

The Besieged Press

The press in Bangladesh has seldom faced such a serious threat to its existence or free functioning as it does today. First is the open challenge to a free press by a group of extremists who are trying to use the religious sentiment of the common people to throttle the press.

The recent spate of attacks on newspapers and journalists have made the general public genuinely worried about the future of the free press in our country. What is the reason behind this widespread attack on one of the most important organs of a democratic system of government?

The message of the recent attack on the press is clear. Multiplicity of views, which is the most sacred aspect of a democratic polity, will not be permitted by an extremist group. Even if our Constitution should guarantee it, the fundamental political force will not permit the existence of the press which may express a viewpoint other than their own.

The role of the government has been most disappointing in all this. Instead of acting as the defender of the Constitution and assuring the fundamental freedoms, especially that of the freedom of press, the government on two occasions acted to harass the press itself.

Two years back Grameen Bank created another company called Grameen Agriculture Foundation. We saw how agriculture in Bangladesh lagged behind other countries in the region because it was left to people who did not have the knowledge, financial capability or interest to bring any change in agriculture.

Setting Things Right

The government has been worse than niggardly in showing respect to Jahanara Imam and recognising the inescapable fact that she is a national hero. The government, as the most representative of the many manifestations of the will of the people, owed it to the people to register, on their behalf, a sense of gratitude to and appreciation of one who almost literally seeded a rather wayward national mind with the values and ideals of the Liberation War in times more trying and confusing than even that of the war itself.

The coverage of Jahanara Imam's death in the government-controlled state media has been poor, in fact quite indecently so. This has been an act of meanness, lacking in grace and violative of a myriad social norms. We are afraid lest this should continue even when her body arrives today and the lack of respect be manifest in all the rites that would follow.

More important, however, than such attending to the demands of propriety is to negate, right now, one of the government's worst mistakes and right the wrong it did to Jahanara Imam by indicting her as an enemy of the state.

This sad affair has been made the sadder by ironies emanating from the government's strange and self-willed abdication from positions that belonged to it as a matter of prerogative. Why wouldn't there be elements of Bangladesh Army turning out a last guard of honour and the army buglers wail a last post? How will it serve the government's position if, instead, all the living commanders of the different sectors of our Liberation Army give her a salute in a much more meaningful gesture to the departed hero?

The government has been narrow and unperceptive in its assessment of Jahanara Imam's achievements, all of which have been in the cause of our people. The government should know how to set this right going far beyond our limited counselling. It should also know that by alienating itself from Jahanara Imam it is in effect alienating itself from many things of enduring national import.

In the non-Communist world of the 1940s and 1950s, many a government of the day chose nationalization of industries, banks, insurance companies, airlines as the favoured path to restructuring economies. We saw the phenomenon in the early years of the 1970s. In our case, exigencies of circumstances also may have acted as a motivating force.

Perspectives have changed now. Government in Europe, Latin America, Africa and Asia are selling off state assets. Privatization is the name of the game. The former Communist states appear even more aggressive among the players on the field and are privatizing with a vengeance. Russia, it is said, plans to sell off nearly all state assets eventually barring a few such as cemeteries and the central bank.

There are obvious reasons why privatization in the former centrally planned economies of East Europe cannot serve as a role model for other countries. For one thing, the context is quite different. In the former socialist countries, the state had taken over all private property in the name of collective ownership of means of

production. Now the state is divesting itself of these assets. The citizens of the country can very well be seen to have a prior claim to shares of these assets. In fact, ownership of the property taken over by the state is reverting to the citizens.

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GAF is looking for partners and friends around the world to find new technology, new market, new crops, new management system. GAF will like to enter into export market for banana, okra, gherkins, tomatoes, vegetables, or anything that has a market for. Any individual or organisation who is willing to use the tools and concepts of capitalism to benefit not the greedy, but the needy, may come and join hands with us.

GAF wants to enter into biotechnology in a big way - to eliminate chemical fertilizers and chemical insecticide/pesticides and replace them with bio-fertilizers and bio-pesticides. We are hoping to organise the bio-fertilizers and bio-pesticides in people-based ways - rather than in mass-scale factory production.

GAF wants to set up seed industry to allow all farmers access to first-rate seeds so that his hard work is not

Privatization Policy: Ensuring Transparency and Consistency

Transparency is a crucial ingredient for the success of a privatization programme. So is consistency. Having framed a policy on privatization, the government should follow its provisions faithfully and with consistency.

However, this is seen more as a desirable outcome rather than an objective. Workers and employees of an enterprise have been allowed to participate in a tender for sale along with other bidders. The only concession, if at all, is that their dues from the enterprise could be adjusted against the sale price. No gifts here.

Enterprises can also be disposed of through public offering of shares. State-owned shares may be offered to the public either direct or through the stock exchange. Indicating the ownership of enterprises being sold off is possible that certain practical considerations make the government more inclined to dispose of SOEs through tender to a single buyer.

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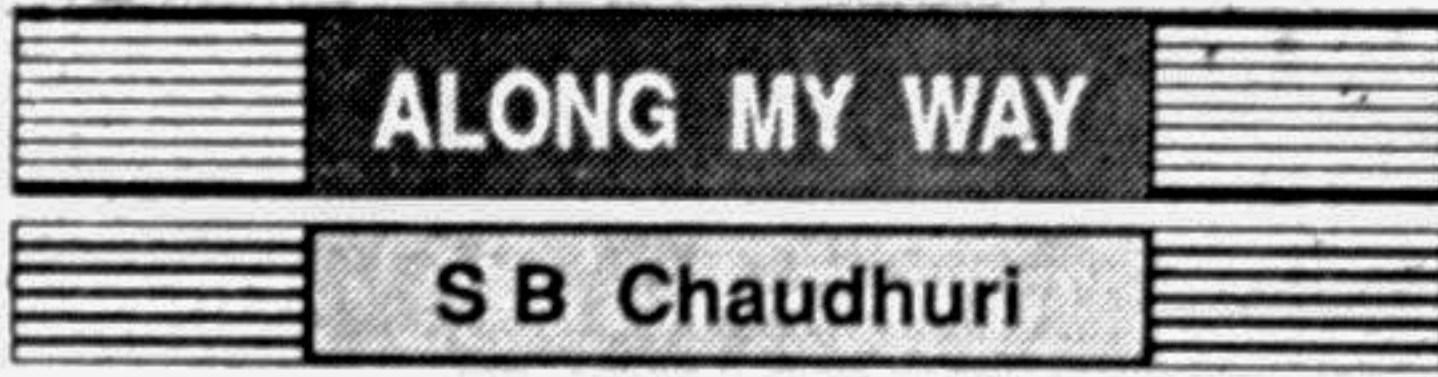
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Does the Capitalist System Have to be the Handmaiden of the Rich? — II

by Prof Muhammad Yunus

wasted behind a questionable seed. We hope to use tissue-culture technology in a people-based way to produce some of these seeds. We are looking for experienced partners to help us set this up.

One of the big plans for GAF is to produce orchids in a home-based manner by inducting poor households to grow orchids in partnership with GAF for international market.

Health-Care for the Poor

All researches done on Grameen Bank show that Grameen borrowers improve their income significantly. They also show rising erosion of income as the borrowers increase their income. Despite this erosion of income Grameen borrowers succeed in crossing the poverty line in ten to fifteen cycles of Grameen loans.

If we can plug the erosion of income, we can help speed up the process. So we looked at it. This income erosion takes place primarily in procuring healthcare services. The poor have very poor health. As they improve their income they spend on one of the priority items - health. But the health services they buy with their hard-earned money is not only unreliable; most often they lead to more serious health hazards. In other words they end up buying more health troubles with their money rather than overcoming them.

Grameen has decided to enter into this market and provide modern health services on cost recovery basis. Government of Bangladesh has a very elaborate health service infrastructure which is built to provide free medical services to all citizens. As a result the service is extremely poor, and it is available only to a handful of privileged people.

Grameen has started its experimental healthcare programme through Grameen Trust, another member of Grameen family of companies. This service is available to all villagers, both Grameen bor-

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New institutions who operate globally to finance privatization deals have also come up. These agencies have come to be known as global privatization funds. They generally invest part of their resources for financing privatization deals in the developing countries also. Some of these global privatization funds allocate as much as 40 per cent of the portfolio to emerging markets in the developing world. Usually, these funds invest by way of buying shares of enterprises being privatized.

Assets of our SOEs listed in 1991 for the first phase of privatization have been estimated roughly at around \$600 million. This is not much, to go by global standards. In fact, the latest estimate put the net worth of all our SOEs at somewhere between 2.3 to 3.6 billion US dollars. Nonetheless, it would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to raise funds domestically to finance the entire privatization programme. Foreign funds would have to be attracted. What better way to attract foreign funds than to offer shares of SOEs at market-determined rates?

Transparency is a crucial ingredient for the success of a privatization programme. So is consistency. Having framed a policy on privatization, the government should follow its provisions faithfully and with consistency. It is indeed disconcerting for potential investors to come across indications to the contrary. Reports appeared in the press recently to the effect that certain sugar mills would be converted into pulp mills to process green juice. Diversifying use of juice for paper manufacturing is no doubt a laudable move. However, the fact of the matter is that the sugar mills sought to be put into service for this purpose have already been earmarked for privatization in the very first phase. Implementation of the privatization policy is thus being stalled. Contrariness in policy implementation is sure to impair confidence of potential investors.

We need to bring them closer to find inspiration from each other. We offer to make Bangladesh an action-research site to demonstrate what can be achieved in a problem-ridden least developed country through the combined efforts of the social-consciousness-driven entrepreneurs from all over the world.

We must find ways to have social-consciousness-driven entrepreneurs out-number the greed-alone-driven entrepreneurs in the world as fast as we can. We just can't leave the market place to be monopolised by the greed-alone-driven business people. Let us not create a wrong world just because we laid down wrong postulations or we are too indifferent to notice opportunities to build a better world. Let the new millennium show that we are alert, active and committed. We can take the initiative to correct the errors of the past in a decisive way. We can set our course on the right track with full vigour.

Let us join our hands to create a world which will be proud to be part of, not ashamed of it.

(Concluded)

OPINION

Blasphemy Law in Pakistan

Salma Sobhan

A few groups in Bangladesh have raised a demand following the furore over alleged violations of section 295 A of the Penal Code that these laws should be strengthened. The alleged violations are, of course, sub judice and it is not proposed to discuss them here. Let us look instead at the issue of freedom of speech.

No one is arguing that people have an unqualified right to say whatever they want. Under the law of criminal libel people are even protected from having the truth about them used to incite violence against them. The law of libel protects persons against defamation. It is clear however, that a certain tolerance of opinions and views contrary to one's own is expected of every one in a civilised society. Thus in a Christian state a Muslim, teaching the tenets of Islam one of which is absolute belief in the Unity of God, could not be held guilty of showing disrespect for the Christian faith which subscribes to the doctrine of the Trinity.

A few organisations/groups are demanding the enactment of a so-called blasphemy law. In Pakistan the addition of subsection C to section 295 of the Penal Code was made in 1986 when the country was under the late President Zia ul Haq's autocratic rule. This amendment is inaccurately referred to as a blasphemy law. Blasphemy is contempt or indignity offered to God. 295 C deals with Gustakh-e-Rasool, insult offered to the Prophet. This may be an offence but it cannot be blasphemy. To describe this as blasphemous is to be guilty of blasphemy or Kufr oneself because this is arrogating divinity to a human being.

The text of 295 C is as follows: 'Whosoever by words, ei-

ther written or spoken, or by visible representation, or by any imputation, innuendo, or insinuation, directly or indirectly, defiles the sacred name of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him) shall be punished by death, or imprisonment for life, and shall also be liable to fine. The amendment is full of lacunae. It lacks provisions of mitigation. Guilt is established even if the offence is unintentional, indirect, through implication and innuendo. It has been used in Pakistan against the Ahmadis and against the Christians. Notable and revered persons like the octogenarian Dr Akhtar Hamid Khan have also been attacked under this law by persons who had personal grudges against them.

The most notorious application of this act must be the case of Salamata Ali an illiterate 12-year old Christian boy who was accused of writing derogatory words on the walls of a mosque. His father, Manzoor Masih, also illiterate and another member of the community who was semi-educated were also implicated. The father was shot dead and the other accused parties seriously injured as they left the court. Local residents say that quarrels amongst the village boys and other petty disputes were the real background to the case. Some of the lawyers providing free legal services to the accused say that the complaints case was weak and realising he was going to lose he set up the murder. Manzoor Masih was the third Christian to be killed on the basis of the so-called blasphemy law.

One of the three Christians killed was a Muslim who had converted to Christianity. In this context it is relevant to

know that 'For an apostate, or murtadd 'one who turns back' from Islam, there is no punishment in the Quran. There are no recorded cases of the Prophet punishing those Muslims who renege [d] upon their faith..... Muslims subscribe to the concept of freedom of worship'. The Quran makes it clear that there is no compulsion in religion' how then can it pronounce death on those who 'turn away from Islam or 'turn back' on it. On the contrary the Quran mentions that in place of those who have given up the right path, God will bring better and more faithful ones. In Verse 16:106 the Quran says 'Anyone who having accepted faith in Allah, utters unbelief, except under compulsion, though in his heart, he remains firm in faith, on him is the wrath of Allah and he will be punished grievously' But the punishment, as is obvious, is for Allah to decide it is not to be inflicted by man here.'

The above quotation shows us how pernicious the enactment of the so-called blasphemy law has been. Men have arrogated to themselves a right they were not given. And they have, further to compound the sin, acted for reasons of personal advantage.

To those of us who believe in it, Islam is a religion of justice and equity. Its message of belief is for all humans. It advocates tolerance. The most unacceptable part of the behaviour of those who are using religion to further their own political agenda is their debasement of Islam. To believing Muslims it is they who are the profaners.

The author is a well known legal expert on Muslim Law, and a leading member of Human Rights and Legal Aid Centre, Ain-O-Shalish Kendro

To the Editor...

Saudi Arabia in World Cup

Sir, It was really a 'dearest storm' for the million of soccer fans all over the world when Saudi Arabia defeated Belgium 1-0 in World Cup soccer.

They have raised the head of Asia high. We all feel proud of Saudi Arabia.

It is reported that the Saudi Arabian players would receive US dollar 100,000 plus a Mercedes for their government for reaching the 2nd round of the World Cup.

We congratulate the Saudi players especially Sayeed Owairan on this historic success and wish them more laurels in future. And as a token of

our love and respect for the Saudi players we would request our government to invite the Saudi players to visit Bangladesh at least for three days and to play at least one friendly match with our national football team in Dhaka.

O H Kabir Dhaka-1205.

No smoking, please!

Sir, I was watching BBC's TV programme on 30-6-94. It was disgusting to see Taslima Nasreen lighting up and puffing cigarette before giving her interview which was of course against religion.

I have no comment for her opinion as it is her own, but I

should say something against smoking. Doesn't she know that smoking is causing harm to her, to the society, to the atmosphere of the country? Or it is also a part of her challenge against the society? And why should BBC propagate smoking on the screen? Was it necessary to show her smoking before she talked? They should understand that if they think Taslima a celebrity, then a cigarette in her hand may not have a 'desired' effect on the mind of the viewers! So no smoking on the screen, please.

Muntra Khan Dhaka.