

Signboard institutions

They have no right to exist

THE government is thinking of discontinuing financial support to 290 schools, madrassahs and colleges for their extremely poor performance in public examinations, subject to a scooping investigation into their state of affairs. Their affiliations might also be cancelled. The audit directorate of the education ministry is to probe further into the matter so that any possibility of political reaction being organised locally can be ruled out.

The Prothom Alo has reported that no student came out successful in any public examinations in the last two years from those 290 institutions, though the government had to spend a staggering Tk 50 crore for their upkeep.

The signboard institutions are an example of gross irregularities and anomalies that have crept into a vital sector like education. The so-called teachers do not attend classes and a highly exaggerated number of examinees is shown for the public examinations, though in reality a handful of students appear. The institutions are poorly equipped and do not even have the arrangements for holding classes.

The education ministry has made it a rule that the minimum distance between two schools should be at least four kilometres and that between two colleges eight kilometres. But this rule is being violated with impunity. Obviously, influence-peddling caused the schools to be located in such a concentric manner.

The institutions are certainly a malignant growth, which has brought down the standard of education as a whole besides putting undue pressure on our scant resources.

It is imperative to know how these institutions got government affiliation in the first place so as to foster transparency by a demonstration effect across the whole system. Obviously, they managed to cheat both students and the government because they enjoyed the blessings of politically influential men who had vied with each other to have schools, madrassahs or colleges in places of their choice. They must have been happily oblivious of the truth that supporting such institutions amounted to undermining the entire system of education.

The SSC examination results have been an eye-opener to poor quality education. But what is a shocking indictment on the infrastructure is that the 290 institutions in question have no pass figure to show. They deserve to be only phased out.

David Kelly tragedy

Truth will be revealed on Iraq dossier, we hope

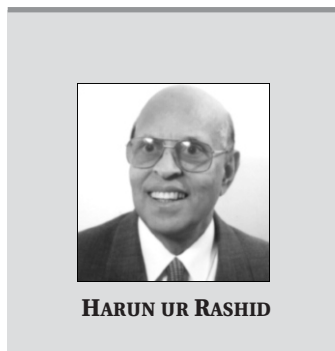
WE are deeply saddened by the unfortunate and tragic death of Dr. David Kelly who by profession was not only an expert on biological weapons but also by nature an extremely conscientious man. He has served the cause of truth. But the truth eventually turned out quite costly for him. It caused his untimely death. Dr. Kelly had never been in media glare in his long and distinguished career as an arms expert. Therefore, the media attention after the British department of defense revealed his name as the probable source for the BBC story which alleged that the government had 'sexed up' the Iraq dossier, visibly unnerved him.

Both Tony Blair's government and the BBC went from pillar to post to prove each other wrong. Dr. Kelly became a victim of circumstances in the tug-of-war between the two sides. True to its professional integrity, the BBC protected him till he was alive; they revealed his name only after he died. It was undoubtedly a sign of commitment to truth, professionalism and, in BBC's own words, 'duty of confidentiality'. We commend the BBC for its firm stand on upholding the virtue of journalism. Neither pressure nor turn of events could deter them from keeping their source protected. But unfortunately Dr. Kelly succumbed to the 'intolerable stress'.

The thing that stands out is that the sanctity of institutions has emerged triumphant. After the whole controversy came out in the open, a probe committee was formed. And, both the sides were grilled by the committee members which was seen by millions via live telecast. People were also able to gauge the emotions Dr. Kelly was probably going through during his interrogation. A sense of accountability was evident from all the sides. If only there were similar tendencies in our country, then private TV channels in Dhaka probably would not have changed or denied their stories on ammo haul after police raided their premises and demanded withdrawal of earlier stories. Lack of responsibility and obligation from both establishment and media has often rendered the truth elusive in Bangladesh.

Let's hope the whole process of investigation in Britain that has got vigorously underway will reveal the whole truth -- not only about the WMD hype but also Dr. Kelly's tragic end.

Freedom of press: Is it under siege?



HARUN UR RASHID

THE present tension between politicians and press in Bangladesh is unfortunate because ideally it should not occur in democratic polity. Press or broadly media is a link between people and politicians. Politicians and media need each other and there should exist personal, political and professional relationships between them. As late Enoch Powell, the British political leader once said: "For a politician to complain about the press is like a ship's captain complaining about the sea."

We all know that people of all classes, literate or not, are keen to read or hear news about the country and the world. In Bangladesh those who cannot afford to buy newspapers read them pasted on outside walls of newspaper offices. In rural areas one reads a newspaper loud to illiterate people who gather and are keen to hear news.

In Britain, media is often called the Fourth Estate. This means that media is, after the three Estates, the Lords Spiritual, Lords Temporal and House of Commons, the Fourth Estate, a quasi-constitutional Estate. This implies that media is one of the integral constituents of a state.

As a watchdog, media keeps a constant vigil on governments bringing to light their acts of omission and commission and thereby helps governments to measure their popularity among people. It is therefore correct to conclude that there is a symbiotic relationship between media and governments. The presence of journalists in the Parliament indicates this close relationship and this link must not be eroded for sake of openness and accountability.

What constitutes news?
Truthfulness of news published or broadcast is always a matter intensely discussed. In this context Walter Lippmann observes the following in his celebrated treatise Public Opinion:

"The hypothesis, which seems to be the most fertile, is that news and truth are not the same thing, and must be clearly distinguished. The function of news is to signalize an event, the function of truth is to bring to light the hidden facts, to set them into relation with each other and make a picture of reality on which

men can act. Only at these points, where social conditions take recognizable and measurable shape, do the body of truth and the body of news coincide.

Another question what is it that makes one thing worth reporting and another not? Graham Murdock offers an answer in the following words:

"It has to be an event. It has to be something that has happened, rather than a long process that's been unfolding over time. It has to have happened recently..... News is not about what ordinary people do, it

is about what the powerful people do..... It has to be an event that has some significance for the country as a whole... The other criterion would be human interest: something like a disaster would be automatically news."

Accuracy of news or information is imperative for arriving at informed political and social judgments. The accurate information is important also because of the need to protect public from the damaging consequences of the dissemination of inaccurate information.

Political reporting is one area where media often comes into conflict with politicians. There are two aspects of political reporting which may create problems for politicians and news coverage. Politicians tend to be subjected to a barrage of criticism on charges of hypocrisy for championing a cause which they had earlier vehemently opposed. On the other hand politicians accuse media of having the luxury of being able to pick up and discard news at will.

Freedom of media and democracy:
One of the essential pre-requisites for a successful democracy is a free and fair media. In Bangladesh one could argue that freedom of media is an extension of freedom of thought and conscience and of speech as enshrined in Article 39 of the Bangladesh Constitution. Freedom of media is therefore placed on a constitutional footing and is argued to be a right to be respected by all organs of state. It can be argued that this right cannot be derogated or diminished in any circumstances other than what are provided in the constitution.

The success of democratic institutions depends on the degree to which governments gain wide coverage for its developmental activities and also receive views of the electorate.

Without free media there is every possibility that governments may develop complacency, leading to stagnation and unpopular. Controlled media could be attributed in many ways to collapse of totalitarian regimes. Thus the Soviet system broke down because there was no freedom of media. The outbreak of financial crisis in South East Asia in 1997 is partly responsible for the constraints media faced in reporting true picture of economy. The fall of the Suharto regime in Indonesia in 1998 was due to the muzzled media during his 32-year authoritarian rule.

Despite the emergence of democracies in Asia, the freedom of media continues to be under siege. While democracy and freedom of media are inseparable notions, one cannot assume the twin notions take the same focus in Asia as in Western democracies. In Asia media observers believe that freedom of media is measured in terms of degrees in which frankness and criticism are tolerated by governments.

The relationship between media (includes press) and politicians has always been a subject of intense debate in all countries. In recent times the Tony Blair government and BBC has developed strained relationship. The British government wanted BBC to apologise for "incorrect" information dished out by a BBC journalist that the government had "doctored" intelligence information on threat from presence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq but BBC stood by their story and refused to divulge the source of information it received because of journalistic privacy.

BOTTOM LINE

It is obvious that freedom of media is a very important adjunct of a successful democracy. Bangladesh is no exception. What politicians may not realize is that once the freedom of media is jeopardized they would be losing the benefit of the mechanism through which their objectives are reflected. Many feel that politicians should perhaps avoid attacking media so that it can do its job without fear or favour in the interest of public.

which they consider politically convenient to place government advertisement, ignoring the fact that the selected newspapers do not have large circulation.

Another aspect that merits attention is privileges and immunities available to Members of Parliament in what they speak within the chamber of Parliament. For instance, Article 78 of the Bangladesh Constitution states, among others, that "A member of Parliament shall not be liable to proceedings in any court in respect of anything said, or any vote given, by him in Parliament or in any committee thereof". The principal purpose of this privilege for Members of Parliament is to divulge facts in public interest without fear of any litigation in courts.

This privilege or immunity is not unfettered and is given so that MPs can perform their duties without fear or favour in the interest of public. This is a "functional privilege or immunity" to be exercised judiciously and not arbitrarily by Members of Parliament. This implies that privilege or immunity can only be invoked to perform his/her functions as MP in the public interest. The criteria of public interest must be satisfied. Therefore, MPs have personal legal and moral responsibility to ensure that this extraordinary privilege should not be abused or misused because it may impinge on rights of others in a democratic society. Article 27 of the Bangladesh Constitution states that "all citizens are equal before law and are entitled to equal protection of law."

If an MP makes statements that are defamatory in nature, the defamed citizen has no remedy in the courts because of Article 78 of the Constitution. This being the case, abuse or misuse of the privilege

Threats to free media:

What sorts of threats do the media including the print media currently face? Media may face conventional modes of suppression: defamation cases, withdrawal of licences, expulsion of foreign correspondents, jailing, censorship or discreet advices to media what to publish or not. Another method is economic strangulation of the media through withdrawal of advertising by government. Empirical evidence suggests that governments of all persuasion hold and use a list of newspapers in

strongly is discouraged by Parliament. In Western democracies there is a long-standing practice that if any defamatory remark is made in the Parliament, the person aggrieved has the right to notify the Speaker with his/her counter-statement so that the Speaker reads out the statement in the Parliament. Furthermore, the defamed citizen can also appear in Parliament with his consent to make his/her position clear. Furthermore the concerned MP is censured by the Parliament he/she misuses, or abuses this extraordinary privilege.

Suggested course of action:

Since free fair and enlightened media can supplement and complement a responsible and responsive political class, it is essential that media does not face unreasonable constraints in performing their onerous tasks. There is a need first to reform defamation laws that have been a nightmare for journalists, editors and publishers of newspapers.

The existing laws in Bangladesh, namely criminal defamation under Sections 500, 501 and 502 of Penal Code, constitute a powerful sanction on media and are archaic. They served the colonial interests in British India. Defamation is essentially a civil litigation and criminal nature of defamation law needs to be immediately scrapped. Instead Bangladesh Parliament may seriously consider enacting new Freedom and Responsibility of Media laws so that the media standards are upheld consistent with the constitutional provision.

In Bangladesh there seems to be no law on freedom of information and certainly no protection exists for "whistleblowers" who reveal corruption within authorities. The Freedom of Information laws provide mechanisms to obtain information as to how a decision is made on an issue. This would benefit both politicians, public and media.

Ombudsmen are common in many overseas newspapers to handle complaints from the public. Furthermore two alternative bodies may be considered. One is a high-powered Independent Press Authority that can hear and adjudicate complaints against media. The Authority may also be entrusted to promote high standards of journalism, to investigate and monitor issues relating to freedom of media

and report annually to the Parliament. The other is the establishment of a statutory tribunal to consider complaints about the news media. The tribunal would have the power to award damages against newspapers when individuals' rights or privacy is breached.

An important factor in media is the nurturing of the professional development of journalists by investing in education and research. It is an irony that while the media seems to value educational least to the extent of pinpointing and condemning any decline in national education standards it appears that they show little interest in educating their own. There has been a long tradition in the US and Britain of newspaper publishers and commercial broadcasters funding education and research.

Conclusion:

Arthur C. Clarke said long ago that freedom of information would be determined not by governments but by technology. A new combination of technology and greater democracy is breaking the shackles on dissemination of information. Control of media by governments is futile because of access to modern information technology (cable TV or Internet).

The struggle for the freedom of media from state control is central to the development of democracy. A free and fair media is the key to transparency and good governance and is an indispensable feature of democracy. According to President of the World Bank James Wolfensohn: "A free press is not a luxury. A free press is at the absolute core of equitable development". Therefore both media and politicians should have a proper understanding of each other's role.

In the final analysis it is obvious that freedom of media is a very important adjunct of a successful democracy. Bangladesh is no exception. What politicians may not realize is that once the freedom of media is jeopardized they would be losing the benefit of the mechanism through which their objectives are reflected. Many feel that politicians should perhaps avoid attacking media so that it can do its job without fear or favour in the interest of public.

The sooner the present imbroglio between press and politicians in the country is amicably settled the better is for promotion of democracy and development. Furthermore the tussle is having a negative image of Bangladesh abroad. The third US President and the chief drafter of the American Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson said: "No government ought to be without censors; and where the press is free, no one ever will."

Harun Ur Rashid Former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

Tajuddin Ahmed: Portrait of a leader

Tajuddin Ahmed -- the very first Prime Minister of Bangladesh at the dawn of the nation's struggle for independence -- would have turned 78 on July 23 had the piercing bullets of the assassins spared him on November 3, 1975. Throughout his life, this great son of the soil conducted an untiring crusade against all odds and selflessly strove to put patriotism before personal concerns... In this abridged narrative, the life and time of this great leader is told anew by his daughter, SIMIM HOSSAIN RIMI.

TAJUDDIN Ahmed was a lawyer, an economist, a scholar and a popular leader. Born in Kapasia on July 23, 1925, Tajuddin became a boy of special attraction to his teachers from the day he enrolled for schooling. He was always placed first in his study and examinations.

He even memorised the Quran and became a law graduate after winning an election in 1954 as a Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA). Traits of the like endowed him with a rarely seen charisma that propelled his career through a meteoric rise in political stature and made him the very first Prime Minister of Bangladesh.

In politics, his primary interests centered in the amelioration of the common people's misfortune. Due to his undivided loyalty and focus in such a mission, he became a founding member of the East Pakistan Student League (now Chhatra League) during the inception of the organization on January 4, 1948. Later, as the language movement gained momentum in the early 1950s, Tajuddin was one of the most active student leaders during the movement.

His true devotion to politics also made him a leading organizer of the Awami League at its founding on June 23, 1949. From 1953 to '57, he served the party as its general secretary (Dhaka district), and, in 1955, became the cultural and social affairs secretary of the party's central committee.

One great satisfaction that Tajuddin had while alive sprang from the role he played during the historic Lahore conference in 1966. The six-point demand was placed in that conference by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib, which later became a *magna carta* for the political emancipation of the Bengali nation.

Tajuddin's contribution to the drafting and placing of the six-point demand was so praiseworthy to Bangabandhu that he was made secretary general of the Awami League in the same year. Then, as he began a political campaign to press ahead the implementation of the six-point demand, he was arrested on May 8, 1966 and released on February 12, 1969.

His release from the prison coincided with a mass movement that began with the killing of the student activist and leader, Assad. The captivity also catapulted him to the centre of the nation's politics. He got elected for the second time as an MNA during the general elections of 1970.

He was in hiding when the Pakistan army went into a genocidal frenzy against unarmed Bengalis on the night of March 25. Having reached the bordering region of Meherpur on March 30, he sent a probing mission inside India to test the Indian authorities' mood and inclination toward the plight of the Bengalis from East Pakistan. It was a clever move of Napoleon.

Instead of crossing the border instantly, he went to Faridpur on March 29, and was told of Major Zia's announcement of independence in Bangabandhu's name over radio. His first reaction was that an announcement by a military officer would likely be interpreted around the world as the act of a revolutionary council.

"The people of Bangladesh had expressed their confidence in the political leadership, not in the military," he argued.

To strengthen our struggle with respect to leadership, Tajuddin embarked upon a mission to form a government in exile. And, immediately upon his arrival in Calcutta (Kolkata), his main focus was to organise a political government that would enjoy the required acceptability and legitimacy at home and abroad.

He met Indira Gandhi, the Indian Prime Minister, on April 2. In response to Indira Gandhi's query about Sheikh Mujib's whereabouts, Tajuddin said, "He is with us and he will be our President." Tajuddin added, "under the administrative structure formed during the non-cooperation movement, he himself was given the responsibility of Prime Minister."

Impressed by a reply tinged with sound legal and political reasoning, Indira Gandhi agreed to provide all types of cooperation to Tajuddin in

forming the new government.

His diligence and perseverance eventually resulted in the formation of a new government on April 4. As the first Prime Minister of the nation, Tajuddin announced the new government's formation in a radio speech on April 10.

On becoming the Prime Minister, his first decision was to conduct the ceremonial oath of the new cabinet inside the Bangladesh soil. Chuadanga was chosen as the venue for the oath as well as the new capital of the nation. Tajuddin approved the re-naming of Chuadanga as Mujibnagar following the administration of oath to the cabinet on April 17.

Besides Tajuddin as the PM, three other central leaders of the Awami League -- A.H.M. Qumruzzaman, Capt. Monsoor Ali and Khondoker Mostaq Ahmed -- became home, finance and foreign ministers respectively of the new government.

Despite his leadership facing ever new challenges from within and without, he led the war of liberation toward its desired victory. Among the challenges he had to surmount within the party, the Mostaq-Moni machination to unseat him through a no-confidence motion deserves special attention. So popular was his leadership that the majority of the elected MPs stood by Tajuddin during the no-confidence debate held in Shilliguri and organised by the duo.



Tajuddin led the war both as a general and a jurist. As India decided to commit troops to liberate Bangladesh during the winter of 1971, Tajuddin advised Indira Gandhi to recognise Bangladesh before Indian troops rolled inside Bangladesh's territory.

He had also convinced Gandhi to sign an agreement that would authorise the constitution of a joint military command to launch offensive against Pakistani forces. This particular agreement served as the catalyst ensuring a quick withdrawal of Indian forces from Bangladesh after the war.

Putting the country before self, he unhesitatingly handed over power to

Bangabandhu upon the latter's return to the country from captivity in Pakistan in early January 1972 and accepted the assignment of a simple minister in the cabinet. However, the war-time conspirators remained active to drive a wedge between him and Bangabandhu, which resulted in his stepping down from the cabinet on October 26, 1974.

Undeterred in the relentless pursuit of political correctness, Tajuddin never mourned his relegation from power. So strong was his moral certitude that while being the prime minister, he decided not to accept aid from nations that opposed the creation of Bangladesh.

Sheikh Mujib's political career passed through a spate of rough currents following Tajuddin's resignation from the cabinet. Only months later, an unruly section of the military assassinated Mujib and most of his family members on August 15, 1975.

The coup-makers arrested Tajuddin and put him into Dhaka's central prison. He and three other leaders of the War of Liberation -- Syed Nazrul Islam, A.H.M. Qumruzzaman, and Capt. Monsoor Ali -- were gunned down mercilessly on November 3 while in captivity.

However tragic his death was, the history of Bangladesh will remain incomplete unless the contributions made by this valiant leader are acknowledged with gratitude and paid homage to.

OPINION

Social change in Bangladesh

SYED WALIUJLALH

PROFESSOR M. Afsaruddin in his article "Social Change in Bangladesh" (DS May 23) has provided an excellent overview on the subject matter. Non-sociologists should be able to get some notion from this short essay about the concept of society. As a matter of fact one cannot however do justice to the subject matter in such a small space. I take this opportunity, however, to add to what the author has presented as a definition of society and some related information. In defining the term society the author missed one very important factor, i.e. GEOGRAPHIC TERRITORY. In our work we find the following definition most useful, "A group of people with a common and at least somewhat distinct culture who occupy a particular territorial area, having a feeling of unity, and regard themselves as a distinguishable entity." (Modern Dictionary of Sociology).

We cannot fully agree with the author when he says that the society "... individuals and social groups... work together in joint problem solving... only. The society does not limit itself to "problem solving" only it carries out all activities intended to sustain and enhance the cause of the society within the given social system (structure and value). Prof Afsaruddin writes that it was the donors, multilateral agencies as well as the national government who founded the family planning programme in this country. Not exactly for it was as early as in late 60s of the last century some social activists under the leadership of Professor Humaira Saeed of the Dhaka Medical College, set up a clinic at Segun Bagicha, under the banner The East Pakistan Family Planning Association, the first of its kind in Pakistan, to advise women from low income families on family planning and distribute contraceptives among them. It will not be out of place to mention that the family planning as an innovative concept and service was introduced to the educated class of this country, for that matter the sub-continent as a whole, by late Abul Hassanat through his book *Jauna Bigyan and Jonmoniontron O Shu Sonian Lavin* 1952. The government, the donors and the multinationals, however, picked up the urban based programme for introducing the service throughout the nation after the service was experi-

mented in rural areas, as a project by late Akhter Hameed Khan, at the Comilla (BARD) Academy.

Social change: A perspective

Role differentiation among our women is in the offing. It is markedly apparent among the middle class and the lower class. Generally they were confined to the kitchen and house keeping. Now with the increasing number of female graduates entering the job market they are increasingly going out to work while taking up the responsibility of accompanying their children to and from school with the added responsibility of taking care of utility bills and also shopping in kitchen market and the mall as well. All these activities used to be exclusively man's domain. The village girls until a decade ago or so were confined to

with such facts and figures. One can just consult SONGSOD-BANGLA OBHIDHAN, a publication of Kolkata, and see over a thousand of foreign words are in use in our vocabulary that bear witness to the change in our education, in our dietary habit, in our dress, in our custom and tradition, and many other cultural activities representing all those foreign immigrants and invaders.

Again incrementally people of this land have started going abroad for entering into the job market in their land of immigration and for seeking formal education in science, technology and literature. Most of them in early days preferred to return home after completion of training and education and take up responsible positions in the fields of law, science, literature, technology,

and technology have singly and severally impacted upon this society. The quality and quantum of contact between the people of this land and the world around has increased and is still going on unabatedly. Every event as recounted above had contributed and has been contributing to great many changes in the life of individuals, family members and the society at large.

Usually social change refers to significant change in behaviour, in modifying means of livelihood from farming to urban labour, or a change in some larger social system rather than to minor changes in small group or groups. Thus social change refers to the changes that are taking place in the established patterns of social relationships. For example, in family (women in the work force), religion (conversion of lower caste Hindus, subjected to social deprivation, to Islam and Christianity), economic life (farmer enters into industrial labour market), culture (village girls entering into modern education system leaving behind or extending beyond Maktaba), institution (formal institution based education system to open university system). These developments are themselves by and large positive in

nature but often the fast speed of the change they bring about demeans the absorptivity and stability of the society that ultimately contribute to social unrest.

Post-script

Thus the society is in a flux. Old values and traditions are on the wane with little or no substitution in sight. The situation is further aggravated by the law and order situation and little or no self-restraint among a great proportion of individuals or group of individuals from intrusion upon others' right. Here the role played by the government in administering the country seems to be half-hearted and confusing and in most cases it is rather destructive. Many important constitutional laws are hoodwinked, or misapplication of the law is a day to day affair among government agencies.

Money and muscle power are all that matter. Resultantly the people cannot benefit from the changes while old way of life has almost lost its credence.

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