

Doctors Do it Again

The country's doctors in the government service stick to their central body's decision of going for the indefinite strike. The government is equally adamant in its stance which is not to negotiate a solution under pressure. In between these two diametrically opposed positions there is however a third party—and indeed the most important of them all, the people—who are being compelled to silently suffer. Apparently, both the doctors and the government care little for the people's sufferings and this lack of care cannot be explained away so easily. For both have taken oaths to serve the nation and they have no right to neglect their duties over the squabbles involving none other than them alone.

If the doctors have genuine causes to seek redress of their grievances, they surely have chosen a wrong issue to make known their protest. The government's decision to suspend some doctors of Tongi and Gazipur hospitals from service is not to the Bangladesh Medical Association's (BMA's) liking. Why? Does the BMA consider that the vigilance team that reported against the doctors in the two hospitals is at fault or it was vindictive? If not, why the BMA is supporting some of its erring members? The fact that the BMA immediately reacted with strikes on two occasions after that incident tells a lot. Organisational power will be used—better say abused—to clear the offenders off their offences. Such a blind advocacy for members of the same group has made a mockery of law and order, honesty and ethics.

The sharp line of difference between several professions such as the ones of doctors and of transport workers should not be confused or blurred. If administrative actions cannot be taken against offences of the highest order, the system is bound to collapse. And if the body of an educated class resists any order against a few of the offenders, it points to a very dangerous mentality on its part. We believe, the BMA's charter of demands has virtues, but its campaign for withdrawal of the suspension order is an ill-directed move.

Not only the doctors but other interested and privileged groups are inclined to reap benefits from chaotic situations. So they want chaos to prevail. But this they can do only because the administration is also hardly keen to solve problems. The health ministry is well aware of the way of medical practitioners of the government hospitals and health centres. For years together it turned a blind eye to the continual absence of doctors from places of their duty. Allowing such irregularities does not make an administration effective. The evil practices in effect become the order of the day. A sudden move without warnings and back-up measures was bound to create confusion. By condoning crimes, one also becomes a party to the offence.

Enjoying leniency in certain matters for long, the doctors seemingly started regarding these as their rights. A large number of doctors today are ill at ease at their work places, neglect their duties and enjoy their private practices. That the hospitals are still running is because of a handful of dedicated and highly professional medical practitioners. There is certainly room for improvement in the services and facilities provided by our hospitals. But can we not ensure in the short run that the ill and the weak—particularly of the poorer section—will get the maximum of the available services?

It is time the government made a serious attempt to resolve what the public consider to be a disgustingly nagging crisis. It must talk to the BMA and make its position clear not only to them but also to the nation. Maintaining a long silence won't help.

Fake Business

A Bangla daily reported on Monday the unearthing of a pharmaceutical factory producing spurious medicines and also an underground factory producing fake ball-point pens. But this is not the first time that such incidents of faking have come to the open. Clandestine business like this has become so widespread that the consumers of the country constantly fret over the indigenous—and even foreign—brands before assuring themselves of the bonafide of the company or producer. The infrequent police successes however hardly reflect the growth of this cancerous social disease. It is indeed too pervasive to be reined in so easily.

Adulterated foods, fake consumer goods and spurious medicines—the list is long. In all such cases it is the people—consumers to be precise—who are subjected to all sorts of cheating and even bodily and mental harms. The motive behind all this, however, is profit-making—the maximum one can extract from the hapless consumers. When regular and honest business cannot what some people's unusual lust for wealth, they go for the most despicable of all trade practices. In their hurry to get rich, these traders put at risk the whole nation's physical and mental health.

If the trend continues, the nation may further suffer from various types of physical complications and lack of talents. Already we have paid a lot for neglecting the quality of our food items and consumer goods. Significantly, the relative success of the fake manufacturers and businessmen has bred further dishonest trade. However it is a lame excuse for the police to say that the job of identification of the clandestine business is very difficult. If the police are serious, they surely can nose into the source of any product—however jealously it is guarded.

The problem perhaps lies elsewhere—right in the system of our industrial and administrative functioning. The provision of punitive measures for the offence committed by way of faking products is hardly adequate. Neither is the implementation of the laws in this regard notable. For when a culprit is brought to book, there is virtually no instance where one has been punished as much—or at all—as might act as a deterrence against similar crimes. The crippling and deadly effects of adulterated foods and medicines should call for a drastic action against the fake manufacturers and traders. If product standards cannot be ensured, the quality of life is bound to fall. Compromise on this issue is a good enough evidence of lax moral too. We have to uphold the standard of our goods to set a standard for our society as well.

A free and competitive media is one of the essential pillars of a democratic society. It must be free in the sense that it is allowed to express a large variety of economic and political views many of which may not agree with the views of the ruling party or parties. It must be competitive in the sense that media consumers can choose freely from alternative sources of information.

Do we have a free and competitive media?

Does such a media exist in Bangladesh? On the surface it would appear that the answer is yes. The print media is indeed allowed to express a whole range of views. We have dailies, weeklies and other periodicals that are very left oriented, right oriented and many in between. A substantial number of papers are allowed to practice tabloid journalism. Even though several newspapers are still owned and subsidized by the government, competition between different suppliers of print media is a lot more intense than it used to be. Prices are quite reasonable so that money cannot be the major factor in determining consumers' access to these sources.

There is just one problem, however. To have access to the print media, one must be able to read. What fraction of population in Bangladesh can read? Indeed very tiny, less than the conventionally measured "literacy rate" which itself is awfully low. But, as human beings, most of the Bangladeshis have two other faculties that are as important for access to information as the ability to read: they can see and they can hear. Unfortunately, the audio-visual media in Bangladesh is neither free nor competitive. It remains a government monopoly. Why?

There is no real technological reason for government monopoly over radio and television. Witness the mushrooming of private radio and television channels in developed as well as developing countries. For example, the American consumer will be able to choose from 500 different TV channels by the end of next year. Technological advances have made such competition possible. Similar competition exists in radio. Thus the only explanation of why government has monopoly over radio and television in Bangladesh is that it has always been that way. In other words, it is a legacy of the past.

Incompatibility of government monopoly and media freedom

A media monopolized by the government can never be free even if the media personnel are allowed complete programming autonomy. One does not have to be a rocket scientist to understand that. The decision makers in the media have little incentive to be responsive to consumer preferences. Their budgets do not depend on any measure of consumer ratings. On the other hand, by being controversial, which any free and enterprising media is bound to be, they run the risk of displeasing the authorities which decide their appointments and perquisites. Why bother to report stories that may strike a sensitive nerve when you know that not reporting it will not cost you anything? Self censorship is therefore the inevitable consequence.

One of the most attractive features of radio and television programmes in the west is their news reports and analyses. They are not just informative but also entertaining. This is true not just for stations like the CNN and the BBC which are 100 percent news oriented but also for stations that are primarily entertainment oriented. Even MTV broadcasts news bulletins tailor made to the preferences of its audience.

The news bulletins broadcast by the Bangladesh Radio and the Bangladesh Television cannot, for the most part, be accused of being either informative or entertaining. If you exclude the tiny slice of time spent on average to report international events, the rest is virtually an amalgam of press releases from different ministries. The typical starting item is the Prime Minister: it may be a speech, a visit and a speech, meeting with foreign dignitaries and so on. Then it will go down the hierarchy of ministers. In every bulletin we are barraged with speeches given by different ministers at different places. The substantive content of most of these speeches is neither profound nor different. From these bulletins one gets the impression that the most news worthy events in this nation of nearly 120 million people are ministerial speeches.

Existence of local medium of free expression to which the general mass have access is vital for fostering democratic habits and sharpening political consciousness. Every year we debate the national budget in

whatever else happens does not matter. For instance, if a

Martian landed in Bangladesh after 6 PM on July 30, 1994, he would have had to wait until the next morning to find out that the whole nation was completely paralyzed throughout the day because of "Hartal". Bangladesh television and radio chose to completely ignore an event that affected the lives of every single resident of this country. Apparently the officials in these media seem to think that the significance of events that the government does not like can be reduced if they do not cover them. They perceive their role not as a vehicle of information but as a mouth piece of the ruling party.

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