

There is more at stake than freedom of press



THE OVERTON WINDOW
ERESH OMAR JAMAL

THE notion of today's press freedom is deeply rooted in the idea of freedom of speech and expression, intellectual freedom, liberty of thought, etc. In the words of Thomas Jefferson, given that the basis of a democratic government is "the opinion of the people, the very first object should be to keep that right [to freely express one's opinions]." Because, "Whenever the people are well-informed, they can be trusted with their own government; that whenever things get so far wrong as to attract their notice, they may be relied on to set them to rights."

Undeniably, the modern media has failed to fully inform the people to the extent necessary for many things to be set right. Also irrefutable is the fact that the media itself is partly responsible for this failure, resulting in people's confidence in what is often referred to as the 'mainstream media', being at its lowest ever in certain parts of the world.

At the same time, however, placing the entirety of the blame 'uniformly' on the media itself would be a misnomer. First, because the environment in which the media operates varies from country to country. And second, because the 'constraints'— an age-old problem faced by all those who have sought to convey a message that others had preferred to have kept hidden — that the media faces in regards to what it can and cannot disseminate vary as

well (from place to place, situation to situation, etc.).

Despite the challenges, scholars, philosophers, journalists (in more recent times) and others have been fighting for the freedom to publish their work without the threat, fear or reality of being persecuted for centuries. The unfettered dissemination of information, ideas, etc., however, has always been opposed, in one form or another, by powerful sections of virtually every society. Mainly because ideas have a tendency to challenge the powerful and empower the weak.

Before the invention of the movable printing press by Johannes Gutenberg for example, it was the Catholic Church which almost entirely controlled the production of books. Gutenberg's invention allowed the cheap production of books for the first time, challenging the church's monopoly and allowing for different viewpoints to be heard.

When Professor of Theology Martin Luther posted his '95 Theses' on a church door in Germany, criticising its practice of selling 'indulgences' — paying the church in return for a reduction of one's time in purgatory — the printing press spread his writings throughout the country in two weeks and most of Christendom in less than a month, launching the Protestant Reformation and challenging the power of the Catholic Church. In response, Pope Alexander VI, in 1501, issued an edict against unlicensed printing and in 1535 Francis I of France prohibited — under penalty of death — the printing of books altogether.

Similar attempts at censoring the free flow of information and the media have been made throughout the ages. What is sometimes different



SOURCE: THELIBERTARIANREPUBLIC

today are simply the means that are used. For example, authoritarian regimes have frequently used 'anti-terror' laws in recent years to crack down on journalists. The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) reported in 2013 that "The number of journalists jailed worldwide hit 232 in 2012, 132 of whom were held on anti-terror or other national security charges," both setting new "records in the 22 years CPJ has documented imprisonments."

What some may find surprising is that similar practices are shockingly

taking place also in countries that proclaim to be the beacons of democracy. In 2014, a British High Court for example, ruled that journalist Glenn Greenwald's partner could be treated like a terrorist because he was trying to deliver leaked documents to reporters. Journalists and whistleblowers in the US too have recently been treated the same way and increasingly so.

Given the current climate, it should, therefore, come as no surprise to find journalists facing severe pressure to do their jobs in

almost all corners of the earth. Rights organisation Article 19, in a report titled *Bangladesh: Violations against journalists and online activists in 2016*, revealed to have recorded "320 violations, including three murders, against 141 journalists, three online activists and three officials of a publishing house," in 2016.

These violations included "attacks on physical integrity, including murder, attempted murder, serious bodily injury, abduction and attempted abduction, intimidation and threats, harassment through

unwarranted application of laws, including criminal defamation cases, vexation cases, and the use of Section 57 of the ICT Act", among others. All this combined has made journalism a dangerous profession in our country to say the least.

In its World Press Freedom Index 2017, Reporters Without Borders (RWB) ranked Bangladesh 146th among 180 countries in terms of press freedom — slipping two notches from the previous year — and warned of a "tipping point" for journalism, going as far as to say that "media freedom throughout the world has never been as threatened as it is now."

What, however, needs to be realised from this is that, it is not only press freedoms that are under threat, but rather the basic tenets of democracy from which press freedoms are derived in the first place, that are currently under attack. And that is something that should concern everyone. Because it is not only the media that benefits from rights such as freedom of expression and thought, but rather all individuals in a democracy and democracy itself, which cannot function without a free press.

Once again, as Thomas Jefferson had said, "Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter." Why? Because a government which does not tolerate a free press (or freedom of speech, thought, expression, etc.), surely isn't going to act in ways that would be tolerable to those who aspire to be free human beings.

The writer is a member of the Editorial team at *The Daily Star*.

Bollywood, please spare us your Muslim stereotyping



SHIFTING IMAGES
MILIA ALI

FILMS are powerful tools that shape ideas, attitudes and social norms. But as any art form, the message can be diffused or even distorted if it's not presented in the right way. In general, movies produced in Bollywood are not inspiring or stimulating — most of them defy logic and common sense. But sometimes they manage to touch a cord — unfortunately it could be the wrong cord. I must admit that once in a while I enjoy Bollywood entertainers, simply because they make no pretences about projecting "real life". Hence, when a friend invited me to watch *Raees* I accepted, looking forward to a fun evening of laughter and light chatter.

I will refrain from commenting on the quality of the film since it's beyond the purview of this column. What irked me is the stereotyped portrayal of the Muslim characters. The story centres on the life of a Robin Hood style mobster *Raees* played by Shah Rukh Khan. Interestingly, *Raees*, his sidekicks and rival dons are predominantly Muslim, creating the impression that the Indian underworld is entirely controlled by Muslims. Shah Rukh's surma-eyed, *kurta*-clad new avatar was charming and impressive. But his bloody, self-flagellating appearance as a mourner in a Moharram procession was too much for my palate. It evoked all kinds of negative connotations, especially now when Islam is projected by the media as a violent and "bloodthirsty" religion. As if that was not enough, we were subjected to a 10 minute (or what seemed like 10 minutes) brawl between Shah Rukh and a group of butchers in a bazaar with pieces of meat, and human and animal blood splattering all over the screen. This raw display of flying flesh and blood was a perfect



Shahrukh Khan portrays a stereotypical image of a Muslim in the Hindi film *Raees*.

gift for the RSS, who label Muslims as beef-eating savages and are advocating a ban on cow slaughter!

The movie could have picked up some traction with its diversion toward the Gujarat riots, but this thread was unfortunately sidetracked. On the contrary, by a strange twist of the plot, it was revealed that a Muslim underground don was involved in a major terrorist attack on the country, killing and maiming hundreds!

Bollywood's depiction of Muslim stereotypes is not new. In the late 60s and 70s, I remember watching Muslim socials (as they

were then called) that came straight out of the studios and had no connection to reality. They were popular because they showcased a surreal world where the hero (usually a nawab's son) fell in love with the marble white (*sang-e-marmar*) hands of the *burka*-clad heroine whose face was revealed to him halfway through the film. After several twists and turns of mixed identities, the story ended happily. There was also the popular genre of the proverbial courtesan (always Muslim) rescued by the hero after a three-hour long *tamasha* with conspiring brothel madams, devious pimps and "khandani" fathers trying

to preserve their family honour by disavowing the smitten, prodigal son!

The question that continues to puzzle me is: Why are Muslims usually depicted as veiled beauties, dancing girls, nawabs, emperors, princesses, gangsters and terrorists! The Bombay film industry has given us many iconic directors, scriptwriters and actors who are Muslim. Yet it is hard to name a memorable movie that has "normal" Muslim characters with normal dreams and aspirations — like the boy or girl next door.

I grew up in Bangladesh in a middle class, liberal, Islamic environment and have not been exposed to the culture of courtesans and princes (if at all they existed during my time). Besides, in all my travels across India I have never encountered a gun toting Muslim gangster or a woman who comes to college with her face covered in a *nikab*. Then, why the fictitious representation of a stereotype that simply doesn't exist? Do followers of Islam not laugh, cry, love, hate like other people? Why must they be portrayed as debauched *nawabs*, oppressed women and violent goons?

So here is my appeal: Dear Bollywood scriptwriters, directors and actors — please try to depict Islam as a part of the whole

and not "a thing apart". There is so much shared culture — architecture, food, music and literature — that connect Muslims and Hindus in the subcontinent. Navigating through the layers of history one may even ask: "Why was it necessary to divide this common legacy into segments known as nations?" While historians and politicians are struggling to find a definitive answer to this question, let the film industry refrain from accentuating the differences between the two communities. Yes, there are differences, as there must be even between and within families. But why not highlight the commonalities rather than flag the dissimilarities?

Bollywood movies are watched by millions both in India and abroad. Their popularity creates a moral obligation on the filmmakers to act responsibly and promote a positive view of any religion or segment of the population — especially now when extremist sentiments are creating social tensions. The Bombay film industry is known for its liberal and secular views and ideas and it has gifted us with some great movies. We would like to see more films that promote secular views

The writer is a renowned Rabindra Sangeet exponent and a former employee of the World Bank.

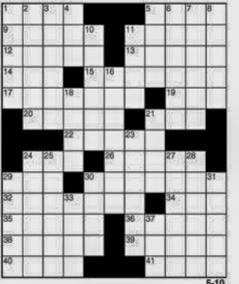
A WORD A DAY



SCHISM
noun
A split or division between strongly opposed sections or parties, caused by differences in opinion or belief.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Gator's kin
 - 5 Wild party
 - 9 "Walk Away--"
 - 11 Half of deca-
 - 12 Bye, in Baja
 - 13 Command
 - 14 To's opposite
 - 15 Geometric puzzle
 - 17 Stein's kin
 - 19 Print units
 - 20 Lawman Earp
 - 21 Method
 - 22 Janet of "Psycho"
 - 24 Perfect serve
 - 26 Bus units
 - 29 Relaxing spot
 - 30 Display of bad
- DOWN**
- 1 Skill
 - 2 Sketch again
 - 3 Like some bagels
 - 4 Corp. VIP
 - 5 Ice chunk
 - 6 Tenor Bocelli
 - 7 Like hot showers
 - 8 Damages
 - 10 Ritzy home
 - 11 Tadpole's home
 - 16 Craftsman
 - 18 Leafy vegetable
 - 21 "Could you repeat that?"
 - 23 Soothing
 - 24 Cochise's people
 - 25 Easy gait
 - 27 One of the Nixons
 - 28 Most certain
 - 29 Hide away
 - 30 Ocean bird
 - 31 Ship poles
 - 33 Leaves
 - 37 Lumbering tool



YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

OBERON ZETA
FELINE IVES
FELTTIPPENS
TALES
STEP CURB
BOAR PAPERS
ALI TIN GOO
TENDON PAIN
STEM DULL
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HOLDINGPENS
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