

# Media's Role in Political Crisis

by Shah Husain Imam

It is worthwhile to reflect on the role our newspapers played during the unprecedented political crisis that for ten gruelling months touched our lives to the core. And yet it is far from over.

This is not birthday liberty we are taking on this anniversary day for us, to speak of others in the print media, much that we are tempted to do so in a rather understandably sentimental frame of mind. We are fully aware that like charity begins at home, our right to judge other newspapers' role is not a given privilege. It has to be earned through self-analysis in the first place.

So it begins at home. The feedback we have received from various circles on the media coverage, both news and commentative, of the political crisis, boils down to four points, two involving principles and the rest on specifics. Since the readers have aired these expressly as unfulfilled expectations they spell a message for the print media as a whole, not just an individual part of it. As promised, we take it upon ourselves to respond to them in the light of our own successes and pitfalls as pointed out to us by our own readers.

Since the parliament remained non-functioning, the judiciary could act only on approach, the government media were one-sided and the gall-up

polling was at best an amateurish exercise. It is the large private sector print media the public naturally turned to: For a shaft of light through a medley of arguments and free-flying formulae on ways to end the political grid-lock on the neutral care-taker issue.

The Daily Star consciously refrained from taking a stand on the basic bone of contention between the government and the opposition, an approach it also consistently maintained right through the evolution of other moot points and upshots down the road. The paper confined itself to presenting views for and against the opposition demand leaving it to the readers to judge for themselves. A professional newspaper cannot take sides, even though there might be provocations, even real temptations, to cross the pre-determined threshold.

We scrupulously avoided being opinionated lest we are unceremoniously dubbed as something of a party mouth-piece. We brought in experts, irrespective of their political affiliations, if any, to opine on the constitutional points relating to the demand made by the opposition for a non-partisan arrangement to oversee the next general election. If we had our own views, we kept these to ourselves because as journalists we were to act pro-

visionally not as voters.

Stand we did take but on the democratic right to call for hartals and what if these dragged on hurting the economy and the civic life and spoiling the chances for building on whatever little progress that was being made through the dialogues we had had in fits and starts.

We prize the primacy of utilising democratic institutions for resolving a political crisis, however intractable it may be. As a second best, when issues hit the streets, we settle for dialogue outside the parliament as the medium to come to terms with each other. The over-riding emphasis is, of course, deserved by the still-elusive consensus-building process. Our attention has been focused on this aspect of a refined political culture since the day one of our inception, precisely for three reasons. First, no alien power has kept us in a state of subjugation. So why have that mentality? Secondly, no democratic government can run without a degree of working relations between the ruling party and the opposition. Thirdly, this is well worth a try in a politically restorative phase requiring a higher goal to be set to achieve a minimum functional tolerance level in the adversarial relations. Last but not least, given the abso-

lute number of votes captured by both sides in the last General Election, the electorate would seem to have built into the situation a latent demand for bipartisan understanding on basic national issues. This message is never lost on any democracy anywhere in the world. In a way, the seeds of a wider confrontation in the present political situation originate from this hard-core composition of the electorate.

Newspaper readers by and large were not found convinced of the inevitability or unapologetic of Emeke's and Ninian's involvement in the process which reflected negatively on our national capacity to sort out our own political problems. As traditionally good hosts we welcomed them in our midst, but discernably there was an unmistakable sense of relief among the politicians who thought they needed a shock-absorber or a trouble-shooter to do their job.

The failure of our own negotiatory process was rather glaring. The readers starved on analysis of this derailment. They thought the media did not press hard enough for a self-management of the crisis. For instance, the suggestion could be made to our major political leaders, at an appropriate time, that since the caretaker issue had once

cropped up when the three major alliances were finalising an understanding in 1990, it could be taken up again for discussion without ruffling any feathers.

Then nearly at every step of the Ninian-facilitated dialogue process political leaders on both sides reeled off their comments on progress or otherwise of the talks. Almost on a daily basis. The newspapers only felt obliged to carry these, but perhaps could have done a better job than that by speaking up that it broke the ground rule Emeke had settled with both the sides. Then Ninian applied the coup de grace by himself making a press statement, his compulsions regardless.

As for relieving the intense and nerve-racking public anxiety over the climactic events on the night of 27th and the full day of 28th, December, the newspapers could not serve up the no-news-is-the-big-news.

Who is to blame? Too many cooks who spoil the broth, all the great men who thought alike or specifically the last-minute brainwork that turned a straight enough thing into a screw? Again, we leave it to you to judge. All we can say is our newsmen on the run had to virtually walk on their heads!

All is well that ends well. We are waiting for that to happen.

# Celebrating Collective Mind

by Nilratan Halder

THE anniversary of a newspaper is always a happy occasion. But the mood of the occasion's celebration may not be as jolly as it is at, say for example, a birthday party. For a newspaper it is more a serious stock taking than anything closer to partying. For one thing a newspaper is a collective effort. That is more or less known to people pursuing other trades. What is however little known is that the anniversary of a newspaper in effect is the culmination of a year marked by the renewal of the commitments that originally went into making of the paper. In that sense it is an anniversary of a collective mind.

This is what cries for recognition but seldom succeeds getting. It happens only when a newspaper manages to capture the imagination of a people, provides the stimuli needed for a wider participation, a committed involvement not only of those working for the newspaper but of the readers as well. Certainly the task places specially strenuous demands on both the people in the profession and others outside of it. Unless a newspaper can go on setting itself newer horizons to reach, it hardly stands a chance of survival. In a way therefore a quality newspaper has to be in touch with its readers and at the same time make its choices clear.

The choices are the outlines of a paper's policy. Journalistic jargon may brand a paper as 'liberal, conservative, objective' so on and so forth. But the truth is that such specialities are the strength of a particular daily or weekly. We at The Daily Star have often argued among ourselves over the impression the daily has been able to create among its readers. Honestly the matter has always ended up inconclusively. Certainly the basis of our debate has been the reactions and responses from the readers we personally know.

This is however no way of determining the specialty of a newspaper, let alone its values. A general impression is what

accomplished only theoretically. A more concrete and capsulated form of suggestion can even go begging. In its modest way The Daily Star focused on a few areas needing immediate attention. But to no avail. So the yearly celebration fails to be the joyous occasion it could be through some of them getting addressed.

It was not that we made impossible propositions. Almost all of them could be satisfactorily dealt with. Even in our sky high optimism did we not expect all the issues getting due attention. But we sadly note that they have been ignored. We do not feel that the concern we have expressed through the set agenda is ours alone. Bolstered by the public responses to our continuous appeal for shaping the policy issues, we undertook the responsibility to frame the agenda. We believe the contributors and readers who corresponded through articles, letter columns and personal contacts made a contribution to the effort. There were of course experts and eminent personalities who figured out for us the right thing in a precise shape.

We have only tried to have a reflection of the cross currents of ideas in a nut shell. This year too will not pass without the exercise. Whether it will be once again a futile attempt to draw the attention of the politicians and the men in power is not known. But we believe this cannot go in vain all the time. Time will surely come when someone caring enough will find merits in it. If the readers and contributors continue to inspire us in giving expression to their feeling, opinion and ideas, we feel obliged to carry on the campaign. Let it be as stimulating as it ever was—and can be—for the sustenance of our vocation married to our occupation. Through birthdays we celebrate lives, here at the newspaper office we celebrate ideas or collective consciousness. The message is: we mean business in our humble way. This we want to do by pooling and disseminating information, ideas and opinions.

# Cable Culture: The Pied Piper of Hamelin in Bangladesh

by Azfar Hussain

Only connect (cable?)

ARCHIMEDES once said, "Give me a place to stand and I will move the world". Today, as McLuhan speculates, Archimedes would have certainly changed his statement and would have said, pointing to our electric and electronic media, "I will stand on your eyes, your ears, your nerves, and your brain, and the world will move in any tempo or pattern I choose".

Who are now standing on our eyes and ears and brains? The obvious answer is: the satellite—indefinitely capable of catching and sending whatever images and ideologies, meanings and messages, magic and miracles, it can. And both the dish antennae and the cable are the agents involved in mediation between the giving end and the receiving one. This is a fairly familiar mechanism, which now stands on our senses and brains, and it is to this mechanism that we have leashed our eyes and ears and nerves.

No wonder we live in an age of the elimination of the body or of the physical and by extension, of the spiritual as well. Electricity has already ended sequence by making things instant: the electronic media have given us a 'global village', but it is a village where 'man is dead', to use Foucault's words; for, man's death is brought about by mighty machines, and by the principle of numbness, on which, McLuhan

rightly thinks, electricity rests. No, we don't have to act; we don't have to use our body, or our brain; because we are already involved, perhaps more deeply than we want, in a world which already exists as a finished product received through various channels and cables that celebrate the myth, magic and miracle of electricity and electronics—and, now more than ever before, of the satellite. And consequently what we see is that the age of action, which was once replaced by the age of reaction with the rise of radio as a medium, is now fully turned into an age of resignation with the rise of television—a medium increasingly acquiring might and strength with support from the satellite and through the mediation of the antennae and the cable.

Resistance to technology, invention and innovation is no sign of progress; it is sheer medievalism. But, then, technology which takes away man's body, spirit and freedom is nothing more than barbarism. And, moreover, if technology precedes science, there is yet another danger: in that technology tends to control man instead of man controlling technology. Now, in the underdeveloped and undeveloped parts of the world, the flow of new technologies minus science and minus control has brought about serious crises which are as significant as socio-economic ones.

One of such crises is now

articulated in the rise of what I wish to call *cable colonialism* or *artel colonialism*—certainly a new form of colonial rule different structurally, if not ideologically, from classical colonial rule. The principle of classical colonialism was: "conquer the land". Now, the motto of cable colonialism is: "conquer the sky". The shift from the land to the sky corresponds to a shift from the physical to the non-physical, and from man to ghost. During those earlier days of colonialism, to rule was to be physically present; the ruler, for instance, had to come to the distant land or the territory which he wanted to own and control. Now, the ruler does not have to travel or traverse any distance physically; he only needs to use the sky, the satellite, the cable to rule and own not only physical and geographical spaces, but also the psychic territory. Therefore, interestingly, to conquer the sky is to conquer the psyche; to control the cable is to control the colonized. And this control is more subtle, more effective, and also more invisible than any other form of control humankind has ever known. Yes, one could see the early colonial ruler physically moving around, and looting the territory; while, now, the ruler is physically absent, but is ethereally moving round the clock just like a ghost, like a spirit—more slippery, more

powerful than his physical counterpart.

Ghosts have now entered Bangladesh. These ghosts are those of the pipers-of-Hamelin who cannot be seen, but only heard. And these pipers have endlessly attracted people from various walks of life, particularly youths and children. Yes, just switch on your TV—you have a pipe. Change the channel, you have a piper. Star Plus is one such piper, CNN is yet another, and there are others, playing endlessly their pipes and entering deep into your psychic life at any point of time.

Bangladesh, as its cable craze indicates, is in a crisis. The other day, a university provost commented, "with the arrival of the dish antennae, students in residential halls have started keeping late at night unbelievably without studies. They seem to have lost interest in studies. In fact, they do not have the time; during the whole day, they sleep; while, in the night, they watch various entertainment programmes on TV." A businessman, who is a father of two children, candidly commented: "It is virtually impossible to stop my children from watching TV, particularly GTV programmes. My eldest son now acts like a Rajani Kant (the film-heroi), and prefers Hindi to Bangla." A rickshawalla, who does not have a TV set of his own, but watches, along with his wife, TV programmes at a rich friend's

house, responded interestingly: "Oh, my wife wants to act like a Juhl" (an Indian film star!).

Yes, Star Plus, MTV or Channel V, GTV, PTV, Metro Channel, DV 1-2, Prime Sports—all are playing their pipes, patterning their own weaves of images, disseminating their own programmes, and entertaining millions all across the country. Of course, everything is not sheer trash or nonsense. But in a country like

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# The Reform Agenda

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price of rice at the present harvesting time is a matter of serious concern. The government tended to be very complacent over foodgrain production over the past few years. In fact, after the foodgrain production jumped by 11.4 per cent in 1989-90 following the unprecedented floods of 1988, it grew at an annual average rate of only about one per cent during 1990-94 while the population grew at 2.17 per cent. Moreover, there has been a setback in the foodgrain production this year due to drought in several districts in the north. Hence, the food supply situation has worsened substantially over the past two or three years. In fact, when foodgrain prices collapsed two years ago following good harvest, the government was not prepared to handle the situation. Neither had it an inkling about the problem that prices would rise at this harvesting season.

The preeminent position of agriculture in the national economy demands that agriculture be in the forefront of development of policy focus. Since more land is not waiting to be brought under cultivation, agricultural productivity must be increased to feed the growing population. Serious attention is therefore needed to be given to agriculture through research efforts, policy adjustment and investment. Similarly, other now-neglected issues must be mainstreamed in the development policy regime. These would include productivity improvement in other sectors, employment generation focusing on the poor, and water development and utilization taking the realities at the local spaces into consideration.

If the policies were homegrown and anchored on realities on the ground and people's circumstances and needs, the perspectives out-

lined in the preceding paragraphs and other pertinent ones which have been left to be addressed through sectoral devices, would certainly have been addressed up front along with those out of the on-going reform agenda which are relevant. But given the adherence, imposed or not, to the reform agenda as dictated by foreign aid conditionalities, the fundamental problems, some of which have been mentioned above, are either not addressed as mainstream policy concerns or are aggravated through the policies being implemented. The government has, in the process, become disempowered. It appears that the economic policy making in Bangladesh has been afflicted with AIDS (Acquired Initiative Deficiency Syndrome) virus. One knows that AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) virus is contracted by individuals through sexual promiscuity. AIDS virus has similarly been contracted by the policy making authorities in this country through extravagantly (promiscuously) seeking and using foreign aid over the years, thereby avoiding facing the hard facts and taking the hard decisions. The proneness to begging for ideas, analyses and resources involved in the process has sapped the vitality of the whole system of governance in the country.

Functioning in the straitjacket defined by the wide array of conditionalities, the government has been implementing policies which have in fact been strengthening further the circumstances of the already enabled, leaving the ordinary people to bear most of the cost of adjustment. The rich and strong have been seizing upon most of the opportunities arising in the wake of economic liberalization. And yet private investment has remained sluggish, along with a restrained public investment.

The argument that resources released by reducing government expenditure would lead to increased resources and, hence, increased investment in the private sector has not held. In fact, studies suggest that more public investment in infrastructure should crowd-in private investment. The persisting uncertain political conditions are a major factor constraining investment, both domestic and foreign. With investment remaining sluggish, economic growth rate has not accelerated. In fact the GDP growth rate of 4.5 per cent achieved in 1993/94 is lower than the average rate achieved during 1981-90 (4.8%) and that during 1973-80 (4.9%).

Thus the country is getting the worst all round. The main goal of the structural adjustment reforms—accelerated growth—remains unfulfilled; a disempowering of the government has occurred; the preeminent sector, agriculture, has been neglected; an employment focus is missing; the powerful have been getting more powerful; and poverty alleviation and empowerment of the poor remain in the wish list. Indeed, it is now widely recognized that empowerment of the people, starting at the level of the individual, within the state structure, is a precondition rather than the outcome of development. Empowerment is a multidimensional concept—it calls for the development of human capability through adequate education, training and health care, the establishment of equitable access to resources for, and processes and benefits of, economic and social development; widening of opportunities and choices before individuals and enabling them through rule of law and appropriate institutional arrangements to make the best out of the available opportunities and choices. But how can empowerment of the people be established if the government itself is disempowered?

As is well known no cure

has yet been found for AIDS. Is it possible to get rid of AIDS virus and pave the way for reorientation and refocusing of policies towards people-centred sustainable development? As an optimist I should say yes, it is. But I have to be cautious because I know that firmly formed habits die hard, if at all. In this case, the virus has spread widely throughout the national psyche. A complete overhauling is necessary to cleanse the psyche and reorient it towards another development that focuses on the imperatives arising from the realities on the ground some of which have been indicated earlier. But this operation is unlikely to be initiated, let alone that it will be successfully completed unless the cancer of pervasive corruption afflicting the body politic and governance structure of the country is also rooted out at the same time. Tall order indeed. But if the society were to make progress, alleviating poverty and embarking on a process of sustainable development on the one hand and earning a respectable position in the comity of nations on the other, we must wake up and be up and doing to get rid of 'AIDS' and 'cancer' for national renewal and reorientation, democratize the society at all levels and empower the people, and brace ourselves for negotiating all the hurdles to ensure sustainable development through environmentally sound and equitably distributed growth. Otherwise, we will be left behind to languish in poverty and dependence as all the smarter members of the global society will march forward in the twenty-first century. Will those who are in leadership positions in different spheres of national life, both within and outside government, accept the challenge and take the initiative?

The author is an eminent economist and chairman of Bangladesh Unnayan Parishad (BUP), a leading think-tank of the country.

Best wishes to The Daily Star on its 4th anniversary

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