

I'm my own prisoner



BADIUZZAMAN BAY

THERE is a lot more to the words "brain" and "muscle" than you think. Standard usages aside, just imagine how easily these seemingly

innocuous words can turn into a potent force if you know how to combine them. Recently, a colleague reminded me of this when he described his experience of dealing with someone in charge of an important statutory institution. He had been assigned to do an interview of the man and so he approached him, through regular channels, hoping to get done with it as quickly as possible. But as luck would have it, he would neither get a text nor a call nor anything in the way of a reply over the next five days.

The official, whose job involves both brain and muscle, found an ingenious way to avoid him without being rude: silence.

This should come as no surprise to the journalists in Bangladesh who have to face the triple whammy of silence, elusive response and self-censorship almost on a daily basis. The first two conditions involve authority figures, who often use their intellect and superior position to deflect nosy questions and are shielded from accountability through a shoddy system of governance.

So, if they are not putting up a wall of silence, they are using vaguely-worded statements that no one can make head or tail of. The so-called media briefings, often manipulated to support the official narrative, give them the appearance of being responsible and forthcoming with information—however absurd that may sound. Take, for example, the reason religiously cited by the police to justify arresting opposition leaders and activists: "subversive activities."

To anyone knowledgeable enough about Bangladesh's current state of affairs, this justification for political arrests has no difference from the oft-parroted official theory for the victims of extrajudicial murders caught in "cross-fire"—both used so often and so randomly that they ceased to carry any meaning. Such reasons, without being substantiated by a plausible explanation of the whys and hows, amount to nothing and are rather symptomatic of the lack of accountability of the public officials.

It is only under such a circumstance that a "No comment" reply makes sense to me. At least, you're being honest through your silence if you're incapable of speaking honestly.

In any case, the public have a right to know about events that matter to them. Official statements, remarks and interviews are an important way to share details related to them. If the details of a certain event need to be kept under wraps, for security reasons, it stands to reason that there will be no elaborate answer and, in that case, the authorities should have the honesty to admit it. But using the same old nonsense over and over again only contributes to the deepening of distrust in the public minds.

Why are our public officials so secretive anyway? What are they afraid of? The media, as the word implies, primarily works as a medium of communication between the public and those in power. When government officials refuse to face the journalists, it actually means they're refusing to face the public. And the failure to come up with honest, straightforward answers amounts to severing that much-needed connection, something that has been happening a bit too often in Bangladesh.

In July 2017, the Home Office of the United Kingdom released a report titled "Country Policy and Information Note Bangladesh: Journalists, Publishers and Internet Bloggers," in which it said: "Some critics of the government... including journalists, publishers, social media users and bloggers, have been subjected by the authorities to



SOURCE: PINTEREST

information each time. Interestingly, the reasons offered to reject his applications differed from one another. It became clear that the government was trying to cover up something.

Subsequently, he wrote a story on his failed attempts, which was widely circulated. People started to talk about the contradictions in the replies given by three departments in response to a single query, wondering what could possibly be so confidential about a financial policy that the government wouldn't divulge even the basic details of its formation. Those replies spoke for themselves.

So if there are barriers to seeking an unearthing truths, there are also ways to turn them to your advantage. That said the threats of retribution, which the UK home office report has so elaborately talked about, are bound to have an impact on the work of the journalists and may even lead to self-censorship.

To be honest, right now, as I am writing this column, I am also self-censoring. Checking every word and phrase and insinuation before they slip through my fingers and cause embarrassment for my editor, even though he didn't tell me to, and the government, even though they didn't ask me to self-censor. I am doing this of my own volition. I am my own prisoner.

Self-censorship is like self-confinement—you confine yourself only when you feel vulnerable. It's not a product of its own. It's an effect, not a cause.

I think those see-no-evil, hear-no-evil public intellectuals who still believe the media is enjoying broad freedom in Bangladesh should try to explore the causes that are leading to self-censorship. A restrictive situation for the journalists, publishers and bloggers—and anyone who cares to speak—eventually plays out in favour of those who do not want them to "know/speak too much." They might as well start by asking about who those could be.

Badiuzzaman Bay is a member of the editorial team at *The Daily Star*. Email: badiuzzaman.bd@gmail.com

I think those see-no-evil, hear-no-evil public intellectuals who still believe the media is enjoying broad freedom in Bangladesh should try to explore the causes that are leading to self-censorship.

surveillance, harassment and intimidation..."

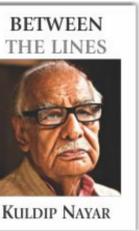
It concluded that freedom of speech and the press is under threat in Bangladesh. The government, apart from the official roadblocks set up to prevent the journalists from digging out unpleasant truths, has a whole arsenal of laws to its disposal, allegedly designed to force the media institutions into submission. But no one will go on record to name names. That's the price you pay to survive.

Under these circumstances, the challenge for the journalists is to find a

way around those roadblocks and do their jobs smartly. Recently, a well-known Indian journalist, while attending a conference in Dhaka, described how he found his way around roadblocks to expose anomalies surrounding the Indian government's highly controversial demonetisation policy.

He said he had approached three different departments, including the PMO and the finance ministry, seeking information under the RTI act about the model based on what the policy was designed. He was denied

The supreme courage of Gauri Lankesh



KULDIP NAYAR

A gathering for a memorial a few days ago turned out to be disappointing. I thought that the meeting held to bring attention to the murder of Kannada journalist Gauri Lankesh at Delhi's Jantar Mantar, would draw many journalists, particularly

the senior ones, to the venue. But it turned out to be a gathering of no more than 30-35 people—very few among them being journalists.

It has become a habit with senior journalists to stay indoors and not mix with the ordinary scribes. I can understand that editors are too busy, planning and editing the paper. But what about those who are a peg lower? They behave as if they are equally busy and have no time for such meetings, even if they are related to the fraternity.

But all these journalists, after retirement, come back down to earth because their utility is very limited. They are among many vying for space to write columns in the paper. Not many make it because readers are only interested in those who have fought on principles. Those who gave their all, refusing to be cowed down, are very few.

Gauri Lankesh was one of them. She has been a loud dissenting voice against the excesses committed in society. The ideals Gauri stood for as a journalist and social activist—she edited a Kannada weekly *Gauri Lankesh Patrike*—are unlikely to be forgotten even if she is no more in our midst. Gauri had been getting threatening messages every now and then but she was never afraid. She was always ready to sacrifice, even when it meant putting her life under threat.

An outspoken critic of the Hindutva politics, Gauri was gunned down by unidentified



SOURCE: WWW.SURABHISALONI.COM

assailants at the entrance of her residence in Bengaluru. Of course, there were initial protests all over, including the Press Club of India condemning the killing, saying, "A fearless and independent journalist who gave voice to many causes and always stood up for justice has been shot dead in the most brutal manner in order to silence her voice."

But this is not the first time that such attacks have taken place. In a democracy, the rule of law should prevail but, unfortunately, mob lynching and harassment are taking place everywhere. Incidents like Alwar, Dadri and Udhampur should serve as an eye-opener. In addition, there have been attacks on cultural, academic and historical institutions and universities, especially Nalanda University and the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library.

Gauri's murder is being compared to the

August 2015 assassination of Kannada journalist MM Kalburgi, who was similarly gunned down at his home. She had, during one of her speeches, mentioned Kalburgi, pointing out how a Bajrang Dal leader had remarked his killing, saying, "Mock Hinduism and die a dog's death." She, too, met the same fate.

She was also critical of the politics in her own state. She had, a few years ago, warned that Karnataka's trajectory from a progressive, secular state to a communal state under BJP rule has been a very interesting and crippling one. Karnataka, she said, was witnessing an increase of attacks in the name of Hindutva and faced the prospect of falling under a "communal, casteist, and corrupt BJP government." Gauri also vehemently opposed the RSS, the BJP, and the Hindutva forces and her killing is the silencing of that voice against

hate politics.

Kalburgi's murder remains unsolved after two years. These attacks are growing at a shocking rate, and as we remember the September 1995 murder of human rights defender Jaswant Singh Khalra, we are reminded that "my way or the bullet" has become the mantra in India. As a journalist, Lankesh knew her outspoken nature earned her enemies. As a citizen of India, she opposed the BJP's fascist and communal politics. In her interviews to a few journals, she said: "I oppose its misinterpretation of 'Hindu Dharma' ideals. I oppose the caste system of the 'Hindu Dharma,' which is unfair, unjust and gender-biased."

Attacking directly the BJP-led massacres of Muslims and other minorities, she declared, "I oppose Advani's Ram Mandir Yatra and Narendra Modi's genocide of 2002." In a 2016 interview, she also expressed how her journalism exposed her to "the rabid hate the Hindutva brigade and Modi bhakts have for its critics and naysayers."

Gauri knew her life was in danger. Yet, she brushed aside all threats and continued to defy the establishment and plugged the same line as an activist. In the last article she wrote for her weekly, *Gauri Lankesh Patrike*, she challenged the archaic forces in her own inimitable way. But the Hindutva forces never forgave her.

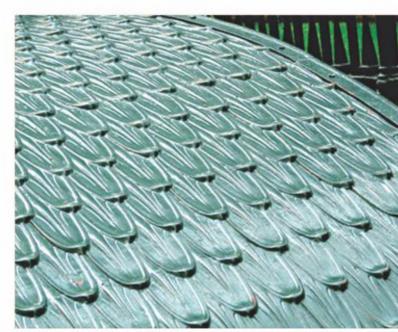
As a parting shot, she wrote: "I know very well that you are all devastated. I am also unhappy that I left suddenly without a word. But tell me, what else could I do? Tell me what was my fault in this final separation? This Tuesday also began just like the hundreds of other Tuesdays of my life. But I did not even have a hint that it would end with me being permanently taken away from all of you. Till that moment when the assassin's bullet split my chest and made me roll down to the earth, my mind kept thinking about the next day's issue of the paper. I am starting this last conversation with all of you with the belief that you will understand this critical situation..."

True, Gauri had a premonition, witnessing her own death and describing it exactly the way it happened. She doesn't falter even in the face of death. This is a lesson for journalists. At times, they have to face even the gravest situations. They cannot keep their eyes shut to the realities. This is what the profession expects from them.

Gauri was among the rare breed of journalists. She said in the article that she was willing to pay the price for what she stood up in rebellion against for her India and had no regrets. "I have a sense of fulfillment," is what she said. Such words are rare.

Kuldip Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.

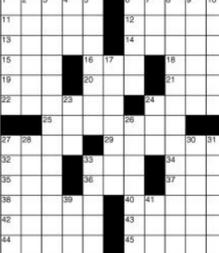
A WORD A DAY



IMBRICATION
NOUN
An overlapping of edges (of tiles or scales)

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- | | | |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| ACROSS | net | 5 Hit show |
| 1 Prepare to take a picture | 32 Put away | 6 Paper unit |
| 6 Take a picture | 33 One heart, e.g. | 7 "2001" computer |
| 11 Start of a Caesar quote | 34 First numero | 8 Second, e.g. |
| 12 Brother of Chico | 35 Autonomous program | 9 Starting bid |
| 13 Sherpa's home | 36 Small worker | 10 Trunks |
| 14 Tribal leader | 37 Bridal title | 17 Begins slowly |
| 15 Will Smith biopic | 38 Pays to play | 23 Cinch |
| 16 Sheltered side | 40 Compass | 24 Month in Marseilles |
| 18 They hold power | 42 Act part | 26 Bureaucratic annoyance |
| 19 Place to park | 43 Fragment | 27 Terre Haute's river |
| 20 Granola bit | 44 Grazing groups | 28 Right away |
| 21 "The Martix" hero | 45 Slip | 30 Opera's Caruso |
| 22 Position | | 31 Lineup |
| 24 Earth neighbor | DOWN | 33 Army sites |
| 25 Not figurative | 1 Tourney end | 39 Complete |
| 27 Corduroy ridge | 2 Spotted cat | 41 Soviet space station |
| 29 Fisherman with a | 3 Sentence starter | |
| | 4 Thurman of film | |



YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

C	U	T	U	P	C	E	D	A	R
A	G	O	R	A	O	X	I	D	E
T	H	U	G	S	B	I	G	D	O
R	E	T	O	R	T				
B	E	G	E	R	A	B	A	G	
E	A	R	B	U	D	P	O	G	O
G	R	O	U	P	E	F	F	O	R
O	N	U	S	R	A	C	K	E	T
T	S	P	W	I	N	G	E	O	
M	E	N	T	O	R				
P	A	P	A	L	A	R	O	A	R
A	M	I	S	S	C	U	B	A	
N	I	N	T	H	T	A	P	E	D

Where others see Brick and Building,

We see your DREAM HOME and a life well lived.

- On Time Handover
- Quality Construction

LAND WANTED

শেলটেক SHELTECH Since 1988
01713091721, 01713091722