

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 become 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 whet 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 deterrent 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.

Why Not Privatise Radio and TV?

by Zahid Hussain

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.

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.

Is the news coverage dictated entirely by the government through censorship? May be or may not be. The point, however, is that it is a consequence of government monopoly. As long as government monopoly remains, the quality of coverage will not change irrespective of whether government dictates quality or not.

Privatization is the solution

So the solution to this problem is not greater programming autonomy. The solution is greater competition by allowing private radio and television channels. This does not necessarily mean denationalization of existing TV and radio stations, although a case can be made for that. It simply means opening this sector to private investment.

Satellite television has already introduced competition as far as entertainment programmes are concerned. Not surprisingly, it has not helped improve the quality of BTV's entertainment programmes. It is also not helping the cause of strengthening democratic institutions. CNN and BBC are informative as far as international events are concerned. But how many of us understand English? Only the elites. Besides, there is no coverage of local events. Local private radio and television will add an entire new dimension to news reporting and analysis of local events.

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

the parliament. The masses are completely isolated from this debate. All they have an opportunity to hear is the Finance Minister's budget speech. Critical evaluation of national budgets appear in the print media which only the elite can read and understand. It is the job of the audio-visual media to report budget proposals in a way as to make it comprehensible to the masses.

How can we expect the voters to correctly evaluate how their representatives are performing if their only sources of information are the representatives themselves and their opponents. You do not have to be a student of economics to know that there is hardly any way these two sources can deliver credible information to their constituents. One would always expect the opponent to say that the representative has performed badly and the representative to claim that he is doing fine. The only way the representative can prove his performance is by bringing tangible benefits to its constituents even if that means sacrificing the larger national interest. A free and competitive audio-visual media will considerably weaken the incentives for political parochialism.

What reason do we have to believe that private radio and television will not degenerate into irresponsible journalism? A part of it certainly will. There is nothing necessarily wrong with that. If people have the right to eat unhealthy food, read trash magazines, watch trash movies, spend their time on idle gossip and so on, then they also have a right to hear and watch trash news bulletins and entertainment programmes.

Won't it be nice to hear all the jokes about politicians, public officials, and other well known personalities that now circulate in private on radio and television? Is that going to trivialize politics? It has not done so in the west. Don't Bangladeshis have a right to publicly make jokes about their politicians? There is no doubt that politicians will dislike it the most. But eventually they will get used to it and may even start liking it because of its publicity value.

There is no reason to assume that tabloid journalism will be the only kind of

journalism private radio and television will produce. It is simply impossible under competition since there exists a demand for serious journalism. Such journalism will not be limited to politics alone. Based on experiences in other countries and our own experience with the print media, it is safe to predict that it will most likely spillover into the behaviour of the private sector as well in different branches of the economy. Consumers, workers, savers and investors will have an additional source of information in making their choices.

Recently the information minister went to US seeking CNN's assistance in training the reporters of the Bangladesh Television. The problem is not that our reporters do not have creative skills. The problem is that they have no incentive and opportunities to be creative. What is fundamentally lacking in Bangladesh is not skill but competition. It is competition which is the ultimate source of innovation and creativity. This general principle is particularly relevant for industries whose bread and butter is creativity.

Will Bangladeshi consumers be able to afford private audio-visual media? Will the size of the market be large enough to make a competitive media viable? We will never know unless we give it a chance to succeed. Certainly, things cannot be worse than it already is. So what have we got to lose by trying? For a long time we hung on to, the belief that universities and medical colleges cannot be viable in the private sector. They are not doing that bad.

Possible objections to privatization

I can anticipate one criticism of the ideas discussed above. Critics will say there is nothing novel. All I have done is to make a case for private radio and television based on the western experience. True. And that is precisely the point. There are a lot of things in the west worthy of imitation. Did we invent computers, VCRs, railways, automobiles, telephone? Aren't these western ideas too? Did we invent the idea of privatisation? Yet we are privatising and rightly so. The critics will do better by trying to answer the following question: What is the rationale for not allowing radio and television to be in private hands?

What we will be imitating are certain general principles. There is no doubt that a Bangladeshi version of free media will eventually emerge through competition featuring our own cultural preferences and ethical standards.

There may be a different objection to the idea of imitating the western media. Many leftists believe that the world is run for the benefit of a few giant corporations. Western, particularly American, foreign policy is murderously imperialist; western democracy is empty of content, a process of elite decision making and periodic public ratification. The working masses are duped into voting against their interest by the media, which are part of the elite's propaganda machine. Why empower the local 'imperialist agents' with a similar propaganda machine?

At their very best, some of these leftists are capable of asking sharp and perplexing questions about western governments and the role of the media in defining national debates. At their worst, they can seem completely disinterested and detached from reality. Nonetheless they continue to have a lot of followers, particularly among disoriented intellectuals. Keep in mind the fact that Adolf Hitler also had many brilliant intellectual followers.

We need not take this objection seriously because, like most acts of faith, their theories are sedulously circular. Inconvenient facts are inherently suspect, since they have been arbitrated by a press which is no more than the public relations department of

big business. So what, for instance, if the American media seem to be more liberal than the American population at large? That only proves the internal subtlety of the establishment's system for fabricating consent. So what if the western media scrutinises the production, pricing, advertising and layoff decisions of the multinationals as viciously as it scrutinises the decisions of the politicians? That only helps perpetuate the illusion of media neutrality.

It may also be argued that privatization of radio and television will divert resources away from 'socially more productive' investments in industry and agriculture. Bangladesh is too poor to have private radio and television.

First of all it is not obvious that any resource will be diverted from industry and agriculture. More importantly to the extent we believe that the presence of free and competitive media improves the functioning of democratic institutions, this argument has little merit. Also, by increasing the quality and quantity of information about the economic and political environment, it can even contribute towards increasing investments in other sectors. Last, but not the least, isn't the whole concept of privatization based on the principle that it is market forces which should determine resource allocation? Why single out radio and television from the domain of markets?

Is there no danger associated with private radio and TV?

One possible danger is the emergence of private monopoly particularly in television and all the evils that come with monopoly. It is almost inevitable at the beginning. It is unrealistic to expect an immediate rush of investments by different media entrepreneurs.

However, experience suggests that such monopoly is likely to be temporary. It will obviously not survive if it loses money. In that case we are back to where we started. It will not survive if it makes excess profits, either because others will be attracted. As long as the government does not assist the private monopoly in building and maintaining barriers to entry, entry cannot be prevented and competition will emerge. Monopolies never survive in the long run without protection from the government.

A second danger is the quality of programming. There is a lot of concern now in the west about the media focusing too much on crime, violence and sex. Certainly, our own movies and the Indian films so popular in Bangladesh also have the same attribute. However, the presumption should not be that the whole emphasis of the programmes will be that. After all, if we really do not like to see such programmes we always have the option of turning our radio and TV sets off. When most of us do that, the stations will go out of business. Sometimes violence oriented programmes teach useful lessons. 'Baker Bhai' was a violent man. Why did this character become so popular? Didn't the drama teach us useful lessons about the dangers of capital punishment and some of the origins of 'mastanisms'?

The issue with respect to quality is not whether it will not offend some tastes. It definitely will. The issue is whether such a possibility deserves to be an overriding consideration in the decision on whether or not radio and television should be privatised.

Let me pose the question somewhat differently. The drug industry is largely private in Bangladesh. There are numerous cases of firms producing adulterated drugs. But does that make us call for nationalisation of the entire drug industry? Except for the lunatics, no one ever claimed that markets work perfectly. What is claimed is that what markets do well far outweighs the risks they add to our lives. The benefits of a free and competitive media will not come free. But it is well worth paying for.

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NGOs, Govt Move to Curb Child Abuse

Mallika Wanigasundara writes from Colombo

Leniency by the courts with offenders often thwarts justice for child victims of sexual abuse

Also noted was the setting up of a National Police Desk on child abuse and violence against women in Colombo — an acknowledgement by authorities that the problem has grown enormously and that it must be curbed.

Former journalist Rajitha Weerakoon pointed out that because of poverty, mothers are forced to go abroad for work. Their young daughters become very vulnerable in such instances, becoming easy prey to abusive stepfathers and even their own fathers, who often do it while drunk. Other children at grave risk are those employed as house help," said Ms Weerakoon.

In many cases adults abuse children by prostituting them to foreigners, said Maureen Seneviratne. A founding member of PEACE (Protection of Environment and Children Everywhere), she has worked on the beaches in southwest Sri Lanka and has shocking stories to tell. For example, PEACE has come across at least a hundred children, some as young as six or seven years old, being sold to 65 or 75-year-old clients.

Ms Seneviratne urged that strong action be taken by the authorities and all concerned because "we do not want whole villages to be devoted to the sexual exploitation of children, as in the Philippines and Thailand." PEACE is affiliated with ECPAT (End Child

turer in psychiatry of the University of Colombo, describes sexual abuse of children by adults as intrinsically a power relationship in which the child is powerless, devoid of the emotional, maturational and cognitive development to cope with such an act.

Such experience is beyond the capacity of the child to assimilate and is profoundly destructive, she said. The trauma is felt into adulthood with the victim plagued by depression, feelings of guilt and shame, isolation, lack of self-esteem and feelings of being stigmatized.

If the father is the offender, punishing him by putting him in jail can mean economic deprivation for the rest of the family, and the victim can get blame instead of sympathy, Mrs de Silva added.

NGOs at the seminar decided to form a strong core group around the YWCA steering committee to tackle these concerns. To be asked to join the core group will be police and probation officers, social service officers and other concerned agencies.

Among the services which the core group plans to establish or strengthen are: counselling for victims; residential facilities for victims when necessary, along with related support services; law reform to correct inadequacies in the legal system; and a pilot project to curb the physical abuse of girl students who enter the universities during ragging of new entrants.

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— Depthnews Asia

To the Editor...

Tunnel for development

Sir, Japan's under-study industrial city project on the other side of Karnaphuli river in Chittagong linking the master city with the first tunnel under a river of this delta is like "a ray of light at the end of the dark tunnel" for this NIC aspirant nation.

This historic port city has always maintained its importance parallel to the capital city in terms of functional supports to economic dynamism of this LDC.

Along with consulates, international industrial and commercial establishments, international airport, major tourist facilities, and many other large national institutions, this country's second longest city (now under 26-year long WHO's Healthy City prescription) will hopefully help elevate the nation's eco-

nomie lot by the grace of all the investments concentrated for the purpose in the vicinity of the world's longest beach.

As of now, to lessen the pressure on this major port, no alternative arrangement has been feasible even when bulk of cargos are transported to and from this land through this gateway. Direct air cargo services between the capital and foreign points may also have to be maximized to cope with this increasing volume of surface shipping.

While developing new commercial or industrial zones or expanding the old ones, exploring similar possibilities in all other areas of the country may be profitable considering the next century would outlook with extra emphasis on the commodity consumer correlations.

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Fake goods

Sir, 'Beware of fake goods' — the consumers are cautioned time and again. Unfortunately, these cautionary remarks only add to our confusions. First we buy goods and then find the occasion to give a (second) thought to the originality of the products. It is the output or the results of the products that ultimately resolves our confusion.

No doubt, the market is full of fake goods. Thanks to the policemen who often acted on a tip and hauled huge quantities of spurious goods. We, the naive consumers, however, are not told about the fate of these seized goods. But the common belief is that they often make their entry into the market through auction etc.

It is found that when some goods of first-rate quality come to market, they create enor-

mous demand among the people and sell extensively. In consideration of the growing demand for such goods some dishonest manufacturers and spurious traders take to sordid trickery to fake them. These spurious goods are much inferior, in quality, to their prototypes. They imitate the trademark tables on things like soaps, batteries etc and inscriptions on, say, ball point pens, sandals etc either with an almost undetectable change, or no change at all. These acts are so brilliantly carried out that there remains hardly any difference in the outward look between the two categories.

Closely studying, one would be tremendously shocked to find the astonishing forgery existing under the false facade. So these trashes, on most occasions are successful to fool the purchasers and pass easily for the real ones. Though actual

price of these two kinds of goods differ a lot, shopkeepers are often expert enough not to miss the change of selling the fake ones as real brands and realising the same price from the customers.

Obviously, reasons behind this malpractice is to deceive people and achieve maximum benefits. Surprisingly enough, the concerned authorities seem least bothered about this.

The greater responsibility, of course, lies with the law enforcing agencies who have performed wonderfully on occasions. The recent incident of the recovery of gold ornaments and other valuable belongings plundered from the house of a former Justice of the High Court attests to the fact that if proper approaches are made they can successfully root out all crimes of this kind.

There are, perhaps, some

strategies under the protection of which the culprits comeout unpunished through the loop-holes of law. I tried in vain to explain to myself the necessity of law which is inadequate to contain these mis-

creants. But I believe this practice should end forth with. Any gesture going against the interest of common people should not and must not be given any ground.

I strongly suggest that, if necessary, more stringent laws be enacted and measures taken against all kinds of false manufacturing. Any attempt of violation noticed, the transgressors must atonce be brought to book and rigorously dealt with.

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