

FOCUS

Seduced by Z, Lured by V The Fear of Foreign TV

THE advent of satellite television in Bangladesh has renewed fears amongst some quarters of moral degeneracy of our youth, cultural domination, the intrusion of "alien" values, and many other similar sins. If one is to believe some of the reports in the news media, and random anecdotal conversations, Bangladeshi youth are facing a crisis of monumental proportions, a battle between "indigenous Bengali" values and "imported foreign" ones. Many an earnest intellectual (and there seem to be no shortage of these) has made dire pronouncements about the need to protect young minds from the insidious onslaught of foreign television programmes. Some have called for regulation, others for outright censorship.

The issue of regulating the media, whether it be the spoken word, print, radio or television is an old one. Censorship appears to be a primal urge — the desire to control access to unpalatable opinions, images or thoughts. There is a long history around the world of initial fear of new trends in music, fashion, and most dangerous of them all — ideas, with campaigns to try to limit their spread, followed by eventual acceptance into the mainstream. I was intrigued to recently discover, that jazz, (one of the more genteel of musical forms) when it first appeared on the public scene in the United States was labeled as licentious, subversive, and a threat to

public morals. How seriously should one take these comments about limiting access to satellite television? Allowing for the inevitable pontification of "intellectuals" is there any merit in these arguments? Should sensible people worry?

I must confess, that I am puzzled as to what exactly these "self-styled guardians of morals and culture" are worried about? I am always suspicious of topics where both the left and the right agree — the cynic in me somehow feels that there is a certain hypocrisy here, a conspiracy to deny choice to the average woman, man and child. Inevitably, when you cut through the jargon, the debate is about values and the molding of malleable minds. If I understand the argument correctly, by watching various nubile women (I suppose I should include men — but can men be nubile? — something to think about) prancing around trees in suggestive clothing, the young may be influenced into — (I will leave it to the reader's imagination). Is this a concern about aesthetics or morals?

In societies such as ours, with a strong authoritarian streak, and no real tradition of open debate, many are at-

tracted to the notion of selective access to information — "keep what is good" and "eliminate what is bad". Unfortunately, what is deemed "bad or subversive" is often what is unfamiliar or different, to self-appointed arbiters of national taste and morals.

What values are we talking about defending, and why should our youth be the can-

vas of shows "Baywatch", where both the men and the women are forever young, have flat stomachs and nothing better to do than frolic in the sand, the sea and the surf.

These shows may be mindless, but should we view them as a threat, and to what or whom? To those on the left, these programs reflect the "crass commercialism of bourgeois values", while to

the media to eliminate all that we fear, and keep the sanitized version of the familiar. To be effective, one would have to resort to a kind of authoritarian control that would have severe damaging effects on the fragile democracy that we now have. To me one of the hallmarks of democracy is allowing a diversity of opinion/thought and information, much of which may be personally offensive to any one individual's aesthetics and or morals. As a society, we need to acknowledge that, individuals, and not some other authority, are the best judges of what they should read, hear and see. Children obviously need guidance and protection, but that should come at the parental level and not at the state. In any case censorship and banning, often leads to perverse results, where what might have been just boring now becomes titillating and sought after, precisely because it has been censored or banned — "the attraction of forbidden fruit."

Leaving aside the issues of the desirability and the effectiveness of regulating foreign television, it is worth noting that exposure to these programs has definite advantageous spill-over effects. One of the less appreciated mer-

its of the explosion in choice of television programs is that Bangladesh Television (BTV) is making some efforts to improve the quality of their programs, although there is still a long way to go as yet. Advertisements have definitely become more professional and creative. Music programs are now catering to more than just staid middle class, middle aged tastes. The dramas have improved, especially the packaged variety. Unfortunately the tendency to present overly-melodramatic fare has not lessened. Doom, gloom and injustice still seem to be the order of the day — I wonder if this reflects a strong streak of morbidity amongst Bangladeshi playwrights or is comedy just harder to write and present — more on this at a later date. There is an abundance of exceedingly dull talk shows on weighty issues, which neither inform nor provoke debate. Given the paucity of creative, entertaining or informative programs on BTV, is it any wonder that those who have the ability, switch on to the giddy fantasy land of Hollywood and Bollywood.

And what of our moral guardians, our intellectual Brahmins who care so much and do so little for us common folk? My advice is: leave us and our children be, switch off our own TVs, not ours.

Dr Omar Rahman is Assistant Professor of Demography, at Harvard University.

THE collapse of the Soviet Union has meant a reprieve for the Russian Arctic. Market prices for fuel means it is no longer economical to exploit that ecologically sensitive region. Meanwhile, WWF is working to conserve areas in the Arctic Circle.

Conserving the Siberian Arctic

by Martin Hiller

OSCOW, Russia: When the wild geese start their long flight north from southern and western Europe to their summer breeding grounds, northern Siberia is still under snow and ice. Only by the end of May does the ice on the rivers crack, and the snow melt sufficiently, for the plants to really start to grow again. The days get longer and longer, and soon the sun never sets.

The Russian Arctic still has a rare, wild beauty. Untamed rivers flow through the wide open spaces of the tundra, the taiga, and into the Arctic Ocean. These are among the last wildernesses on the planet.

"The recent initiatives in Russia to establish a network of large protected areas, should serve as models for other governments in the Arctic," says Peter Prokosh, WWF's Arctic Programme Coordinator.

Fortunately, northern Siberia is not the most accessible or friendly part of the earth. That is why its northern, cold, and treeless regions have not been completely ravaged. Nor do they people did not try!

When Russia was part of the Soviet Union, there was a deliberate policy to tame the

The Young Returnees!

by Anita Aparna Muyeed

Did you ever notice women who just can't keep their ornaments on properly? That no matter how hard they try, the ornaments happily keeps sliding off? You have perhaps also noticed those looking painfully suffocated in their salwar kameezes, not only because of the layers and layers of material and belligerent ornaments, but also the heat. How about those who are afraid of salamanders and insects (especially the monster flying cockroach)? Or those who are avoid black smoke like the plague and walk with their noses and mouths covered? Do these sights seem familiar?

You have probably spotted a deshi who has returned from abroad. Just give them ten months in Dhaka, and they'll not only get used to all these trials, but might even start getting fashionable. One woman quite humorously defined her readjusting as, "I grew my hair and started wearing lipstick. It was really traumatic!"

An escalating number of young deshis, who have been brought up abroad, are not only returning to the homeland, but coming back for longer periods of time than before. Is this unexpected pattern just coincidence, or is it something more than chance? This question being worthy of investigation spurred a series of interviews with fifteen returnees. From the pool of fifteen, the majority have spent more time abroad than in Bangladesh. They range from age twenty to twenty-nine. Most of them were either born abroad or left at an early age accompanied by their immediate family. They have all either completed their Master's or Bachelor's degrees. Yet, the incisive question is, after all these years, what are their reasons for returning?

Some are here because of a strong luring pull, coupled with the enticement of a land and culture that was never fully experienced. Many have returned to Dhaka after the completion of a Bachelor's, not only to spend some time with family and for work experience, but also because

they had never lived in Bangladesh, deciding that this interval between studies, or that this transitional phase in their lives would be the most propitious time to undergo the experience of living here. Add another motivating ingredient, such as personal exploration, alongside suitable timing, and what you get is many young men and women coming back to ascertain their roots. A young man, aged twenty-eight (the son of an Australian mother and a Bangladeshi father), has spent his entire life in Britain, yet he invariably felt a very strong bond with Bangladesh and

that job opportunities here are more stimulating and interesting than they are abroad. They feel that they are given greater responsibility than they would be given abroad and that their abilities are not stifled but, on the contrary, are encouraged to expand. Working in Bangladesh allows more personal contribution and on a much larger scale.

One young man quite eloquently described his return as, "a feeling of somehow being propelled by an intense sentiment of magnanimity." He feels obligated to Bangladesh in an intangible way, ... perhaps it's just an attempt to override the guilt that I

have always identified him self as Australian, not as British, but as Bangladeshi. And today, his presence in Bangladesh will give him the occasion, not only to experience and understand the reason for this strong vinculum, but also an opportunity to explore himself further. Many others coming from like backgrounds are susceptible to parallel experiences, and are searching for a similar breakthrough in Bangladesh.

Yet, the very top reason for returning to Bangladesh is for work experience. Most returnees have come back to work in between further studies. Today, Bangladesh is virtually a depot for develop-

ment work: a large proportion of these young returnees have come back because of their special interest in social work. Many work for BRAC, Grameen Trust, UN organisations and various other international organisations and NGOs as well as tenuring law and journalism to name a few other professions. Due to the shortage in Bangladesh of some of the skills that they possess degrees from abroad, proficiency in several languages, broad outlook on the world, familiarity with different cultures, etc. A lot of them find

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