

# Real journalists act as agents of people, not power

John Pilger, as foreign correspondent, covered Bangladesh's Liberation War. His front-page report 'Death of a Nation' alerted the world to the life-and-death struggle of the Bengali people. He has been a war correspondent, author and documentary filmmaker who has won British journalism's highest award twice. For his documentary films, he has won an American Television Academy Award, an Emmy, and a British Academy Award given by the British Academy of Television Arts. He has received the United Nations Association Peace Prize and Gold Medal. His 1979 documentary, Cambodia Year Zero, is ranked by the British Film Institute as one of the 10 most important documentaries of the 20th century. He is the author of numerous best-selling books, including Heroes, A Secret Country, The New Rulers of the World and Hidden Agendas. In an exclusive (electronic) interview with Eresh Omar Jamal of The Daily Star, Pilger talks about his coverage of Bangladesh's Liberation War, the state of journalism today, and the current political shifts happening in the West.

In an article for *The Guardian* in 2008, you wrote that when you came to cover Bangladesh's Liberation War in 1971, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's wife Sheikh Fazilatunnesa Mujib had asked you, "Why have you come when even crows are afraid to fly over our house?" But you didn't write your answer. Can you share what it was?

I had spent much of 1971 based in Calcutta reporting on the seven million refugees coming from what was then East Pakistan. Their journey was along what we reporters called a "corridor of pain". The previous year, I had witnessed the devastation caused by the great tidal wave that engulfed the unprotected Bay of Bengal. What had struck me was the lack of real concern by the government in Islamabad, which sent the army to impose martial law on the people of East Bengal.

This was a dangerous corner of the world for ordinary people and dissenters from the colonial power that touched all their lives; it was also an inspirational place where, it was clear to me, a free Bangladesh was struggling to be born.

I like Bengali people; I admired their resilience and warmth and wit. In the summer of 1971, a young idealistic lawyer, Moudud Ahmed (who later rose to high office in Bangladesh), led me at night across the Radcliffe Line that divided India from East Pakistan. We marched behind an armed guide bearing a green and red Bangladeshi flag and we listened to people's moving accounts of Pakistani atrocities and saw their destroyed villages.

My subsequent report in the *London Daily Mirror* and my colleague Eric Piper's photographs provided substantial evidence that the Islamabad government was waging genocidal war in Bengal.

Can you give an overall picture of what you saw happening in Bangladesh in 1971, and later when you came back to cover the Bangladesh famine of 1974?

As we went from village to village, waiting for jet fighters to pass, the evidence was stark. Where there had been Hindu communities whose ethnic place in Muslim East Bengal had been delicately but peacefully maintained since Partition, there were now deserted ruins. Whenever the Punjabis attacked, it was the same pattern of massacre of Bengalis, Muslims and Hindus alike. In one village, people had been buried alive in mud. Now and then, in the midst of this misery, I heard the defiant words: "Joi Bangla!"

The years that followed liberation were extremely difficult. Bangladesh had been laid bare by war and the wilful denial of resources. I filmed the human consequence of a famine that ravaged the countryside and my reports asked why.

In Washington, Henry Kissinger, then President Nixon's powerful Secretary of State, regarded Bangladesh as a "basket case", which was an extreme ideological position that divided the world into "successful" and "failed states". Remember the US then controlled most of the world's food trade. To Washington, "failed states" were expendable, or places to dump surpluses; food shipments were used as a political weapon, literally to "zap" governments the US administration did not like.

Those countries that tried to assert their independence—for example, by voting against or abstaining from US motions in the UN—were denied food shipments and international agency support. The dilemmas faced by a new and troubled state such as Bangladesh were innumerable. I met Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and he wondered aloud whether or not democracy could survive in these conditions. Certainly, the recent elec-



John Pilger

tion says it has not survived. The stuffing of ballot boxes and the deployment of armed thugs, and the brutal intimidation of opposition candidates, shame the liberation struggles and those who died in those epic times.

Besides Bangladesh's Liberation War, you have also covered wars in Vietnam, Cambodia and Nigeria. What roles can journalists and the media fulfil to help people who suffer because of wars?

Journalists can help people by telling the truth, or by as much truth as they can find, and acting not as agents of governments, of power, but of people. That is real journalism. The rest is specious and false.

You have been a journalist now for many

decades. How has journalism changed during this time in your view?

When I began as a journalist, especially as a foreign correspondent, the press in the UK was conservative and owned by powerful establishment forces, as it is now. But the difference compared to today is that there were spaces for independent journalism that dissented from the received wisdom of authority. That space has now all but closed and independent journalists have gone to the internet, or to a metaphoric underground. Bangladesh has a rich tradition of independent journalism; be sure you protect it.

What are some of the biggest challenges and problems that currently exist within this profession, and what do you see as being the best solutions to them?

The single biggest challenge is rescuing journalism from its deferential role as the stenographer of great power. The United States has constitutionally the freest press on earth, yet in practice it has a media obsequious to the formulas and deceptions of power. That is why the US was effectively given media approval to invade Iraq, and Libya, and Syria and dozens of other countries.

For many years you have been a great supporter of Julian Assange and WikiLeaks. How do you see them fitting into the current global media framework?

WikiLeaks is possibly the most exciting development in journalism in my lifetime. As an investigative journalist, I have often had to rely on the courageous, principled acts of whistle-blowers. The truth about the Vietnam War was told when Daniel Ellsberg leaked the Pentagon Papers. The truth about Iraq and Afghanistan, and Saudi Arabia and many other flashpoints was told when WikiLeaks published the revelations of whistle-blowers.

When you consider that 100 percent of WikiLeaks leaks are authentic and accurate, you can understand the impact, as well as the fury generated among secretive powerful forces. Julian Assange is a political refugee in London for one reason only: WikiLeaks told the truth about the greatest crimes of the 21st century. He is not forgiven for that, and he should be supported by journalists and by people everywhere.

Why do you think populism in America and Europe is on the rise all of a sudden?

"Populism" is a pejorative media term. What we are seeing is a popular class revolt; people are fed up with the poverty, collapse in employment rights and insecurity that are engulfing their lives, caused by the extreme economic policies of their governments.

There are other contributing reasons, of course, but basically ordinary people in the West—especially the US, Britain, France, Greece and Italy—are seeing their precious gains fading away. That's why the "Yellow Vests" in France have such widespread support. Also, a stampede of refugees from countries devastated by Western rapacious policies—such as Libya and Syria—have provided the scapegoats.

Why do you think the liberal forces in those countries are being replaced by what are being described as elements of the far-right?

Liberal forces are often to blame for the conditions that have given rise to the far-right. They have enabled the divisiveness. In the US, the Democratic Party has long betrayed ordinary people, whom Hillary Clinton abused as "deplorables". Liberals in the West today are often class-obsessed behind a veneer of so-called "identity politics". Ordinary people are waking up to that, or at least they are trying to.

# Bangladesh starts its journey towards climate resilience

POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

SALEEMUL HUQ

While there are many strands to fulfil this important strategy, one of the first is to generate, disseminate and use good quality scientific knowledge so that the process is a rigorous learning-by-doing one.

Thus the recently completed fifth annual Gobeshona Conference at the Independent University, Bangladesh, with several hundred researchers and scientists from over fifty universities and research institutes, participating over three days with nearly a hundred scientific papers presented in over twenty different thematic sessions, has got us off to a good start.

The fourth and final day consisted of a science-policy-dialogue with senior policymakers with whom the scientists shared some of the latest research findings and also received advice on what kinds of research would help the decision-makers in future. The annual Gobeshona Conference has thus become a major means of assessing the state of our scientific knowledge as well as setting future research agendas.

The first major cross-cutting issue was to emphasise the need to invest in our youth in order to make them not just ready for employment but to turn them into problem solvers. We had a group of university students selected from universities in Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan participating in the conference who then stayed an extra day to develop their own workplan going forward. This workplan goes well beyond simply raising awareness about the climate change problems and focuses on how to solve some aspect of the problem by each of the youth in their own respective settings. This network of university students will be both Bangladesh-

wide as well as students in universities which are part of the Least Developed Countries Universities Consortium on Climate Change (LUCCC).

It is important to note that transformation will take place over the next decade and today's youth will be the leaders of tomorrow. Another important point to note is that coming up with solutions for tackling climate change in Bangladesh will also be applicable in other countries which means we can export our knowledge in future.

The second major cross-cutting theme was on gender, but going well beyond simply focusing on the vulnerability of women and girls to the adverse impacts of climate change. Here the emphasis will be on empowerment of women to become agents of change in tackling and solving climate change impacts in different settings. This also related to the first point of empowerment of youth but with an emphasis on girls over boys.

The current generation of women in Bangladesh have already demonstrated their

ability to contribute to the economy of the country, such as in the garment industries. The next generation will have to move from employment as labour to using their minds to become problem solvers and not just employees.

The third major cross-cutting issue that came up time and again in different thematic sessions, including urban, coastal and migration sessions, was the need to anticipate and ensure that future migration due to climate change is done in a planned and enabled manner and not under distressed conditions. The challenge here is to make the current problem of environmental migration due to distress conditions into a possible adaptation to future climate change by investing in education and empowering the youth, primarily girls, in the low-lying coastal parts of the country and at the same time investing in setting up climate resilient migrant friendly cities and towns around the country so that the future climate migrants don't all end up in Dhaka.

The fourth and final point to make is that the three cross-cutting issues described above are not separate but intertwined together and while funding will be a key requirement, an even more important requirement and investment will be in knowledge and education of the right kind. It is only by enabling the country to institute effective means of learning from practice that we can continuously improve our actions in order to achieve transformational adaptation outcomes.

In this context the Annual Gobeshona Conference will continue to play a key role in taking stock of our progress each January and building on what is successful and dropping what is not. Also from January 2020 onwards the event will become a truly global event where we will invite the rest of the world to come and learn from Bangladesh how to go about achieving transformational adaptation at national scale.

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QUOTABLE Quote

MALCOLM X (1925–1965)

AMERICAN MUSLIM MINISTER AND HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVIST

You can't separate peace from freedom because no one can be at peace unless he has his freedom.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Disney meerkat

6 Bourne's portrayal

11 Love, to Luigi

12 Find darling

13 Binge

14 Alerts

15 Chiding sound

16 "The Conners" role

18 Skin art, for short

19 Greek vowel

20 They hold power

21 Feasted

22 Depended

24 Hightailed it

25 Singer Iglesias

27 Went under

29 Track athlete

32 Pull gently

33 Dove sound

34 Juan Peron's wife

35 Tycoon Onassis

36 Small worker

37 Hr. part

38 Thus far

40 Cake coating

42 Singer Cara

43 Flower girl, often

44 Ready for shipping

45 Neon and helium

DOWN

1 Wine expert

2 Ascribe

3 2018 steampunk movie

4 Lode material

5 More poor

6 Daily events

7 Oklahoma city

8 The Hatfields and the McCoy's, e.g.

9 Decorative

10 Like some boxes

17 Fireplace item

23 Squid's squirt

24 Merriment

26 Offering, as a price

27 Unmoving

28 Dawn goddess

30 Show clearly

31 Mountain chains

33 Made crow calls

39 Low bill

41 Snoop grp.

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

RAGDER

ANODE

HYENA

SAGGED

LAGLEON

ERRANT

GOESTOS

USES

PENZEN

JAMES

EXIST

TEXTS

WASTE

OMAHA

VIPER

FOREF

SLEEP

SAYSNO

BAT

ADER

ADOBE

LIKENE

STEED

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

BEETLE, YESTERDAY I TOLD YOU THAT "TOMORROW WILL BE THE FIRST DAY OF THE REST OF YOUR LIFE"

WELL, TOMORROW IS HERE!

I KNOW

7-8

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott

HERE'S YOUR NEW BACKPACK, HAMMIE. COOL.

JUST TO BE SAFE, LET'S WRITE YOUR NAME ON IT SO YOU WON'T LOSE THIS ONE.

LOSE WHAT?

THAT'S A NEW RECORD.