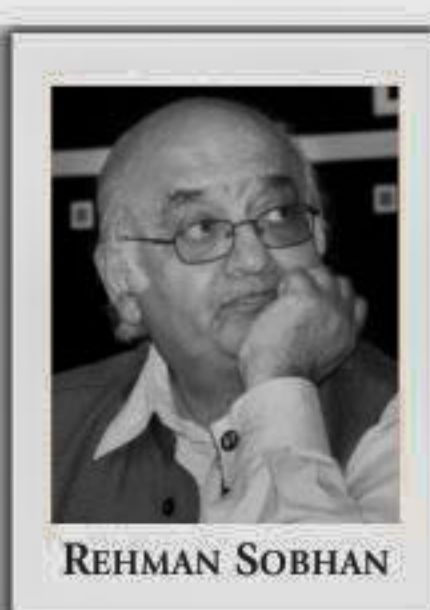


Physician heal thyself



WHEN Mahfuz Anam expressed regret on public television about publishing information passed on by the task force investigation cell (TFIC) in 2007, he should have remembered that

in our prevailing political mood, 'no good deed shall go unpunished'. The feeding frenzy unleashed by his well intentioned remarks on an action which took place nearly 9 years ago reflects less on the wisdom or ethics of Mahfuz and reveals much more about the progressive degeneration in the level of political discourse prevailing in Bangladesh today.

Publishing unverified and in most cases unverifiable news items planted by official agencies obviously does not conform to the highest standards of journalistic ethics. Unfortunately, this is rather late in the day for sundry lawmakers, senior journalists or media pundits to wake up to such practices in the media since this has been commonplace for as long as we can remember. This was a tradition set in motion in the days of the Pakistani raj when news items passed on by official agencies competed in their frequency with the news picked up from the wire services. Sadly this tradition, along with a few other such unsavory legacies, was carried over into an independent Bangladesh and has been perpetuated from regime to regime. Unsurprisingly, in the years of cantonment rule such activity increases in frequency since informing or misinforming the public about the acts and motives of the regime became more necessary in the absence of regular platforms, available under political regimes, for the powers that be to explain their actions. That such activity should have multiplied during the period of cantonment backed caretaker rule during 2007-8 is thus par for the course.

In such circumstances, the indiscretion of *The Daily Star's* editor in publishing such a release on Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia, based on interrogations of sundry parties by the TFIC was hardly a media coup and was carried by most dailies and TV channels at the time. It would not require much research to find out what particular senior editors and journalists, piously pontificating today on particular talk shows about such a lapse in journalistic ethics, did or said in those days. In contrast, at that time Mahfuz Anam periodically went on the record in his op-ed pieces or through editorials to criticise particular actions of cantonment rulers such as their maladroit decision to detain Sheikh Hasina and later Khaleda Zia, and persistently demanded that the schedule for restoring democracy be adhered to.

The reality of news reporting in Bangladesh over these years and indeed in many other countries, not just in our neighbourhood but beyond, is that official agencies use 'leaks' to the media as a standard practice for not just reporting on their actions but when they seek to influence public opinion in a particular direction. In the US, the concept of the 'embedded journalist' was immortalised as part of journalistic lore, during the time of the unprovoked aggression of the US and its allies on Iraq. Respected papers such as *The New York Times*, and

particular journalists were fed concocted stories seeking to justify such a violation of international law, for which both the US and the world are paying a heavy price, even today.

In South Asia, virtually all news stories on border incidents between India and Bangladesh or armed activity between India and Pakistan, originates from official agencies. I have personally brought this ubiquitous reality to the attention of senior media personalities from India in several Indo-Bangladesh dialogues and charged them with abdicating their journalistic responsibility for verifying, independently, news items fed to them by their agencies. I have suggested that some Indian dailies should enter into partnership with an established Bangladeshi news daily to jointly investigate particular border incidents rather than keep themselves in perpetual thrall to their respective agencies for reporting on incidents which have been so detrimental to Indo-Bangladesh relations.

Today we can pick up any paper on any

To wake up, in the best tradition of Rip Van Winkle, after all of 9 years, to a self-confessed action by Mahfuz Anam which was, at that time, practiced by most of his colleagues and continues to be practiced today, smacks of wilful amnesia or selective memory, which are common afflictions among our media, chattering classes and political community. If apologies are indeed called for about unverified reporting of news plants during 2007-08 and in the years after, then a wider cross section of the media and other commentators would need to express contrition for their acts of commission and omission.

What is unfortunately common practice cannot, after all these years, be escalated into an occasion for vilification of any particular person or the resort to defamation suits. Such suits, filed by insignificant parties with no *locus standi* to do so, have become so commonplace today that they have made a mockery of the rule of law, where those who file them deserve to be charged with contempt of court for wasting its time.

indecent language. In many cases, such acts of libel and slander are based on not a shred of evidence. In a well functioning legal system, it is such people who should be sued for defamation or even charged with criminal libel. Unfortunately, such reports are blithely carried by the media or online websites without minimal verification, thereby making themselves a party to the offense and no less culpable of charges of defamation.

In such a milieu, the assault on Mahfuz Anam is reprehensible, particularly since he has provided chapter and verse about what his paper wrote in the Emergency period. Unfortunately, his victimisation is itself part of an endemic disease in our polity today where libel and slander, based on lies and half truths, have become a standard vehicle for political discourse with little scope for redress left to its victims. During 2007-08 a former and a future Prime Minister became victims of this culture. Today Mahfuz Anam is a victim, tomorrow anyone, including the vilifiers themselves, may be at the receiving end. If the spread of this malignity is to be

from such 'official' sources which cannot be readily verified.

The media itself should remain the principal source for policing malpractices within their own community. The Press Council (PC), which was designed to perform such a function, is infrequently used, perhaps because it has failed to inspire confidence among its prospective users. The PC should be made into a much more serviceable, professional and empowered body, headed by a reputed, independent and respected person with members drawn from the senior ranks of the journalistic profession and supported by a capable professional staff. Such a body should be the first court of appeal for victims of the media, including where the media itself is victimised. The 'defamers' and the defamed should be invited to explain their positions within a transparent hearing process which should be widely publicised. The Press Council can then pass judgement demanding public regret and/or some form of restitution from the offending to the



To wake up, in the best tradition of Rip Van Winkle, after all of 9 years, to a self-confessed action by Mahfuz Anam which was, at that time, practiced by most of his colleagues and continues to be practiced today, smacks of wilful amnesia or selective memory, which are common afflictions among our media, chattering classes and political community.

day to read about a story planted by some official agency. Reports on cross-fire killings, arrest of 'terrorists', on border incidents, or even suspected murderers, rarely originate from investigative journalism but are fed to privileged or occasionally all journalists by the particular agencies. Many such stories are designed to indicate a level of activism within the concerned agency in pursuit of dealing with some security threat or solving a particular crime. In most cases, the concerned media outlets run these stories unquestioningly or with minimal attempts to confirm the accuracy of the story.

In the 2007-8 period, the stories on the alleged acts of corruption by the two detained leaders were just one among many such planted stories about acts of corruption by various politicians and business persons. Most papers, including *The Daily Star*, ran all or many such stories without question, though some may have balked at publishing reports on particular people, depending on the status of the person or personal connection or knowledge about that person.

Indeed, the Prime Minister's well-wishers should consider taking action against these unknown persons for attempting to invoke the dignity and reputation of the PM in attempting to extract astronomical sums of money for themselves from Mahfuz as compensation for damage to their own non-existent reputations. But again, such is the rather sorry state of our political culture that such suits, used selectively to harass opponents critics, have become standard practice and are regularly entertained by our lower courts so that victims have to travel from Teknaf to Tetulia to answer such charges in court or to seek bail. It is perhaps time for our senior jurists, even the Law Minister, to speak out or explore the scope for some legal action to arrest such abuses of the law.

It should be kept in mind that publishing news sourced from the agencies is not the only occasion for publishing unverified news. On innumerable occasions, whether in Parliament, on political platforms, on webpages or talk shows, people held in some public esteem are vilified often using most

arrested then the concerned parties, politicians, media, civil society and the very agencies who have been and continue to be the source of such disinformation, need to collectively develop some ground rules on how and under what conditions should news be sourced and then reproduced in the media.

As part of such an introspective process, we need to review our laws to see whether credible legal sanctions can be put in place to restrain people from acts of defamation without such laws becoming instruments of harassment and persecution for authentic and credible journalism. At the same time, our various agencies also need to be subject to some form of checks and balances, whereby they refrain from using the media whether on behalf of a particular regime or for their own institutional purposes and should be made accountable for the misuse of such practices. The media owners and editors should, in turn, sit together to develop an institutional code of conduct on how to deal with news items emanating

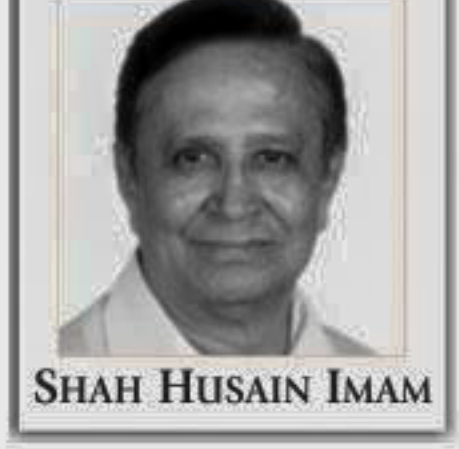
affected party or where justified exonerating the accused. Where appropriate, the PC can also recommend that the complaint be taken before a court of law.

Finally, of course, our political masters must attempt to restore some civility in their political exchanges which appear to have degenerated to a level where it is an embarrassment to our institutions of democracy and ultimately to the global image of our nation. Strong political divisions exist and may remain so that strong words may continue to be used to articulate such divisions. But strong words do not need to be expressed through vile abuse and resort to demonstrable untruths as instruments of debate. As long as the language of politics crosses the boundaries of civilised and decent conduct and some restraint is not exercised in our political transactions, it will be difficult if not impossible for one segment of society, our media, to correct itself.

The writer is an eminent economist and founder of the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD).

Truth making itself felt

PLEASURE IS ALL MINE



SHAH HUSAIN IMAM

PUBLIC memory is said to be short and the politicians' even shorter, blemished too by a bias to top it up. But a journalist has to have an elephantine memory by the very nature of his or her functioning in a time continuum. And this may work both to the advantage and disadvantage of a journalist. He reports or comments on progression or digression of events from the past through to the present into the future.

The Editor of a newspaper more than anybody else in the profession is in an unenviable position to be making editorial judgments on critical issues of the day. If from his long memory something should prick his conscience over an act of misjudgment and he wants to salve himself of it then it is only natural for him to be admitting it.

And, there is no shelf life to making such an admission on moral grounds that it is, with the good of the profession in mind. In Mahfuz Anam's case, its far-reaching value lies in setting the record straight with himself, then with the

profession of journalism and finally, with a dark phase of our political history.

But in judging a slippage of the past you do need a distance in time to be objectively putting it in perspective. The reason why I say this is because in Bangladesh, farcical, even devious processes, have led to regaining our foothold back on rails at important tipping points of our political history. The cases in point are the mockery of the February 15 1996 election that gave birth to a caretaker government to oversee a properly held election; and the prolonged, often gone-beyond-the-writ 2007-08 military-backed caretaker, that delivered a good election in the end.

Now about the blame-worthy editorial pitfall in publishing news reports dictated to and supplied by Taskforce Interrogation Cell in 2007, we have to recreate the situation to gauge the compulsions against independently verifying the interrogated versions of the stories. In an emergency the fetters on the press is a strangling reality journalists find difficult to cope with. When most newspapers and media houses carried the items, how some journalists could be taking a holier-than-thou attitude, beggars belief.

The opaque legacy of journalism during 1/11 emergency replicates itself in some form or the

other even to this day when we get to see interrogation-based reports failing to ascertain the veracity of what was being published.

At any rate, these highlight the lessons drawn from the unexpected controversy over Mahfuz Anam's straightforward observations at the TV interview. After being relentlessly pilloried for two weeks, the wheels of sanity is moving in favour of Mahfuz Anam since yesterday.

Credibly, in a test case situation, the line between the government and the Awami League as a ruling party has been maintained and not allowed to be blurred. This is something to be lauded as well as sustained till the matter is closed.

The Prime Minister herself has not spoken a word about the whipped up controversy maintaining a dignified silence over it. Seminally, reflecting government attitude, Information Minister Hasanul Haque Inu was the first to laud *The Daily Star* editor's courage of conviction in admitting a mistake. And when the situation became tense with the reported issuance of warrant of arrest from a Narayanjan court the Law Minister Anisul Huq acted promptly and 'took full responsibility' asserting that it was summons and not a warrant of arrest to follow. He has basically

reiterated a 2011 amendment provision whereby summons replaced the arrest procedure in defense of dignity and freedom of the press.

Also we happily hear the conscionable voice of Dr. Shafiq Siddique, a professor of Dhaka University and husband of Bangabandhu's daughter Sheikh Rehana, describing the lawsuit spree against Mahfuz Anam as being "too much". Enough is enough, it must be called to a halt and rolled back full cycle.

Indeed, the figure has topped 69 sounding absurd vis-à-vis the total number of districts at 64, so aggressive was the politicalisation of the issue. The beehive mentality of surpassing each other in ingratiating themselves with the higher ups, if not checked, may hold the system to ransom.

The fantastic demand for compensation money drives the episode into an abomination of dire proportions.

Finally, we endorse the Editors' Council demand for withdrawal of all cases against Mahfuz Anam. When the country is firmly set on a growth trajectory we would do well to put our best face forward, one feature of which is independent journalism.

The writer is Associate Editor, *The Daily Star*.

BEETLE BAILEY

by Mort Walker



BABY BLUES

by Kirkman & Scott

