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The last bastion of a profitable press



AWAKENING INDIA
SHASHI THAROOR

AROUND the world, newspapers seem to be facing imminent extinction, as a mass exodus to the internet causes their circulation to slump and their advertising revenue to collapse. But not in India.

In the West, young people have largely dispensed with the home-delivered physical morning newspaper, and instead catch up on the news whenever they choose, using tablets, laptops, or mobile phones. As advertising revenue has been vacuumed up by the internet giants Facebook and Google, newspaper profits have plunged. The industry has faced many bankruptcies in recent years, with those still operating often having laid off large numbers of staff, especially in their foreign bureaus. In the United States, the number of full-time journalists has dropped by 20 percent since 2001.

Even several grand titles have either closed down or publish only online. Cyberspace is, after all, where the eyeballs are. Yet, while some well-known newspapers – such as the New York Times, the Washington Post, and the United Kingdom-based Guardian – have developed a robust internet presence themselves, it is not enough.

In the Guardian's case, the site receives an

impressive 38 million unique visitors per day, compared to a print circulation of just 200,000 copies. But those online visitors read for free, leaving the Guardian hemorrhaging money. It doesn't help that web advertising revenues – which, for most newspapers, account for only 10-15 percent of total revenues – can't compete with the print-ad revenues of the past.

All of this has generated a distinct sense of uncertainty at journalism schools. Last year, for the third year in a row, the CareerCast survey identified "newspaper reporter" as the worst career a young person could pursue in the US. (Full, and somewhat rueful, disclosure: one of my sons is a journalist at the Washington Post.)

Yet, in India, the printed word on pulped trees remains an amazingly healthy industry. India now has the world's largest number of paid newspapers, and the number continues to grow, from 5,767 in 2013 to 7,871 in 2015. Over those same two years, 50 newspapers ceased publication in the US, which has less than a quarter of India's print papers.

Moreover, figures for newspaper readership released by the Audit Bureau of Circulation (ABC) this month show that, over the last decade, newspaper circulation has grown significantly in India, from 39.1 million copies in 2006 to 62.8 million in 2016 – a 60 percent increase, for which there is no parallel in the world. Comparable data for the most recent year available, 2015, show that while newspaper circulation grew by 12 percent in India, it fell in almost every other major

media market: by 12 percent in the UK, 7 percent in the US, and 3 percent in Germany and France.

The robustness of India's print-newspaper industry cannot be attributed to lack of growth in internet access: in the last decade, the share of the population with internet access rose from less than 10 percent to some 30 percent. So what does explain India's thriving newspaper market?

One basic factor is India's rising literacy rate, which has climbed to 79 percent, owing largely to improvement in the "cow belt" of the northern states – the Hindi-speaking heartland. In the 1960s, when Hindi speakers were overwhelmingly less literate than those who read in English, Malayalam, and Bengali, Hindi newspapers had low circulations. Today, they are on top: for the second decade in a row, Hindi newspapers experienced the fastest growth, with average circulation soaring at a compounded annual growth rate of 8.78 percent since 2006.

Economic development has also helped India's newspaper industry. Many newly affluent Indians get their national and international news from television. But events close to home are best covered in the local dailies. And, indeed, newspapers remain the best way to reach this segment of Indian society.

To be sure, most leading news outlets in India have been developing their digital offerings. They have created mobile apps to download the news from their sites, and they increasingly treat their readers to short takes of digestible news briefs tailored to the small

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screens of hand-held devices. But, for many serious readers, such options are no substitute for the look and feel of a printed newspaper article. Printed newspapers offer the added advantage of reliability, in a country where internet access cannot be guaranteed all the time, owing to still-patchy electricity supplies, which cause frequent blackouts even in the capital. News junkies still need a tangible paper that can be read in the sunlight without a fully charged battery. Given all of this, it may not be quite so

surprising that advertisers in India have remained loyal to the appeal of newspaper ink over the flickering cursor. In sharp contrast with the Western experience, advertising remains the Indian newspaper industry's main source of revenue.

Of course, this trend may not last forever. But for now, India's newspapers are in no danger of becoming financially unviable. While growth in digital advertising expenditure is surging, at an annual rate of nearly 30 percent, it still comprises just 8 percent of India's total ad spending. Meanwhile, TV and print advertising revenue are also growing, at 8 percent and 4.5 percent, respectively.

The differential, ABC predicts, will level out by 2021, with advertising revenues for print and digital media reaching parity. But even then, India's print media will enjoy a healthy stream of advertising revenue that their Western counterparts can only dream about.

So India's print media story continues to be a happy one. And a robustly growing India will remain paradise for newspaper mavens for a while yet. There are still 280 million people yet to become literate. And when they get there, they will want their own newspapers, too.

The writer, a former UN under-secretary-general and former Indian Minister of State for External Affairs and Minister of State for Human Resource Development, is currently Chairman of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs and an MP for the Indian National Congress.

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IN REMEMBRANCE OF FARUQ AHMED CHOUDHURY

A man who lived life to the fullest

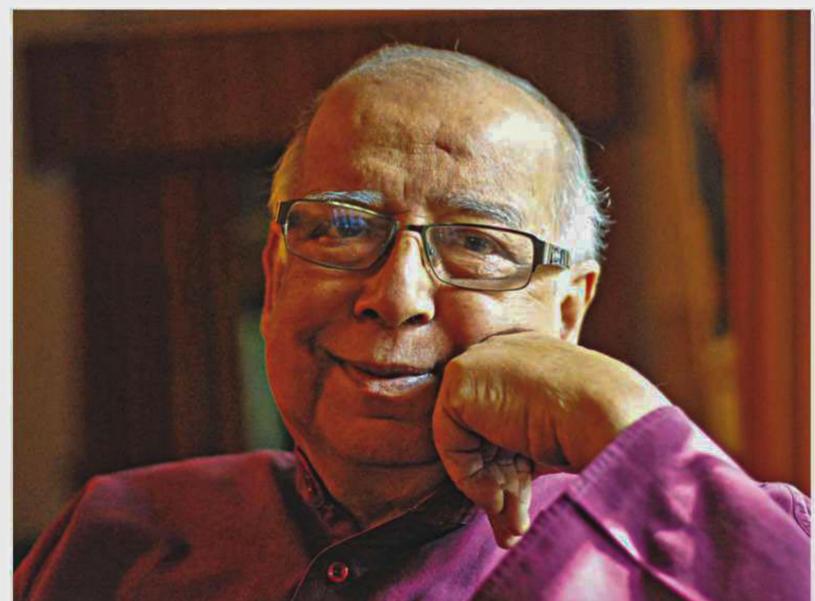
DR. FAKHRUDDIN AHMED

IT is with a heavy heart today that I write about the passing of Faruq Ahmed Choudhury - a man whose presence loomed large not just for those of us who had the good fortune of knowing him, but for our entire nation. An esteemed diplomat, he served at home and in capitals around the world, including as the first Chief of Protocol for independent Bangladesh, as our High Commissioner in New Delhi, and as Foreign Secretary. Remarkably, his post-diplomatic career was perhaps even more impressive, whether as a senior advisor at BRAC, or as a renowned author who shared his wisdom and experience through over a dozen books in Bangla.

But for me, for the past 50 years I have known him as "Boro Bhai", my wife Neena's eldest brother, and someone who was as a brother to me as well. I first met him in the autumn of 1967, when he took me to lunch at Dhaka Club, a few months after my engagement to his youngest sister. He cut an impressive figure - tall, charismatic, with an obvious joie de vivre - he had an easy rapport with everyone around him, regardless of their station of life or how long he had known them. Within minutes, I could feel the warmth, love, and affection which would be a consistent presence in my life for the years thereafter.

With Boro Bhai's various postings, we did not see a great deal of him over the ensuing few years - yet whenever we did, it was as if the time and distance melted away instantly, and we were regaled with his charm and mischievous sense of humour. While I don't need to tell anyone of his accomplishments as a writer of articles and books, I remember most vividly how his sharp wit came out in humorous rhyming couplets that he would create on the spot, incisively cutting to the core on virtually any subject.

In 1974, he took Neena, our son Naveed, and me to visit Bangabandhu - a man who Boro Bhai revered, and for whom his veneration only grew over the years. We travelled from Princeton to meet with them in New York, in order to ask Bangabandhu for an extension to my leave from the civil service, so that I could complete my PhD - an extension which I received, and which then influenced my entire future career. But just as much as



Faruq Ahmed Choudhury

such a pivotal moment, I will also remember the many places that he, Boro Bhai, Neena, and I travelled, around the world - whether in China, Myanmar, England, Bangladesh, or anywhere else. He was a magnificent travel companion - combining his interest in the cultures and histories of places with the habits, especially the cuisine, of its present-day people.

While my memories of Boro Bhai will be dominated by the joy and laughter that were his hallmark, he shared not just the best times but also supported us through the worst. When Neena suddenly lost the vision in her left eye, Boro Bhai and bhabi rushed to be with us in Washington, and his support was immeasurably helpful in that difficult time, especially for Neena, to whom he was particularly close. When we faced the unimaginable with Naveed's passing, he was again a tower of support, not just in the immediate aftermath, but also in the years that followed. Indeed, Boro Bhai was beloved by both of our sons, to whom he was "Bomama Dear" - two quite different boys, far

apart in age, but with whom Boro Bhai shared a kinship, and who both admired, loved, and respected him.

Our relationship with Boro Bhai grew even closer, if that is possible, when we returned to Dhaka in 2001 following many years abroad. He immediately took upon himself the task of helping us settle back in Dhaka, and re-introduced Neena and me to the spectrum of society; he was known to a large number of people from different walks of life, whether bureaucrats, diplomats, politicians, writers, artists, or journalists. I have never known anyone who had the capacity to make friends with people from so many different backgrounds, a testament to his character. I also came to further appreciate his deep knowledge, wide-ranging experience, and love of country, as I benefited beyond measure from innumerable conversations with him during the ensuing years, as he thought of multiple angles on even the thorniest issues. Boro Bhai had an unshakeable belief in the value of democracy

and the rule of law, and held a very deep sense of patriotism as a Bangladeshi.

And so it is today that I feel a deep sense of personal loss that Boro Bhai is no longer among us - something that seems scarcely conceivable of a man who lived larger than life. Yet, while I miss him dearly, at the same time I must say that I feel an abiding joy in all the memories that bear witness to the impact that he had on my life. I pray that he rests in

peace in the care of the Almighty Allah, and in the meantime, I will remember him as he was - a man who lived life to its fullest, who laughed loudly and often, and who was surrounded always by the love of family and friends.

The writer is an economist, and former civil servant, governor of Bangladesh Bank, World Bank official, and former Chief Advisor of a caretaker government, and the brother-in-law of (late) Faruq Ahmed Choudhury.

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10th Death Anniversary

We pray for Marhum A. B. M. Kamal Uddin Khan on his 10th Death Anniversary today, the 20 May 2017. Marhum A. B. M. Kamal Uddin Khan was a Founder Life Member of the North South University (NSU) Foundation, now changed to North South Foundation, which established and administered NSU, now run by NSU Trust.

He was also the Chairman of the Board of Governors of the NSU Foundation, and a member of the then Parichalona Porshod of NSU. He was a successful industrialist, prominent banker and enthusiastic philanthropist.

May Allah bless his soul and give the members of his family the strength to keep on bearing the loss.

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