have never demonstrated that they are aware of the specific community and individual level problems on family planning and MCH, which are currently faced by the programme. They have so far addressed the problems from an abstract and generalistic level reflecting ignorance of

the specific problems, which today impede acceptance of family planning by the millions of eligible couples in the country.

Already valuable information are available from a large number of surveys and publications on family planning in the country. I believe, they felt little necessity of consulting these findings. Many people bear high esteem about their self generated wisdom, when it comes to the issues of dealing with people's problems.

The Janamat programme never involved a satisfied acceptor as a discussant, while every year the Family Planning Programme is awarding a host of couples as ideal acceptors of family planning with national recognition on the Population Day. This programme is a monotonously designed lecture session by individual participants; it fails to telecast the actual sessions of motivation education conducted in the field by the field workers belonging to the government and the NGO programmes of the country. The programme has never objectively projected the feelings and opinions of the political or community leaders on family planning in the country. The participants are frequently selected from among the urban middle class most often demonstrating poor knowledge on the current situations of FP/MCH programme, its weaknesses and achievements. Can these participants be identified as the effective role models, whose deliberations may affect the attitude and levels of motivation of the large target audiences in the country? Apparently this was never a concern of Mr Noon while designing his presentation in the TV.

Television is no doubt a powerful medium of modern communication, but it is also a

very costly medium. It is not also true that the BTV does not telecast effective programmes. The examples of good programmes telecast on development communication from BTV may be identified with the comparable programme on agriculture.

When will the audience of BTV be presented with an effective programme on family planning? This remains a concern to be solved by BTV authorities.

Nawab Sobhan
Lalmatia, Dhaka

'We remember, Rima'

Sir, The murderer of Rima, her own husband, Munir is to be hanged. Justice is done. Rima's soul will rest in peace. But hundred and one doctors have appealed to spare Munir's life because his parents — "honourable people" — will suffer for his death. For God's sake, spare us the rhetorics.

These doctors can show sympathy to the parents and we will join with them at that; but sparing the life of a cold blooded, ruthless murderer? How could they even think to be a part of this appeal boggles our minds. Has it been that long a time that they forget the gory details of how ruthlessly Rima was butchered by Munir?

The hundred and one doctors would do greater service to the society and the dead if they build a monument for Rima so that the Munirs of this country are reminded that people do care for Rimas of this country and will stand for their rights.

Those who care
Dhaka

OPINION

Corruption

Dr M T Haq

In an article on "Corruption — a legacy of the past regime yet to be banished-II" published in The Daily Star of 24 December, 1992, I said "I felt happy and assured when once I watched and heard Professor Badruddoza Chowdhury, the Deputy Leader of the ruling party, answering questions in this field in a television interview quite sometime back. Professor Chowdhury rightly indicated that when corruption will not be indulged in by the leaders at the top, corruption will be less at the lower stages. This is a good statement, but corruption has become so deep-rooted and ingrained in the habits of the people that I doubt if corruption at the lower levels has now shown any reduction in extent." In fact corruption in all forms, in all areas and at all levels can hardly be eliminated in Bangladesh in the existing state of the society.

I have so soon discovered that Professor Chowdhury was wrong. I have noticed in the news media during the last fortnight and so that even some senior Cabinet Ministers have been charged with and challenged on corruption cases in the Sangsad, apart from the sacking of Mr Nurul Huda by the Prime Minister. Mr Huda was a State Minister, Establishment, Prime Minister's own portfolio. The Sangsad Speaker came out with suggestions of a parliamentary probe into these charges which are now being sabotaged or hushed up on one ground or the other, as I find in the newspapers of 7 July 1993. Such attempts, whoever might be responsible for these will not go to the favour of the ruling party. It will be a wise policy to bring the truth to the notice of the general people of the country after Parliamentary Committee enquiries were held and the real position was known. Such charges need to be nipped in

the bud in the interest of the ruling party. If the Opposition were wrong, the falsehoods of their charges would have been proved too.

Incidentally, in another recent issue of The Daily Star, I suggested that: (1) there should have been a full-blown report on the activities, good or bad, of the Ershad regime by this time, and that (2) under a democratic rule, however young it may be in Bangladesh, every Ministry must publish an Annual Report of its activities to be presented to the Sangsad. A few days back, the LGRD Minister was reported to have declared in a meeting, as announced on television, that a White Paper on the Ershad regime would be published; but there was no reference to the publication of an Annual Report by every Ministry.

Following the allegations and charges against the ministers, I gather from the news media that the Prime Minister has asked for the files of a number of ministers. This is encouraging, but we should also appreciate the Prime Minister's difficulties and limitations. After all she is one person and the country is faced with multifarious problems to which she has to attend. Moreover, no systematic attempts have been made to deal with the problems. In the context of the corruption charges, for instance, the misappropriation of funds — there is no way of knowing as to who is what in the absence of any initial declaration of the assets of the Jatiya Sangsad members and the ministers at all levels. The same question applies to the government and other bureaucrats and groups of businessmen. I wonder if the Prime Minister has time to attend to these matters. Indeed an appropriate mechanism to deal with the corruption question in all forms needs to be developed and implemented.