Journalism's darkest hour
and a roadmap to its survival

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DIRECTOR Steven Spielberg's 2017 newsroom thriller *The Post*, set in the 1970s America when a group of journalists try to expose a massive cover-up of government secrets about the Vietnam War, beautifully captures the tension between the press and a corrupt administration. It's a standard theme for a movie on journalism—defenders of truth vs enemies of truth—but there's a twist: *The Washington Post* faces an existential threat if it publishes the Pentagon Papers. So it must choose between a heroic stand to assert its right to publish and an about-turn to avoid threats of retributions. Tom Hanks, who plays the hard-charging editor of the newspaper, chooses the former: "The only way to protect the right to publish is to publish."

Journalism, by its very definition, is conflictual as it exposes what is expected to be hidden. *The Post*, based on a true story, lays bare the tension that arises from this exercise but also, importantly, unearths the inherent vulnerability of the profession. There are always threats of retribution in the pursuit of truths. The Internet and other modern instruments may have revolutionised how news is gathered and shared today, but threats remain constant although the nature of threats has evolved over time.

For example, before the Internet, journalists rarely had to worry about virtual violence. The main risks they faced were in the field: the physical and psychological safety concerns of reporting on, for example, disasters and conflicts. But today's media battlefields, according to Hannah Storm, director of the International News Safety Institute, are increasingly shifting online, resulting in hitherto unheard-of consequences and often extending to family members and even those remotely benefitting from their reportage. The result is a "blurring of virtual, physical, and psychological frontlines of safety" all rolled into one big, multidimensional threat.

And Bangladesh is as much vulnerable to this threat as any other country plagued by weak democratic institutions and restrictive media laws.

The country's drift toward digital absolutism looks all but certain after the passing of the controversial Digital Security Bill 2018 in parliament, on September 19, which now awaits approval from the president to be enacted as law. As the Editors' Council showed in a section-by-section analysis of the act, in trying to prevent crimes in the digital sphere, it "ends up policing media operations, censoring content and controlling media freedom and freedom of speech and expression as guaranteed by our Constitution."

The act gives unlimited power to the police who can raid a place and arrest anyone on suspicion without any warrant or permission. It also "suffers from vagueness," using many terms that can be misinterpreted and used against the media. The result? The editors believe it will "create an atmosphere of fear and intimidation" and make journalism, especially investigative journalism, "virtually impossible." Their verdict? What we have here is a law that's basically "anti-free press" and "antithetical to democracy."

The manner in which this act has been drafted, promoted and eventually passed helps us understand the dynamics of state-media relations in Bangladesh. It's a fragile, uneasy relationship, fraught with distrust. The state wants the media to be subservient to it. The media has to walk a tricky tightrope between divergent expectations. Not willing to entertain criticism, the overriding political narrative tends to isolate sceptics in the press and portray them as "the enemy of the people"—"enemy" being the keyword. It heightens fear of potential threats and justifies the action to contain them. Just in August this year, one influential ruling party leader said that "a section of the media is conspiring to thwart the government." More recently, another wrote a commentary vilifying the editors for asking for reformation of the eight disputed sections of the Digital Security Act. He even appeared to suggest that any amendment to the act, while very unlikely, will depend on the editors rectifying their "amoral" ways.

In all fairness, such bellicose rhetoric does little to calm the frayed nerves. It only turns the spotlight on the supposed "unfairness" of the journalists rather than the unfair treatment being meted out to them.

The crisis for the journalists, however, didn't begin with this law and will not end with it either. Already, Bangladesh stands 146th among 180 countries in the World Press Freedom Index 2018 prepared by the Reporters Sans Frontiers (RSF), which cited growing media self-censorship amid the "endemic violence" against journalists and "the almost systematic impunity" enjoyed by those responsible. The true extent of this

SOURCE: LINKEDIN

impunity can be understood from the Global Impunity Index 2017 released by the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ). Bangladesh ranked 10th in the index, preceded by countries such as Somalia, Syria, Iraq, South Sudan and Pakistan—an irony given that Bangladesh far outranks these very countries in various development indicators.

How to make sense of Bangladesh's appalling press freedom records? How to prevent it from further backsliding on democracy and people's fundamental rights? More importantly for the journalists, how to continue their work with the integrity and responsibility expected of them despite the obstacles that have been put in their way?

Leon Willems, director of Free Press Unlimited, argues that while there are myriad pressures and challenges confronting the profession, resistance is possible. In a column published on the eve of this year's World Press Freedom Day, he shows how journalists around the world are fighting back, navigating all sorts of dangers including physical and reputational harm. Even in countries where there is strict online censorship and few legal protections, creative use of social media and other journalistic tools is paying dividends. Willems cited the example of the Philippines, where independent news organisations have become targets of slander by politicians and online trolls but "reporters are turning the tables with devastating effect." For example, in a recent series of reports identifying people making threats against the media, the news website Rappler uncovered a network of trolls tied directly to government insiders.

But I think the old, traditional concept of unity can achieve what few modern strategies can. In Bangladesh, perhaps the only silver lining to the recent debacle was the unprecedented display of solidarity by the Editors' Council, an association of 20 newspaper editors, who united in ardent opposition to the Digital Security Act and published the section-by-section analysis of the act (as mentioned above) in their newspapers on the same day. This momentum needs to be kept alive and supported by other representative bodies within the wider news network.

At the risk of sounding trite, a united press is more powerful than one that is divided, and stands a better chance of surviving with dignity. There are historic precedents that show how a united front works better than journalists fighting separately. In 1971, after *The Washington Post* began to publish reports based on the leaked Pentagon Papers, braving threats from the Nixon administration, 15 other newspapers decided to publish copies of the study. It was a glorious moment in the history of journalism when one newspaper's fight to protect its right to publish suddenly became everyone's. Finally, the threats to their rights were removed.

Again, in August of 2018, nearly 350 news outlets united to run coordinated editorials denouncing President Donald Trump's "dirty war" on the media. Trump routinely derides media reports as "fake news" and attacks journalists as "enemies of the people". The call for a united pushback by the *Boston Globe*, which had launched the campaign using the hashtag #EnemyOfNone, was joined by major US national newspapers, smaller local outlets, tabloids—even pro-Trump ones—and international publications like the UK's *The Guardian*. One of the editorials read: "It may be frustrating to argue that just because we print inconvenient truths doesn't mean that we're fake news, but being a journalist isn't a popularity contest. All we can do is to keep reporting."

"Unity, quality and creativity"—this can be our motto as we move into the Dark Age of Journalism.

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Slavery in Bengal: A forgotten history

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NOTABLY absent in Bengali literature and history is a rather shameful past: the existence of slaves and the significant role that slavery played in our society and economy. Slavery, in the manner that it existed in Bengal, should not be misunderstood as indentured servitude. Slaves were not just poor labourers and servants. Slaves were legally owned as property by their *malik*s. Often, they were part of the estate, the owner of which could do with them as he wished. Given that Dhaka was deeply involved in the slave trade, the history of slavery is largely the history of our ancestors. Yet we know so little about the slave industry in Bengal that it seems as though we have willingly removed it from our collective memory. Slavery existed in Bengal for many centuries, prior to and during British rule, and only started to dissipate after the 1840s when the British took legal steps to—if not abolish the practice—weaken the institution of slavery. However, until then, both indigenous slaveholders and European colonialists were involved in the slave trade in Bengal.

Much before the British colonial rule, India was involved in the global slave trade that included Arabia, East Africa, the Persian Gulf, Mauritius, Indonesia, and South Africa, although after the East India Company gained a foothold in the subcontinent, the company itself legitimised and took part in the slave trade. For example, take Governor-General Lord Auckland's argument against legislation banning slavery that slavery provides "mutual advantages" to both the slaves and the masters. Even in the 1840s, a decade after Britain's much-touted Slavery Abolition Act of 1833, conservative estimates suggest that there were half a million slaves in the British territories in India. Slaves were transported from long distances into Bengal, including Coffrees and Habshis (Africans slaves); however, most slaves were indigenous people, mostly war captives, abducted children, or the rural poor who had sold themselves.

Historians have shown that after the famine of 1769-1773, which was largely orchestrated and exacerbated by exploitative British taxation and grain exports, the slave population increased as people sold themselves to the zamindars to escape starvation. Dhaka, Chattogram, Sylhet and Mymensingh were particularly known for agrestic slavery, and according to the Report of Law Commission of 1839, one in five people were slaves at the time. British missionary William Adam writes in 1831, "In 1801, the total population of the [Dacca] district was computed at 938,712 individuals, one-half Hindoo and the other half Mahomedan. A portion of this population consists of slaves, and the sale of persons in a state of slavery is common throughout this district." Indeed, slaves were mentioned in the wills and inventories of 18th-century Anglo-Indians which demonstrates that slaveholding was ubiquitous.

There were primarily two kinds of slaves—agrestic slaves who worked in the land and domestic slaves—although these distinctions cannot accurately describe the diverse labour that slaves performed. Indrani Chatterjee, in her study of Indian slavery in the 19th century, presents evidence of the various tasks, both skilled and unskilled, that slaves were involved in, which largely depended on the wealth, profession and social position of their masters. It also depended on the age, gender and skills of the slaves themselves. Women slaves were expected, and often coerced, to perform productive and reproductive labour for their masters. There are substantial accounts of eunuchs and concubines playing important military, diplomatic and social roles, and some slaves had slaves of their own. Slaves were a signifier of the *malik*'s social status as well, as the rituals regarding the slaves, as well as the number of slaves in employ, indicated wealth and prosperity for the owner. Both Hindus and Muslims held slaves, Hindus calling their slaves "das" or "kritadas" whereas Muslims calling them "ghulam" or "nafar". Slavery in Bengal was structurally different from that practiced in the Atlantic, although the abolitionist movement influenced both slavery systems around the same time.

Owing to the abolitionist movement from the 1780s, there was a growing movement within Britain demanding an end to slavery in India. Rather than abolishing slavery, the government effectively sought to distance British ownership of slaves in India from indigenous slave ownership. The testimonies where British colonial officers admitted to having slaves in the house distinguished their ownership as "emancipatory" rather than exploitative. Others, such as Governor-General Cornwallis, linked non-British European settlers, such as the Portuguese and French, to slaveholding to further distinguish Britain as an abolitionist colonial ruler that does not participate in domestic slavery in India. The justification for slave ownership was delivered with an emancipatory zeal and an ostentatious sense of responsibility to interfere in the nefarious practice of slave ownership by indigenous masters. British Historian Margot Finn argues that this distancing of British morals from the practice of slavery in India enabled British colonialists to continue slaveholding under the auspices of a master-servant relationship in the 19th century.

Abolition of slavery would take many decades in Bengal, even after the enactment of "Act-V" of 1843. Act-V did not abolish slavery itself but dissolved the distinction between free persons and slaves. Although the law did not immediately end the practice of slavery, it laid the foundation for eventual abolition. Making imports and exports of slaves illegal was the first crucial step. It would take many other factors, including abolitionist movements, social stigma around slaveholding, industrialisation and the rise of free labour, to end the practice of slavery. Slavery continued until the early 20th century, a testament to the extent to which slavery was part and parcel of the economy and social fabric in Bengal.

It may very well be that many of our ancestors were slaves only a few generations ago, and hardly do we ever find mention of this great cruelty in our history books. To correctly reconcile with this dark past, we must learn about slave histories in Bengal, teach them in our schools, and address the matter as many other post-slavery societies have done, since the history of slaves in Bengal is our own. One may say that slavery still exists in parts of our country, where the extremely underprivileged are prone to selling themselves and their children to labour in industries where very few legal protections are available to those classes against their employers.
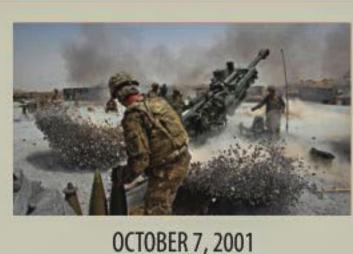
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CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS
1 Restaurant VIP
5 Timetable, for short
9 Less polite
11 Edison's -- Park
12 Spanish resort isle
13 Green hue
14 Clique
15 Hold out
17 Do well
19 Hosp. sections
20 Grove makeup
21 Naval initials
22 Church feature
24 Ran into
26 Less ordinary
29 Polite address
30 More arrogant
32 Alarm tripper
34 "-- little tea-pot..."
35 Ham's device
36 Macaroni shape
38 Insurance seller
39 Puzzle out
40 Hardy heroine
41 Keg contents

DOWN
1 Like new bills
2 Lyndon's veep
3 Book worker
4 Shriner's topper
5 Egotist's focus
6 Stabs
7 Little wrigglers
8 Active folks
10 Climber's descent
11 Marshy waste-land
16 Make good as new
18 Pants part
21 Pakistan tongue
23 Cherishes
24 Desert sight
25 Undermines
27 Fit for consumption
28 Take out
29 Small herring
30 Book basis
31 Less refined
33 Victories
37 High hit

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

BEETLE BAILEY   **BY MORT WALKER**

BABY BLUES   **BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT**