

The Heavy Fall-out

India rammed down the five-test nuclear series in a matter of three days reminding of that French obduracy two years ago. The BJP-led government may have given an euphoric stunner to the Indian electorate. It may have let the scientists have enough data to go on the computer and perfect the system in quietude. India has indeed reached a stage where, in her own words, she is 'prepared to consider a ban on such testing'.

But at what cost has India achieved all of these self-satisfying things? Was India any worse off only four days ago in terms of parity with what her PM Atal Behari Vajpayee in his letter to US president Clinton termed as 'overt' nuclear weapon state China or a 'covert' nuclear state Pakistan? Hardly. India's basic nuclear capability has been a proven fact since 1974 when she had successfully tested the fission device. In point of fact, the Indian tests followed the completion of Chinese nuclear tests in 1963. China at that point in time announced she would not carry out any more underground tests. India restrained herself from conducting tests all these 24 years without losing a bit on her potential nuclear power standing. Why couldn't see continue with the same sagacious policy? We find in this 'parity' game a dangerously unending escalation into competitive manufacture of weapons of mass destruction. Supposing China today reconsiders her self-imposed ban on tests and sets about reaching a new plateau in weaponry build-up. Then what? In all probability India would try to match in a quest for parity *ad infinitum*.

Pakistan seems set to carry out retaliatory tests in the near future. If Islamabad seeks nuclear parity with Delhi and Delhi with Beijing then what we have is a dreadfully overt nuclear arms race — in the region and perhaps beyond. So, we don't see how India's long-term security concerns have been addressed by her conducting the nuclear tests.

The present Indian leadership may have given rise to jingoism. We are deeply concerned at the sharp deterioration in Indo-Pak relations which are central to regional environment. Outlook-wise it seems hardly short of post-war belligerence between adversarial countries.

This is bound to cast a long, dark shadow over the SAARC process which had been so painstakingly built up to a reasonably stable, cooperative order of things. The SAARC has received a body blow. Perhaps Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, the Maldives and Bhutan should try to persuade India and Pakistan to step back from the brink.

From Here to Where?

Are we, as a nation, going to be devoured by the fire of lust? If the morning press is anything to go by then this is one question that is becoming increasingly bigger and difficult for the sentient citizens to sweep under the carpet.

The Daily Star front page yesterday carried the visual of three teenagers arrested on charge of raping a nine-year old employed as a maid in a house in old Dhaka. What is remarkable about the picture is the total absence of innocence and emotion on the three faces. Cruelty, ferocity and recklessness are writ so large on their countenance that no message of humanity seemed capable of seeping into their mind. Crime was perhaps an automatic choice with them. What sends a cold sweat down the spine is that along with a shooting criminal index, faces like these are increasing in number quite steadily, an obvious effect of the unabated process of brutalisation of society.

Stopping rape may be a multidisciplinary challenge but are we showing any sense of urgency or consciousness about the preventive aspect of the matter on the individual or familial level? Apparently not. With rape having broken out as a universal and recurring social aberration, members or the management of the house where the girl worked should have had enough wisdom not to send the girl on an errand at night however short the distance might have been.

It is a common practice with urban households to send maids for small shopping chores. More often than not this is not helpless situation where the family members — more precisely the male members — themselves cannot look after household necessities like doing the grocery for want of time. It is a legacy of dependence culture where the employer driven as he or she is by the psychology of 'wringing out' the most for what little is doled out to the employee every month quite thoughtlessly indulges in the domestic aid's inclination to utilise every opportunity of going out. It is a perfectly natural inclination with the domestic aids because the atmosphere they work in is almost always cheerless, oppressive and tyrannical.

Accidents will always happen no matter how careful we are. But if only the employers start recognising that the domestic aids are as much human beings as they or their children then such mishaps could be avoided to a large extent.

Netanyahu Factor

Much is being apparently made about Netanyahu's latest so-called climbdown from his sticking point of 9 per cent pull-out from the Israeli-occupied Palestine. All he has agreed to do after a constant diplomatic hammering of the US on her 13 per cent formula is to effect a 'further withdrawal' beyond the 9 per cent ceiling he had originally set. His refusal to quantify what he proffers as 'further withdrawal' bespeaks his dodger mentality born of expedient political behalf that it is a land-for-terrorist deal which is being foisted upon him. However much he tries to undermine the land-for-peace appeal of Yasser Arafat by overstressing his security concerns, the facts are ranged against him.

In the first place, none of this percentage tossing about the pull-out of troops was envisaged in any of the paragraphs of the Oslo Treaty signed between the two sides in 1993. By now the troops withdrawal should have been completed with a forward foothold reached on the status talks on Jerusalem and Palestinian homeland. Joint policing or mixed control ought to have been a matter of the past, to say nothing of the new Israeli settlements.

How much of an assurance on security Netanyahu wants from Arafat when the latter goes out his way to keep peace in areas administered by him. Several Palestinians are in detention camp under the PLO administration.

Netanyahu is an impediment to the Middle East peace process and 'perhaps' an emerging 'strategic liability' for the US.

Democracy and Free Press: Inseparable Twins

A lie is a lie whether it is here or else where. But tradition or historical cultural context is often used as an excuse by authoritarian rulers, oligarchies and corrupt vested interests. Democracy, genuine elections and a free press enable the people to change a government.

WORLD Press Freedom Day was observed recently all over the democratic polity. Free press is the inseparable twin of democracy. If the people and their leaders believe in democracy there cannot be any quarrel with Mahatma Gandhi's belief that 'the national cause will never suffer by honest criticism of national institutions and national policies.'

He explained the rationale still further: 'One of the objects of a newspaper is to understand the popular feelings and to give expression to it; another is to arouse among the people certain desirable sentiments; and the third is to fearlessly expose popular defects.' Simply put, the freedom to express someone's opinion freely is an essential constituent of a liberal democratic order. The life element of that order is permanent intellectual struggle, i.e. the contest of opinions.

Freedom for the American Press is guaranteed by the First Amendment to the constitution. In Britain, this freedom is scrupulously upheld by the courts of law. German constitution states, 'Everyone has the right to express and disseminate his opinion in words, writing and images and to inform himself unhampered by means of generally accessible sources. Freedom of the Press, and freedom of reporting by broadcasting and films are guaranteed. Censorship shall not take place.'

In Bangladesh today, as democracy takes roots, the print media is free to report as is. The only limits are the regulations of general law and more importantly, the moral and social responsibility to the people. Also, free press must be a fair press. Our newspapers with all their subjective biases are quite fair in representing the other points of view. Clearly, there is no single reality. There are different versions of reality. Some of them may contradict each other, but only honest depiction can promote clarity and help to achieve a balance. And that precisely is the media's responsibility. Because, only thus the media can grow away from the tendency towards sensa-

tionalism and avoid the tempting shine of filthy lucre.

Let us pause here and look at the electronic media — radio and T.V. State control continues to persist. Our newspapers and publications combined together can boast a circulation of around one million or less in a population of 122 million. Radio, on the other hand, reaches the majority population in the countryside and T.V. is gaining ground everyday, albeit slowly. They are a far more potent influence in a country of high illiteracy.

Further, in our shrinking world, the argument for constructive control of electronic media in the name of national duty is indeed counter productive. Sunanda K. Dutta Roy, once editor of 'The Statesman' writes: 'Our media runs the risk of losing credibility. It is not unknown for viewers in a Third World country to watch the bland anodyne of the national television newscaster claiming that all is best in this best of all possible worlds, and then switching over to CNN to see live telecasts of violence within a few miles of where they are sitting.' In other words, modern technology makes concealment difficult.

Another question that is often asked is 'whose freedom? Should it be the proprietor's, the editor's or the journalist's?' If we do not live in Utopia, we know that everywhere in this imperfect world he who pays the piper calls the tune. The western media, as Sunanda notes, is a product of the free market. Today's press magnate is more inclined to see news as fillers between revenue earning advertisements. This transformation was dramatically underlined in 1969, when the Sun, whose earlier incarnation, the Daily Herald, prided itself on its social conscience, became part of Mr. Rupert Murdoch's empire. As one chronicler puts it: 'Politics went, naked ladies arrived and circulation soared.'

What about Bangladesh? So

far our newspaper - owners have looked after only the business part and that sometimes in dignified anonymity. Hopefully, they do not interfere in the day-to-day editorial operations. However, there is always an outer limit to which individual reporter editor can go before proprietorial interests manifest themselves.

Thus, when we say that the press must be free to choose and cover the issues of interest to the people untrammeled by any vested interest, the cynical reply is that there is no free press. It is always controlled by the owners, a political party etc. Observations of Dr. Syed Hussain Alatas, former Vice Chancellor of the University of Malaya, are pertinent in that

 Do I Dare!
AZ M Obaidullah Khan

context. Yes, he says, there are ideological, public, group and political interests and these interests have a right to expression. Similarly, he adds, I also must have the right to have a press of my own, to complete and defend myself against the influences of other press. That is the fundamental existential condition of the press — the right of the Press to be born.

'For instance, if I do not have the right to have newspaper when some others can own newspapers then there is no freedom of the press.... Controlled breeding disallows the freedom of breeding. So the issue of the right to give birth to the press is a very fundamental right in the issues of press freedom.'

Besides it is undisputed that plurality, that is, a variety of differing opinions, has to be represented by various press organs in order to have the function of intellectual dis-

course fulfilled. This will not be possible if structures in the media market are monopolistic.

Further, and I go back to my friend Sunanda, an institution whose owners are prepared to assert their ownership rights in order to gain control over the flow of information, loses its credibility with the public and its effectiveness with politicians. It is seen as just another commercial activity in the hands of operators whose only interests are power and profit. The public perception is that the print media is altogether a far more respectable institution when journalists have a greater say in its running. It is trusted more then, because readers think journalists have fewer

axes to grind, is that so? Someone may ask. Look at the lure of what is called investigative stories. The staple of many investigative stories is the plant or the leak, which means they are engineered by someone with an axe to grind. 'After all, newspapers everywhere must sell to survive. Notwithstanding the implicit faith of the readers in journalists having fewer axes to grind, there is always the danger of manipulating the press. The most insidious, as pointed out by Tom Wicker of the New York Times is the danger of being seduced by having Henry Kissinger call you by yours first name.'

Another argument. How about freedom being abused? Yes, some of the media are very good, some not-so-good and there are some which stink. The facts may be true or half-true, but there is no aesthetics, no refinement. But can we stop the unhampered development of

press, because there are some rotten eggs? This is a negative conditioning. Rather, we must say that we must avoid such pitfalls and do otherwise. If we cannot have an abusive headmaster, we cannot say that the principle of universal education is wrong. The abuse of press freedom must be given attention in a different context without affecting the principles of press freedom.

We cannot, and I repeat, must not throw out the baby with the bathwater.

There is a related point. Clearly, the issues that interest different societies are different. As the interest is different, the focus is also different. Of course we cannot question these differences as also regional, ethnic and cultural considerations. What is of paramount importance, however, is the truth value. Here there are no cultural differences nor any east/west, north/south divide. A lie is a lie whether it is here or elsewhere. But tradition or historical cultural context is often used as an excuse by authoritarian rulers, oligarchies and corrupt vested interests. Democracy, genuine elections and a free press enable the people to change a government.

So, to remain in usurped power, they say they are against imitating the West, or this is not our tradition. Knowing that they cannot say they are against democracy or a free press, they use all sorts of excuses to camouflage the real reason. The issues of press freedom and democracy must be considered independently and intrinsically on their own merits. This is an issue where you must not have linkages in terms of discourse, saying it is western or eastern. Those things are irrelevant.'

Press freedom is thus based on its universal principles. A crime is a crime, whether it is in Chicago or in Bangladesh. How it is reported in media may be different but the responsibility of the crime is perceived the same everywhere and sets off

the same law and order process. Although such comparison is odious, the above is true of press freedom, a freedom sobered by social responsibility. If any political or corporate leader, and for that matter, any newspaper person claims to believe in democracy, he must believe in press freedom. It is otherwise for the proponents of guided or controlled democracy who take shelter behind traditions and history. And guided press is an inevitable handmaiden of guided democracy.

Many of our Third World leaders, and I am plagiarising from an eminent editor, secretly share the worries of the great Napoleon who confessed: 'If I loosen the reins on the press, I would not stay in power for three months.' Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel put it differently immediately after the independence of India: 'We are interested in papers that support us wholeheartedly. To say will support when we are right is meaningless. For why should any one oppose us then?' In circumstances like that, when a journalist's professional obligations appear to clash with the demands of state, an euphemism for the government in power, the media has only its conscience to fall back on.

It will be presumptuous to offer any general rule and the least of all a moral judgment. The parameters of each society will determine what to defend and what not. But two warnings may be borne in mind. First, 'while all censorship are repugnant, nothing is worse or more deadly than self-censorship.' Second, the journalist's only loyalty is to principles. She/he may arguably tone down certain facts in the interest of religious/sectarian harmony or national cohesion. But one betrays the sanctity of the free press if one does so to protect a politician or a godfather.

The journalist's is a difficult task in all countries. It is especially so in the Third World because he has to tread warily between pressional integrity and government expectations which are so often camouflaged as national duty.'

To the Editor...

Streets of Dhaka

Sir, If you happen to be a dweller of our ever throbbing and pulsating mega-city, Dhaka, you must have been witness of many interesting incidents and scenarios on its streets. The hubbub of this city is enough to frighten a newcomer, out of his wits!

The jam was caused by the checking of every vehicle — car, rickshaw etc., entering the cantonment. Wonder why the army should be afraid of the civilians, when actually it is vice versa!

Like the other day, a well-dressed guy, suddenly shot out of his seat and crash landed on the road — absolutely sprawled on it, all hands and knees — poor fellow! His spotlessly clean dress now all covered in many other countries too but absolutely freely by the citizens. If it is so allowed here too, it will ease the traffic jam immensely on other roads, serving as a by-pass.

One would think that the chaos on the roads of this metropolis is because of the buses, trucks, tempos, cars, baby-taxis and rickshaws (what a variety of traffic we have on our roads — it is unique indeed!). There is also another very important factor that contributes to this chaos subtly.

They are the paedestrians.

These people never follow the rule of the road, just like the vehicles.

To cross the road they rarely use the newly-constructed overbridges or the zebra crossings. They just make a dash across the road where ever they feel like and without even looking right or left. Therefore just throwing themselves to the mercy of the drivers! But if they are hit the fault is all driver's. Many times they are seen walking on a busy road rather than on the footpath thus endangering their lives with least worry in the world!

The horns of some buses and trucks are so shrill and loud.

that it is sure to startle anybody. It is very harmful for the ear drums too, which are very sensitive to such loud, harsh sounds and can result in deafness even, especially in children.

There would not have been

so much confusion and jam on the streets of this city had everybody shown a little consideration for other's convenience.

Most people on the streets appear to be unimaginably selfish and self-centered with complete disregard for others — each one wants to go first. Why can't we be a bit less selfish?

Dr. Sabrina Q. Rashid.

Dhaka Cantonment, Dhaka

Is Dhaka city really a safe place?

Sir, For the last few days, I have been wondering if I really feel safe in my country's capital. From experience and surrounding happenings, I definitely do not feel so. First of all, the percentage of hooligans has increased numerously, causing much terrorism in different neighbourhoods. These outlaws are found to be heavily armed and so standing up against them alone has become a fool's move. Unfortunately, the police are unable, or unwilling, to provide us with sufficient protection, which makes me feel very unsafe.

The situation of the traffic on the roads of the city makes me wonder if I will ever return home in one piece once I have left my house. Most of the drivers do not really know the rules and regulations of the road, and the ones who do know do not care to give much importance to it as they are not bound to follow the traffic rules.

Furthermore, if one tries to abide all these regulations and all the other drivers do not care, then it does become very difficult for that person to drive on

these road. The traffic control fail or do not care to punish the culprits properly and suitably, and so the problem continues to grow.

The solutions to these problems call for drastic changes, which is very difficult to achieve. However, if each of us try to improve our faults and replace them with virtues, try to respect each other for what we are, and just try to stay as a respectable healthy community, it is really impossible?

Shams Bin Quader

International Education Centre

Uttara, Dhaka

Why do I feel unsafe in Dhaka?

Sir, For the last couple of years violence and turbulence in our big city has seemed to have increased disturbingly. The streets are no longer safe, not even during day-time. Kidnapping, robbery and other tragedies occur every single day. It seems like some city-dwellers have lost all sense of morality.

But what saddens me most, is the hypocrisy of people who stand by and watch innocent people being harassed right in front of them, and still do nothing. Their insensitivity and inhumanity is as dangerous to our society as the criminals themselves are (although some people react strongly).

This is the reason why, a young girl living in Dhaka, feel unsafe to even walk outside my front door after dark.

What has happened to the bold and self-sacrificing Bengalis?

I request the readers: if you see a person being robbed or kidnapped, do not be afraid to protest or to help. It is the least we can do to show the criminals that we do not accept their behaviour.

Bornita Quader

Dhaka

Dhaka today

Sir, The population of Dhaka is a mixture of people from different areas. People here are as busy as bees. The social relationship is not harmonious.

Unlike other places, the atmosphere here is not affable.

Terrorism is one of the reasons, which makes me feel unsafe in Dhaka city.

In the capital of Bangladesh, this sort of crime is abundant.

Terrorism is escalating day by day in Dhaka. It makes our life miserable.

Another problem is the traffic jam.