

Of the talk shows, by the talk shows, for the talk shows

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SHAMSHER CHOWDHURY

WE as a race are well known for talking more than others. We talk at cross roads, we talk while crossing roads and streets, we talk at cross purposes, we talk loudly in movie halls while the show is in progress, we talk in examination halls, we even talk in funeral prayers (*janaas*). We talk at meetings for hours. We talk more and hearless.

Perhaps no other nation whites away so much of its valuable time talking. We talk at meetings for hours that could essentially be concluded in just an hour or even less. We talk some sense and lot of nonsense. Remember the age-old pastime of the Bengalis, *addas*.

We talk and tire ourselves out giving unsolicited advice to one another. We not only talk too much but also talk at odd hours of the day and night, and that too in loud voices. At times, I often had to wake up from sleep due to the loud sounds of people talking in and around the apartment complex

where I live.

Of late, this business of talking has taken on a new dimension with the heightened display of talk shows in our electronic media, the television. When the private channels arrived I thought there would be an opportunity to see yet greater variety of news and innovative socio-cultural programs. Instead, nearly all of them began to telecast talk shows on any and all subjects under the sun

The menace seems to have doubled in recent times. Today, you are bound to be hit by talk shows simultaneously on different channels at any time of the day or night.

Most of these talk shows essentially serve two purposes. Firstly, they serve as a platform for the participants to appear on the screen and, hence, help build their personal profiles and images in the eyes of the public. Secondly, stay alive and focused amongst their circles of "like minded people" and continue to thrive.

There is yet another aspect of these talk shows; it is often difficult

to distinguish between the speakers or guests and the compere. On the other hand, some of the talk shows clearly take place for the benefit of a handful. Coming back to the question of profile building and the talk shows often participated by eminent specialists and scholars, I am not too sure as to what purpose these actually serve.

Many of these talk shows to me appear to be nothing but empty exercises in intellectual discourses, leading to nowhere. When the show comes to an end you emerge no wiser, simply because nearly each and every occasion gives you in so many words the problems but no specific suggestions for resolving the contentious issues.

These talk shows have so far clearly failed to catch the imagination of the people at large for yet another reason. Many of the frequent participants in the panel of discussants deliberating on a contentious issue of public interest, whether social or political, were once, not too long ago, part of the problem.

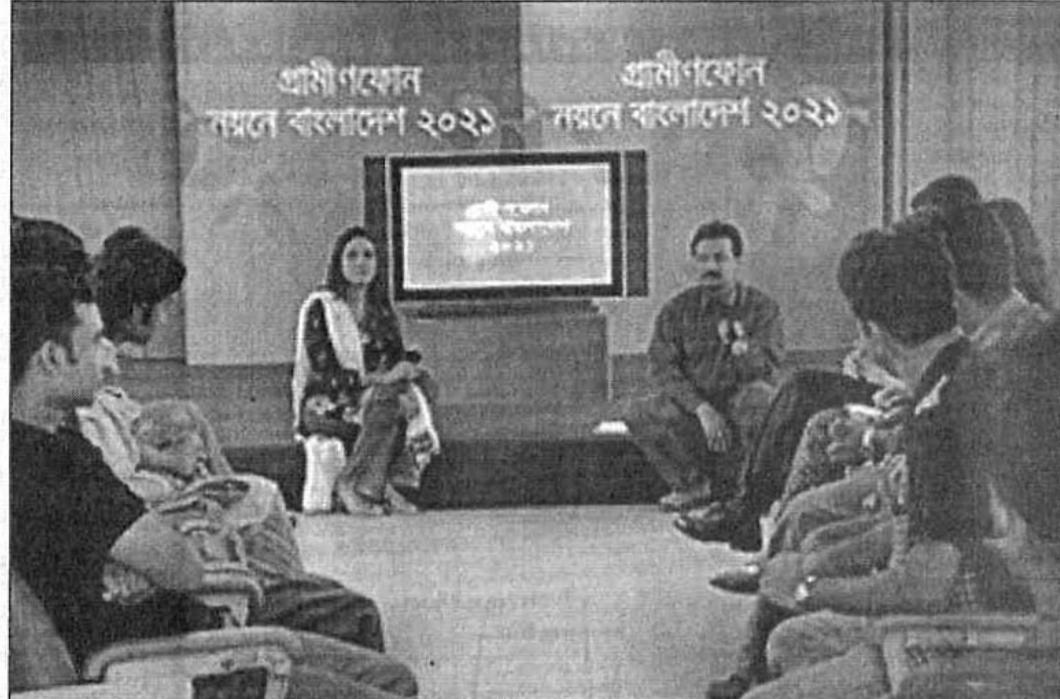


Some of these people happen to be retired senior bureaucrats, experts and specialists. I find that most of these shows are stage-managed. It is not clear as to why these "honest and upright" people chose to speak now, despite the fact that the problematic issues did exist then, too, particularly in the case of ex-bureaucrats who were still in active service.

There are also those who are linked to some professional

organisations or institutions. These subject matter specialists and thinkers subtly represent the establishment under cover of intellectual discourse.

To my mind these talk shows are self-defeating, and have little or no meaning for the common man. They also appear to be nothing but sheer propaganda exercises serving vested interests. Talk shows have also become an instrument for a handful of well-informed



people to hide their true selves behind the curtain of their individual intellectual scholarship. Finally, let me say that I am not against talk shows as such, but what I am unable to endorse is the way these are conducted by our electronic media. To me, they appear to be too structured and stereotyped. Besides, the emphasis appears to be more on quantity than on quality. I also wish to state,

with malice towards none, that selection of both speakers and compere should at all times be above all forms of partisan and coterie interests and thinking.

Our electronic media gurus could learn a few things from the BBC's "Shanglap," the round table discussions and the Hard Talk type shows, that are not only informative but are also driven by an honesty of purpose. The participants

merely give their opinions, and do not indulge in display of their intellectual prowess, despite the fact that they too are nationally and internationally recognised experts.

These talk shows do not act as fault-finding missions only, but also go a step further; educating and reaching the people at large.

Shamsheer Chowdhury is a columnist for The Daily Star.

Crunch time for Musharraf

The government's hopes of holding a partially credible election with results that change little in the power structure are unlikely to be fulfilled. Either Musharraf would have to take the risk of allowing opposition success at the polls to secure the election's acceptability, or he would ensure massive rigging to keep his party in power at the cost of all credibility.

HUSAIN HAQQANI

A politician usually knows when his support has worn out. A general, however, must wait for intelligence reports or the siege of his command post to realise that he has lost a battle.

Even after declaring himself civilian president of Pakistan and getting an endorsement from India's National Security Adviser to the effect that New Delhi considers him Pakistan's "elected" leader, Pervez Musharraf remains

a general at heart. Since his command post is intact and his intelligence machinery has not reported his rout to him, Musharraf continues to insist that he faces no political crisis.

If only the western media would stop reporting bad things, he told Newsweek's Lally Weymouth last week, things in Pakistan would be as stable as they have been since Musharraf took power in the 1999 military coup.

An opinion poll conducted by the International Republican

Institute (IRI) in November

showed that Musharraf's approval ratings in Pakistan have sunk lower than those of President Bush in the United States.

Sixty seven percent of Pakistanis want Musharraf to resign immediately whereas 70 percent believe his King's party, the Pakistan Muslim League-Q (PML-Q) does not deserve re-election. Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), with 30 percent support, emerges as the single largest party in

Pakistan's multi-party system.

Former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League-N (PML-N) is in second position with 25 percent support. Most people would prefer a Bhutto-Sharif coalition to rule the country rather than the Musharraf-Bhutto alliance favoured until recently in Washington.

Instead of facing the facts, Musharraf's spokesman has turned around and made the absurd argument that a poll of a few thousand people cannot represent the views of 160 million Pakistanis. Until a year ago, the IRI polls showed Musharraf as quite popular in the country, and at that time none of his supporters questioned the validity of opinion polling methodology.

The unavoidable truth is that Musharraf's political support in

Even after the official withdrawal of the state of emergency, Pakistan's ruler is virtually ruling by the strength of the state, not on the basis of his personal credibility.

There is bad news even for Pakistan's permanent institutions of state in the latest IRI poll. The Pakistan army has long been the most respected institution in the country, and it enjoyed a favourable rating of 80 percent in IRI's polls over the last several years. In the most recent polls, the army's rating first dropped 10 points to 70 percent, and now stands at 55 percent -- a further slippage of 15 percentage points.

The media and the judiciary, from whom Musharraf says he is now trying to save Pakistan, are now the most favourably rated institutions in the country. The media's 78 percent approval

shows how out of touch Musharraf and his sycophants are with the current reality of Pakistan.

According to the IRI, "The drop in the army's prestige is likely due to the unpopularity of Musharraf.

When Pakistanis were asked if the performance of Musharraf affected their opinion of the army, 31 percent said that they now had a higher opinion due to his actions and 20 percent said that their opinion had not changed, while a plurality of 41 percent said that Musharraf's performance caused them to now have a lower opinion of the army."

The Bush administration wants Musharraf to survive, and has been willing to let him retrace some of his missteps. The withdrawal of the emergency was another occasion for the State Department to speak of "positive" developments in Pakistan.

But just as American officials called upon Musharraf to "do more" in fighting terrorism, they are now calling upon him to "do more" to restore democracy in the country.

Whether Musharraf does more in reversing his authoritarian course will depend largely on the domestic and international pressures building up against him. The legitimacy and credibility of the January 8 election is going to be a major test in this respect.

International perception of the election process being unlawfully and unethically tilted in favour of the King's party is growing. As the *Washington Post* reported: "With less than a month to go before parliamentary elections in Pakistan, independent experts say that there is little chance the polls will be either free or fair -- and that

the result could be renewed tumult across the country."

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Musharraf would have to take the risk of allowing opposition success at the polls to secure the election's acceptability, or he would ensure massive rigging to keep his party in power at the cost of all credibility.

It is bad enough to have little support at home. It will be worse when the lack of support at home is accompanied by a total absence of credibility abroad.

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Education Watch Report 2006

Education management needs structural overhaul

Recent official statistics show that about half of the children in the country do not complete primary education, and over three-quarters of the appropriate age group do not complete secondary education. This is an unacceptable situation, leaving aside the question about the quality of what is learned by those who complete these stages. It is evident that the distance to the 2015 EFA goals and education MDGs is formidable.

MANZOOR AHMED

THE Education Watch Report 2006 of Campaign for Popular Education (CAMEP), released on December

17, deals with financing of primary and secondary education. The meagreness of public allocations, parents' effort to compensate for limited public resources, and the consequent inequity, is manifested

in the major problems of poor quality and inefficiency in the education system.

In primary education, almost sixty percent of the cost of a student's attendance in a government

school is borne by the family. In the non-government secondary school (98 percent of all secondary schools), over 70 percent of per student cost is paid by parents. The largest item of parents' costs is private tutoring for their children.

Two facts emerge from the above data. First, inequality in opportunities -- since only the better-off families can afford the substantial payment for private tutors. Secondly, students and parents have little faith in what goes on in school -- since even in primary

grades they rely on private tutors.

The study reveals that the rationale and criteria for public allocations are not clear or, at least, not public information. The allocation does not appear to be on the basis of student population of a locality (say, an upazila) or enrolment in an institution. The *dak hil madrasas* have been the largest beneficiaries of government funds, calculated by the number of students in these institutions.

Non-government primary and secondary schools, which mostly serve children of poor families, have received the least from the government. Disbursement based on approved list of teachers in the monthly pay order (MPO) of the Ministry of Education does not seem to serve the goals of quality improvement and equity in education.

Recent official statistics show that about half of the children in the country do not complete primary education, and over three-quarters of the appropriate age group do not complete secondary education. This is an unacceptable situation, leaving aside the question about the quality of what is learned by those who complete these stages. It is evident that the distance to the 2015 EFA goals and education MDGs is formidable.

The half that do not complete primary education and the three quarters who do not reach the end of secondary education are the children of the poor and the ultra-poor, those who live in remote areas and urban slums, children with disabilities, and children of the ethnic minorities.

The study did not specifically look at the efficacy of incentive payments for attracting students to primary and secondary schools -- only rural girls in the latter case. Previous Education Watch reports

and other studies raised the question whether the substantial spending on stipends was the most cost-effective way of using scarce public funds.

The studies indicated the need for a re-assessment of the current stipend programs, since they did not contribute to improving quality of instruction, or support the kind of assistance in classroom that the children from the disadvantaged home background needed.

To reach those who are deprived, and to raise the general quality of education to an acceptable level, it is necessary to re-examine the structure of management and governance of education as well as the allocation of funds and their use.

A major shift in primary education management was introduced in 1973, when all schools were brought under the authority of the national government. The well-intended move, however, severed the traditional relationship of accountability between the primary school and the community.

At the secondary level, in the 1980s, the system of paying a part of the teachers' salary in non-government schools by the government began on a large scale. Along with government subvention came a plethora of rules and control mechanisms. The non-government secondary schools, subjected to government rules to qualify for subvention, lost self-rule and autonomy in management.

The purposes of government subvention and the compliance rules were not often fulfilled mainly because of the general degeneration of morality and integrity in public services, aided and abetted by corrupt political leadership. This is not a unique Bangladeshi problem; this malaise afflicts most developing coun-

tries.

Dr. Muhammad Yunus, the Nobel laureate, said that the structure that created a problem could not be expected to solve the problem.

Creative and out-of-the-box thinking is necessary to bring about changes in a structure that has been in place for over three decades, and does not serve the needs of the system any longer.

International and Bangladeshi experiences and studies suggest the outlines of the changes needed in the management structure of school education. Three points are underscored below, which are in line with the recommendations of EW2006.

First, government allocation of funds should be guided by a formula taking into account eligible child population in an upazila, and enrollment in institutions and socio-economic development of the area. The school should gradually become the unit for planning and use of the funds within a general framework for improving quality and equity in education.

Second, education management, especially school level management, should be made fully accountable to the local community and parents. Every institution should analyse its own situation and develop a realistic plan for improving management and instructional standards. The head of the institution and the managing committee should be given the authority and support to implement their own plan.

The purposes of government subvention and the compliance rules were not often fulfilled mainly because of the general degeneration of morality and integrity in public services, aided and abetted by corrupt political leadership. This is not a unique Bangladeshi problem; this malaise afflicts most developing coun-

culture of accountability and transparency in management and governance in education at the local level. CAMEP and Brac, which have received international recognition for their pioneering role in education, should be regarded as invaluable social capital for educational development in the country.

CAMEP has several hundred NGOs in its network. They can facilitate and promote the dialogue between the government, the school and the community, and help in raising awareness and understanding of educational issues in the community.

The proposed structural changes cannot be brought about by issuing government circulars. Working out the details of roles and functions at different levels, identifying obstacles that have to be overcome, and experimentation and trial on a limited scale, have to precede the introduction of changes on a large scale.

The government needs to appoint an advisory committee consisting of academics and researchers and representatives of concerned NGOs to advise the Ministry of Education about the structural overhaul needed in the management of school education and how to go about it.

The twists and turns of national politics have placed the present government at a historical crossroads. It is faced with the responsibility and the opportunity to initiate major reforms in various spheres of national life. In the field of education, if the government fails to take the initiative to bring about structural changes in education management, we will most likely repeat in 2015 the same discussion we are having today. That is not an outcome anyone wishes for.

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