

GROUND REALITIES

Let's talk about talk shows



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

THERE used to be a time, in this country, when we could not imagine having to buy water to drink. And yet we pay for water

today. There was a time when we didn't have any idea that something called the mobile phone would be there. You must thank those in the mobile phone business, for they had the foresight to know that a day would soon arrive when the traditionally talkative Bengalis would talk even more through those futuristic mobile phones. Look around you today, observe the water and the mobile phone. And you will know.

If you have noticed, a fairly good number of people have lately been talking about talk shows. They wouldn't have if the prime minister had not first talked about it. Whether Sheikh Hasina was right or wrong in her assessment of talk shows on the many television channels is a question we choose not to answer, for the good reason that it could throw up a whole new crowd of responses. But what is certainly important is that the head of government appears to be among those people who watch talk shows with a fair degree of regularity. If she didn't, she wouldn't be pronouncing judgment on them.

Seriously speaking, though, it is time for us to reflect on the nature and quality of all the talk shows we are treated to every evening by all this ubiquity of television channels in the country. We will begin with an assertion of a basic principle here, which is that in a land where parliament does not function because of the opposition boycott of it and because of which boycott citizens are never privy to the stimulating debate that energises life in a democracy, television talk shows fulfill, or should fulfill, a certain public need. To suggest that talk shows be done away with would be naïve, a sign of the very intolerance democracy eschews all the time.

That said, there are all the huge holes in talk shows that need plugging before we are persuaded into

believing that such discussions on the electronic media can serve a serious purpose. Among those holes is the propensity on the part of the television people to rope in, day in and day out, the same faces we have seen and heard on innumerable talk shows and on public occasions for years on end. You might suggest that there is hardly anything wrong in bringing in these eminent people to your living room every night, seeing that a small country like Bangladesh always suffers from a paucity of intellectual or fairly knowledgeable men ready to throw wisdom our way. We understand your argument, up to a point. Beyond that comes

the bureaucracy are ready and willing to proffer advice on how politics ought to be conducted. Superannuated military officers, having served martial law regimes, speak up vociferously for democracy. Academics, having tried distorting history at the behest of certain political parties, find nothing wrong in defending moral politics. Journalists who commit historical wrong by refusing to address Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as Bangabandhu wax eloquent on the path the nation must take to the future. Former caretaker advisers who might have ignored their responsibilities during their stint in office are forever ready

and the one whose fair turn it is to speak finds himself rudely interrupted by another. That is not civilised behaviour. And when the compere is unable to restore order or inform his or her guests of the rules of the game before the show begins, it is only natural that a talk show will descend into chaos, that the country will learn nothing from it. There are talk shows where the compere grins and watches helplessly as his guests slug it out, each one accusing the other of every kind of perfidy in the world. When that happens, your children and mine, watching with us at home, are quite at sea about the state of our politics. This is not adult behaviour, they seem to say.

Speaking of comperes again, there are some who have developed the outrageous habit of interrupting the individual who is trying to answer their questions. The result is an asinine affair: the original question has remained unanswered and the television audience has only had the experience of seeing the compere hear his or her voice on screen. The moment a compere decides to be the centre of the show, much of the enthusiasm associated with watching a talk show goes out the window. It is for the management of the television channels to ensure that their comperes do their homework, go through a fact check on their guests, ask questions in brevity and then wait for the guests to respond. Don't let television talk show hosts make statements of their own.

Finally, talk shows get to be spoiled when in an hour-long programme you have a compere hosting three guests as well as taking calls from outside. And within it all there are the "short breaks" for commercials. By the end of the hour, the audience is not quite sure what it has learnt from the show. It is as confused as the three guests who suddenly realise that they had a lot more to say to their audience than the programme gave them scope for.

Ah, but we have talked enough already. Give the reader some space, now.

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the question: haven't these people we see on television all the time become rather predictable in their expression of opinions? Once the camera focuses on them, you know what they are likely to say on the issue under discussion. And that is when talk shows lose their glitter.

There are other difficulties you encounter on the talk shows, at least in a large number of them. And they relate to the fact that every talk show participant seems to be an expert on nearly every subject under the sun. You will spot these venerable men discussing an entire gamut of issues from *hartals* to the caretaker government to crime to corruption. Men who have retired from

to let you in on where the politicians are going wrong. Of course the politicians are going wrong all the time, but should the compere at the talk show not do his or her homework and ask such advisers why they could not oversee a proper production of school textbooks on their watch or why they linked up with a caretaker chief who had manifestly violated the constitution in taking up his job?

Which brings you up against the role of the comperes or presenters you see every evening and every night on television. Quite a few of them, once a talk show gets under way, quickly lose the initiative to their guests. Impoliteness takes over

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TIB report on MPs

Questioning the motive is denying benefit from it

THAT the government will be critical of the Transparency International Bangladesh's (TIB) survey report underlining the tainted activities of a high proportion of MPs does not come as a surprise. It was a predictable reaction. Our ruling party political leaders are not known to take criticism gracefully, even if that be constructive and well meaning. Any eye-opening messages contained in an independent appraisal is swept aside by a broad brush wholesale rejection.

Such dismissive attitude from the top towards any adverse findings on the MPs is neither helpful for the elected public representatives nor for the government of the day. Because, in the process, the MPs and the government deny themselves of the benefits that could accrue from the report had it been analysed, internalised and made use of with due diligence in a positive frame of mind.

Of course, the government is free to, and should, verify the veracity of the report before accepting it as credible or refuting it with informed knowledge. That the government would be only keen to put its best face forward is understandable, but even if part of the report is validated by the government's own finding then that itself would be worthy of its attention. The government has its own channels to get the TIB data checked on the ground. As far as we know the government is already made aware of the activities of the MPs. And because such negative reports have not been paid heed to, elected public representatives developed a sense of impunity indulging in questionable activities.

The present TIB report has been castigated by the PM in the same manner that the 2001 Transparency International report which had labeled the country as the 'most corrupt' in the world had been. Actually, that report was published by Transparency International from its headquarters in Berlin. It is interesting to note that when Bangladesh was subsequently labeled as the most corrupt for four consecutive years during the BNP's term in office, the AL would revel in the dubious distinction because it worked to the disadvantage of the BNP.

As for the report coming out in the last year of government's tenure, we believe that a leeway still exists for the MPs to make amends and for the government to rise in public esteem.

Helping women to their rightful position

Key is in recognising their contribution to economy.

IT is regrettable to note that so far women farmers had not met at the national level. It is only day before yesterday that the first ever national female farmers' conference was held marking the World Food Day. We appreciate ActionAid for having organised it.

A consensus emerged from the conference demanding social and state recognition of women's contribution in all stages of food cultivation. Such recognition will help protect their economic rights as well as upgrade their status in their families and society at large.

According to reliable statistics, rural women work 20 per cent longer than men in farming, but they hardly exercise any right to decision-making in the households and at the community level. At workplaces they get less pay than their male counterparts, although they have a larger share in activities like farming and livestock rearing. Such discrimination is a shame for a country where the prime minister and the opposition leaders are women.

Increase in literacy among women will help the process of their uplift in many ways. Emphasis on schooling and various financial incentives to women over the years have been helpful in bringing women to the fore.

Women in rural areas and their children remain physically weak and malnourished. But as pointed out by a researcher of Helen Keller International at a discussion on the International Day of Rural Women, the number of underweight among under-five children in South Asia can be reduced by 13 per cent only by improving women's status.

On the whole, the raw deal the women get in society must be reversed with a strategic plan of action formulated by the government in tandem with relevant women

HAMEEDA HOSSAIN

SUCCESS in a senior school exam is a cause for much rejoicing and celebration, not only in the family but amongst friends and in the school. It's a leap forward to further education and opening of opportunities. This may not, however, be the case for Limon Hossein. His results in the first part of the HSC exams were announced a few days ago but instead of celebrating his success he will have to appear in the Jhalakathi court on October 17 because he has been charged by Rab under the Possession of Arms Act.

Since March 23, 2011, sixteen year old Limon's life has turned upside down. He lost his leg when he was shot by Rab in Rajarpur thana of Jhalakathi. It was his determination that made him learn to walk on an artificial leg. His studies have been disrupted because of his court appearances. Nevertheless, he has shown considerable resolve in pursuing his studies even though it has meant moving away from his village.

The course of justice is rarely straightforward in Bangladesh, particularly if you find yourself at the wrong end of a law enforcement

agency. Limon has been accused in two separate cases filed by Rab, one for possession of arms and the second for obstruction to law enforcement. In the arms possession

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case, charges were filed against Limon on April 24, 2011, under the Juvenile Crime Prevention Act. As a juvenile he should have been placed in the Juvenile Correction Home rather than in jail. In the second case of obstructing law officers, it took the police over a year

to file the charge sheet on July 1, 2012. Police have taken over a year to complete investigations, and while Limon was able to obtain bail, he has



had to miss school in order to attend court for each hearing.

The delay in investigation suggests that the police is not able to find evidence against Limon. But Rab has yet to withdraw its cases, and the court proceedings remain pending

because Limon has been charged with 6/7 other young men who are absconding. Unless they present themselves in court no decision is

taken, forcing Limon into a limbo. Limon is an earnest young man, keen on personal success. He will pass his next exam and the next, but how can he overcome injustice.

The writer is an eminent human rights activist.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

October 17

539 BC

Cyrus the Great marches into the city of Babylon, releasing the Jews from almost 70 years of exile. Cyrus allows the Jews to return to Yehud Medinata and rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem.

1912

Bulgaria, Greece and Serbia declare war on the Ottoman Empire, joining Montenegro in the First Balkan War.

1917

First British bombing of Germany in World War I.

1973

OPEC starts an oil embargo against a number of western countries, considered to have helped Israel in its war against Syria.

1979

Mother Teresa awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.