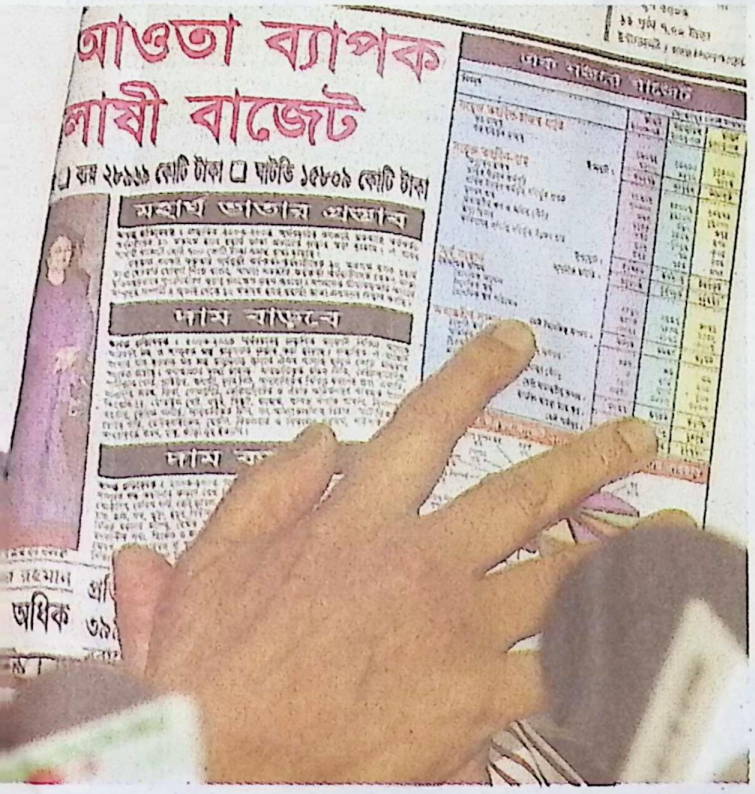
responsibility of informing the people lies with the State media.

A Democracywatch report released in October 2002 found the news coverage of BTV the month before to consist of 33.56 percent of national news -- 31.96 percent was news related to the prime minister and her Cabinet,



while 8.94 percent was on the prime minister herself. The ratio of news coverage of government and opposition was 99:1.

During every past political government, State-owned media have served the ruling party, acting as its mouthpiece. This was after the fall of Ershad's autocratic regime when the so-called democratic political parties promised freedom of media. The Awami League (AL) in its election manifestoes promised autonomy of BTV and BB but upon coming to power in 1996 did not follow through on its promise. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) did not pledge autonomy but did promise a policy of free flow of information while also criticising the AL for using State-owned media for party interests during its tenure.

The media have been criticised for being elitist, representing an elite ruling class and its interests, misrepresenting, undermining or simply ignoring the genuine interests of the masses. When the media in a country are capital-centric, the greater part if not all of their focus is on urban life and its representation. In Bangladesh, this excludes some 80 percent of the population which happens to be rural. The national media, which is supposed to uphold the interests of the larger population, generates little interest with its ancient set-up, boring presentation and limited credibility. Local media, that is electronic media, which are more accessible to a largely illiterate population most of who do not read newspapers, do not exist. It is unfortunate that in all these years, despite television stations mushrooming in the capital and now even radio beginning to spread, there are no local stations in other districts. This would not only make the media more relevant for the people of each district but also involve them in the process, thereby creating local employment opportunities as well.

With radio sets being more affordable and feasible as they do not require electric power, radio as a medium has contributed to our national development through its awareness-raising programmes, but it still remains under-utilised. Community radio, working at the grassroots and enhancing the democratic process, has proven itself as an effective tool for development in many countries in Asia and Africa. It could do the same for our own country.

It is not enough, however, to simply have the infrastructure. Strategic planning and design are of equal importance. The advent and increasing feasibility of television are not the only reasons why radio listenership has declined. Any medium has to be relevant to the people and suited to their lives. With most people in rural areas tired after a hard day's work and in bed by 8 in the evening, who listens to "Esho Gori Shukher Ghar" at 10 at night on BB is worth pondering. Programmes on population, health, nutrition and farming which are targeted more towards those living in rural areas must be designed accordingly, with their interests and lifestyles in mind. Radio, as with every other medium, must be entertaining as well as informative for people to actually want to tune in.

Credibility, of course, remains of utmost importance. While private media may take this into consideration for business competition purposes if nothing else, there are no such bindings on State-owned media which have been continuing their display of biased arrogance for years. Judging from the actions of past political governments, media autonomy is not something that will come easy. With the caretaker government currently in power, this may be the opportune time to bring changes in the media. Though getting into the nitty-gritty of private media may be too detailed and daunting a task, giving autonomy to State-owned media would have much wider repercussions, benefiting the larger population. With their reach, BTV and BB can bring massive awareness and change among the people. Bringing change within, by revolutionising the process in which the two themselves work, however, would have to be the necessary first step. ■