

An appalling bad idea

Existing mechanisms are enough to prevent "yellow" journalism

WE are alarmed by the Information Minister's comment that the government's plans to introduce a law aimed at preventing what it calls yellow journalism. Our response is plain, simple and without ambiguity. We believe that if there is yellow journalism in certain instances and if the government means to act against it, there are sufficient existing mechanisms to do it. A new law cannot be the answer to the problem. It will only become a problem by itself. The answer lies in empowering Press Council and allow it to do its job professionally and independently. Certainly there could be news reports which might be false or designed to malign individuals, groups and the government. But those reports can be dealt with by the Press Council once strong measures are in place to ensure the absolute independence of the body. We suggest that an independent Press Council is the appropriate body to deal with all matters regarding allegations of bad or motivated journalism. It must be provided with adequate funds, manpower, indeed infrastructure in order to function without fetters of any kind. That is what the government should do and not formulate any new law.

A fundamental concern of the government is its feeling that certain sections of the print and electronic media are dishing out false reports aimed at tarnishing its image. Here too there is a mechanism already, in the form of the Press Information Department, that can keep tabs on news items and arrange news briefings on a regular basis to set the record straight for citizens. Again, the government or its affected departments can seek redress through the Press Council. But on its own the government can put in place tried and tested systems which can rebut any misleading or false news items. If in neighbouring India every government department can have an official spokesperson to respond to queries about its activities, we can have a similar method here in Bangladesh. Additionally, the Principal Information Officer (PIO) as well as the Prime Minister's press secretary can arrange daily news briefings in order to keep the country apprised of developments and expose any news or report they consider to be false. Such briefings will be a chance for the government to make its position on the issues clear and also refute immediately any news report it considers motivated or malicious.

In this context, there is another point we feel about strongly. It has been alleged in the Jatiyo Sangsad that land grabbers and people with similarly dubious credentials have been coming out with newspapers of their own. It has also been suggested that no one with less than fifteen years' experience as a working journalist should be allowed to be the editor of a newspaper. To the first point, we say that it was the authorities who, without asking any questions, helped shady individuals and organizations acquire declarations for bringing out newspapers. Now when the government is contemplating a new law, we ask: since the authority to issue a declaration lies with the government, why did it not prevent questionable quarters from getting such declarations in the first place? To the second, we believe that the fifteen-year experience idea holds no water because we have already seen how new newspapers, with veteran journalists as editors at the dictate of their owners, have been going around vilifying individuals, business houses and newspapers in black and white, to the horror of citizens. Experienced journalists are thus no guarantee that bad journalism will not be there.

We are convinced that a new law for newspapers is a bad idea. It is fraught with danger and it threatens to put unfettered press freedom in jeopardy. We ask the government to jettison the entire idea in the larger interest of press freedom and by extension intellectual freedom in Bangladesh. We suggest that it utilize the existing mechanisms to ensure objective journalism in the country, especially the Press Council.

Dhaka University's turning 90

Our resolve on the occasion would be to restore its past glory

EIGHTY-NINE years ago on July 01, 1921 the Dhaka University was founded fulfilling the long cherished dream of the then population of East Bengal. The idea of establishing a university for the relatively unserved section of the Bengalees living in the eastern part of greater Bengal came to the mind of the imperial rulers after a deputation of high ranking Muslim leaders, including Sir Nawab Khwaja Salimullah, Khan Bahadur Chowdhury Kazimuddin Ahmed Siddiky, Nawab Syed Nawab Ali Choudhury and A. K. Fazlul Huq, met Lord Hardinge, the then Viceroy of India, on January 31, 1912 and expressed their fears that the annulment (of Partition of Bengal) would retard the educational progress of their community. This highest seat of learning in this agricultural hinterland of greater Bengal, in course of time, truly became the centre of intellectual excellence as well as that of political thinking and movement.

One may recall here that during the early years of its creation, renowned academicians of distinction like the celebrated scholar Philip John Hartog of London University became its first vice chancellor. Of the academicians of international repute who walked the corridors of the university and taught its students include physicist Satyendranath Bose, historian Romesh Chandra Majumder, Dr. Mahmud Hasan, Professor Jenkins and so on. After the British rulers left partitioning India, the student community of this university added a new chapter to the rich history of the Bengalee people through their glorious struggles to restore the honour of their mother tongue as well as launching other democratic movements against dictatorial regimes. The language movement of 1952 and its great martyrs, the heroes of the democratic struggles of 1960s until its culmination in the mass upsurge of 1969, which also paved the way for overthrow of the then Pakistani military dictator General Ayub Khan and initiation of the nationalist struggles to wrest the total freedom of Bengalees from the theocratic trappings of Pakistan were the outcomes of those struggles. And the great War of Liberation of 1971 through which the Bengalees finally won their independence also owes to a large extent to the sacrifices made by the students and teachers of the Dhaka University.

Even as late as in the late 1980s and 90s, the Dhaka University students had re-enacted their glorious legacy by making great sacrifices during the anti-autocracy struggles against a military dictator.

To be exact, since its inception the Dhaka university students and teachers had for the most part played the role of a vanguard in every intellectual, cultural and political movement that had to do with shaping the course of Bengali people's march of progress.

However, looking back from the present context, the brilliant exploits of the earlier generation of teachers and students appear to be something of a nostalgic reminiscence that needs to be resurrected.

On this 90th anniversary of founding of Dhaka University, let our resolve be to restore the past glory of Dhaka University, which was once the Oxford of the East.



PHOTO: STAR
No one wins with hartals.

Who killed Faruque Hossain?

But what of those who called the hartal in the first place? Do they not bear any responsibility for Faruque's death? I don't see how anyone with a modicum of intellectual honesty or moral compass can argue otherwise.

ZAFAR SOBHAN

How is it that hartals are even legal? I have had enough of hearing the tedious and tendentious argument that the right to hartal, like the right to free speech and free assembly, is a democratic right.

Really? I can't for the life of me understand how anyone has the right to threaten me with violence if I choose not to heed their protest call. What about my right to go to work or to travel the streets without fear for my safety?

Incitement to violence and intimidation are crimes. When a political party calls a hartal it implicitly (or even explicitly) calls upon its cadres to enforce the hartal, a clear incitement to violence, and a hartal comes with an implicit (or even explicit) threat to the public if they do not heed the call.

I'm sorry, but these kinds of threats are crimes, pure and simple. The question is not, then, whether hartals should or should not be legal. By any reasonable reading of the law, they are already illegal.

The question is why the law is not enforced and why the government tolerates this gross infringement on the democratic rights of the common citizens of the country.

If the government is not willing to enforce the law so as to protect the common people's right to go about their business as they see fit, it should at least hold those who call hartals responsible for crimes committed by their cadres to enforce the hartal.

Faruque Hossain died at Dhaka Medical College Hospital on Thursday morning, where he had been bravely fighting for his life since a mob torched his car last Saturday night on the eve of Sunday's hartal.

Is it too much to ask that those responsible for Faruque's killing be brought to justice? One wouldn't think so, but if those who were responsible actually are bought to book, it will be a first in Bangladeshi jurisprudence.

The arson attack was the handiwork of a pro-hartal mob who wanted to send a

message about the perils of not heeding the hartal call. Message received, loud and clear.

I certainly hope that the police are able to track down those who committed this crime. There were eye-witnesses to the atrocity and the leaders of the mob are probably well known in the locality, though it always seems that in Bangladesh, the more serious the crime, the less likely it is that anyone will ever be called to account for it.

But what of those who called the hartal in the first place? Do they not bear any responsibility for Faruque's death? I don't see how anyone with a modicum of intellectual honesty or moral compass can argue otherwise.

If there is any ambiguity in the law as it exists, then rectifying this should be the first order of the day for the legislature.

There should be no obstacle to parliament passing the Anti-Hartal Act of 2010, explicitly making the calling of hartals a punishable offence, and holding those who call them legally liable for any criminal activity committed in furtherance of the call.

The law couldn't be applied retroactively to apply to Sunday's hartal, but it should ensure that others are not killed in the future, or that, if they are, that there will be accountability.

Let's look at the alternative. Tolerance for hartals means tolerance for a grotesque

violation of the rights of every Bangladeshi. And tolerance for hartals means tolerance for crimes such as Faruque's killing.

But that is not all. Faruque and the two other innocent bystanders injured in the run-up to and during Sunday's hartal were not its only victims.

Pro-hartal pickets were beaten up by law enforcement and anti-hartal cadres, with the cops even going so far as to storm the house of a BNP leader closely involved with enforcing the hartal, and creating mayhem within.

This kind of abuse by law enforcement is as unacceptable as it is counter-productive. If the government cannot maintain law and order during a hartal without resorting to excessive force and police brutality, then that is another reason to seriously consider an alternative.

No one wins with hartals. The government cannot possibly believe that its heavy-handed maintenance of the peace did it anything but harm in the public eye. Similarly, the opposition surely must know that the public is repelled by arson attacks on innocents.

But, in the final analysis, it is we, the people, who are caught in the middle, and end up losing the most. Just ask Faruque Hossain. Oh, wait, you can't. He's dead.

Zafar Sobhan is Editor, Editorial & Op-Ed, The Daily Star.

Mommy dearest

Whether by design of nature or genetic configuration, mothers are a selfless island in a selfish world. When the world gets cruel, a child finds shelter in his mother. When the mother gets cruel, where does he go?

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

THERE may be a thousand reasons why the formative years may play a role in the molding of a killer, but not as many reasons to explain what may play a role in the making of a victim. That contradiction became even more poignant when a boy and his younger sister joined their mother to take their own lives in this city. But as icing on that horror cake came the news of another gruesome death. A little kid, whose mother is suspected of complicity with her lover, was brutally killed and kept in a refrigerator for several days before being dumped on the street.

We are hearing lurid tales of lust and lunacy that may have led to these atrocities, yet reasonable minds cannot but search for clues as to how these depravities took roots in their heads. In the first story, the victims are their own killers, two children and their mother abandoned by their father and husband, a man whose idea of a family unfortunately converged on his fatal attraction to another woman.

The second story, as beknown to all by now, has to do with the shame and fear of being caught in the illicit act of a mother with a man other than her husband. The son became a collateral damage. He paid the price, much like a witness does for no fault of his own other than an accidental appearance at the crime scene.

These are sad stories of bad people,

licentious parents, unforgiving spouses, unsympathetic relatives, of broken homes, shattered hearts and wrecked marriages. These are age-old stories of human frailties and mortal vices, of sex, violence, betrayal, intolerance, impatience, conflict and hatred. But somehow these are also stories of a social transformation, the shifting gear of norms and values that is changing the way we look at things.

It's not news that a man takes another wife, and neglects his first wife and children. In the past we have seen jilted wives concentrating on raising their children, the sweetest revenge coming when those children grew up to become more successful than their fathers.

It's not news either if unhappy wives cheat on their husbands. We have heard of mothers who abandoned their children to avoid the scourge of hunger, poverty and the scary prospect of a lonesome life.

But preparing the children for collective suicide, having them write prolific suicide notes on the walls, taking them out for one last treat to a Chinese restaurant, then getting them to drink glasses of water laced with sleeping pills, speak of a meticulous mother who spared no details in her preparation for obliteration of three lives in one go.

That being a father-driven tragedy, the other one is mother-driven. Here a man knows about his wife's infidelity, lends money to another man who turns out to be her lover, goes to work in the morning and



returns home to sleep alone in his room, the child in the house growing up in the desolation of a no-man's land caught between two warring countries.

If the suicide of two children was heart-breaking, the killing of this one child is mind shattering. If the killer is telling the truth, then the mother pinned down her son by his legs when he was being suffocated with a pillow. Take a pause and think! The tiny body must have been in violent spasms as horrors of shock and betrayal worked through it.

Innocent children get killed all the time by earthquake, pestilence and famine. They get killed in explosions, shootouts and road accidents. Once a photographer told me that when a mother's body was recovered from a mudslide in Chittagong, she was found lying on her stomach to protect her three-months-old baby nestled in her arms. It was the death-defying posture of a mother who wanted to save her

child even at the cost of her own life.

William Ross Wallace writes in his poem, "For the hand that rocks the cradle is the hand that rules the world." The opposite also has been found to be true. The hand that rocks the cradle can wreck the world. A study of the American serial killers show that most of them grew up in homes with disturbed mothers.

This is not to exonerate the fathers. This is also not to complain against one gender or another. But this is about the last refuge of a child in a stormy world. Whether by design of nature or genetic configuration, mothers are a selfless island in a selfish world. When the world gets cruel, a child finds shelter in his mother. When the mother gets cruel, where does he go?

We grew up when mothers reflected on the world. Now the world is reflecting on mothers.

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a columnist for The Daily Star. email: badrul151@yahoo.com