

'Praise Freedom' is the new Press Freedom

In the era of Alternative Facts, who needs the truth?

THE THIRD VIEW



MAHFUZ ANAM

Press freedom was a fundamental pillar of modern civilisation. Nearly all countries, save the communist bloc and the dictatorial regimes, ensured special protection for the media in their constitutions.

There used to be a competition of sorts to highlight media freedoms in developing countries to gain respectability in the international fora. Jailing a newperson was quite rare and closing down a media outlet was even more so.

Sadly, not anymore. In the age of populism, ultra-nationalism, rising authoritarianism, post-truth and the emergence of leaders who can commit no-wrong, there is a new incarnation of press freedom.

It is "praise freedom"—where the press is fully free but only to praise and the more the press can praise, the freer it is certified to be.

Any alternative view is fake news, conspiracy, anti-national, anti-progress and, in some instances, acts of treason.

In the fairy tale "Snow White", in reply to the queen's well-known question, the mirror replies, "My queen, you are the fairest in the land."

In today's world, more and more governments and political leaders want the media to be the mirror in that fairy tale that only sings praise and not be the "mirror" that reflects

the reality of the society. As in George Orwell's famous novel 1984, "War is Peace", "Freedom is Slavery" and "Ignorance is Strength"—so also in the world of "praise freedom", truth is false, facts are non-facts, to dissent is to sow a seed for chaos, to oppose the official narrative is to mislead the public, to give space to the opposition is to foment divisiveness and, God forbid, to reveal corruption in the highest echelons of power is nothing short of trying to destroy the country.

Since it is the free press that does all this, it is "the enemy of the people". A new misplaced nationalistic zeal is now destroying the space for tolerance,

enough or see far enough", "time consuming", and development requires quick decisions and centralised authority that gets things done.

After all, when the leader knows everything, people's views merely distract and confuse things. Built into this mentality is a disdain for public opinion, accountability and transparency—and for the media that raises too many questions.

Such a mind-set in time inevitably leads to a culture of impunity with mega corruption becoming its natural bedfellow.

Decline of the parliament as an "oversight" body has been a tragic

Tragically, the "check and balance" system involving the judiciary, the legislative and the executive branches of the state, enshrined in every democratic constitution, has collapsed.

Over time, and for different historical reasons, the power balance shifted in favour of the executive branch leading to the emergence of authoritarian rule and elected "autocrats" and "demagogues" who project themselves as "demigods".

The rise of the all-powerful executive branch—meaning governments—has directly led to the increased pressure on the press to "toe the line", thereby impinging on the media's freedom to function, since it is the press that "watchdogs" the government.

When press freedom is being curtailed, freedom of speech can hardly remain unaffected. Democracy's precondition is individual freedom and freedom of speech that free media embodies as an institution.

It thrives by allowing multiple views, especially the dissenting ones, to be freely articulated forming a crucial part of public discourse.

By reflecting these divergent views, the media brings the multi-faceted thinking process into the public domain and thereby creates that vital intellectual ferment that allows a society to pick and choose ideas that benefit them most.

Just as body cells die without our blood bringing fresh supply of oxygen, so also a society dies without the "oxygen of latest information and fresh ideas" that are brought to fore through a free media and other institutions like the academia, think tanks, civic society bodies, etc.

A precondition for the existence of free media is freedom of speech and freedom of thought.

As Idi Amin, the former Ugandan Military strongman, is reputed to have said, "There is freedom of speech but I cannot guarantee freedom after the speech". It is that "freedom after the speech" which is now of highest concern for global journalism.

The number of journalists killed, injured, jailed, driven out of the country, intimidated, forced to indulge in self-censorship paints a very grim picture.

Yet, it is only a part of the whole picture which can only be gauged if we can know how many have been

silenced. This "missing" intellectual ferment is the real loss for a society and for our future.

Just as the digital revolution brought new challenges and opportunities for the media, it has, unfortunately, also opened up a new avenue for government control.

In many countries, under the pretext of preventing the misuse of the digital space, sweeping laws—framed mainly to stem, rather than enhance, the flow of news, views and ideas—are being enacted with an eye on the digital and mainstream media that governments increasingly find difficult to control.

The US President, Donald Trump perhaps epitomises this new era of "Praise Freedom".

From the very start, he embraced only the media that praised him and called all others the "enemy of the people" and had nothing but loathsome words for them. Though he is not the first leader or head of government to hate the free press, he definitely gave the trend its most powerful boost.

Leaders from many parts of the world are now ardent followers of Trump and they all want the media not to play their traditional "watchdog" role but more that of the lap dog variety.

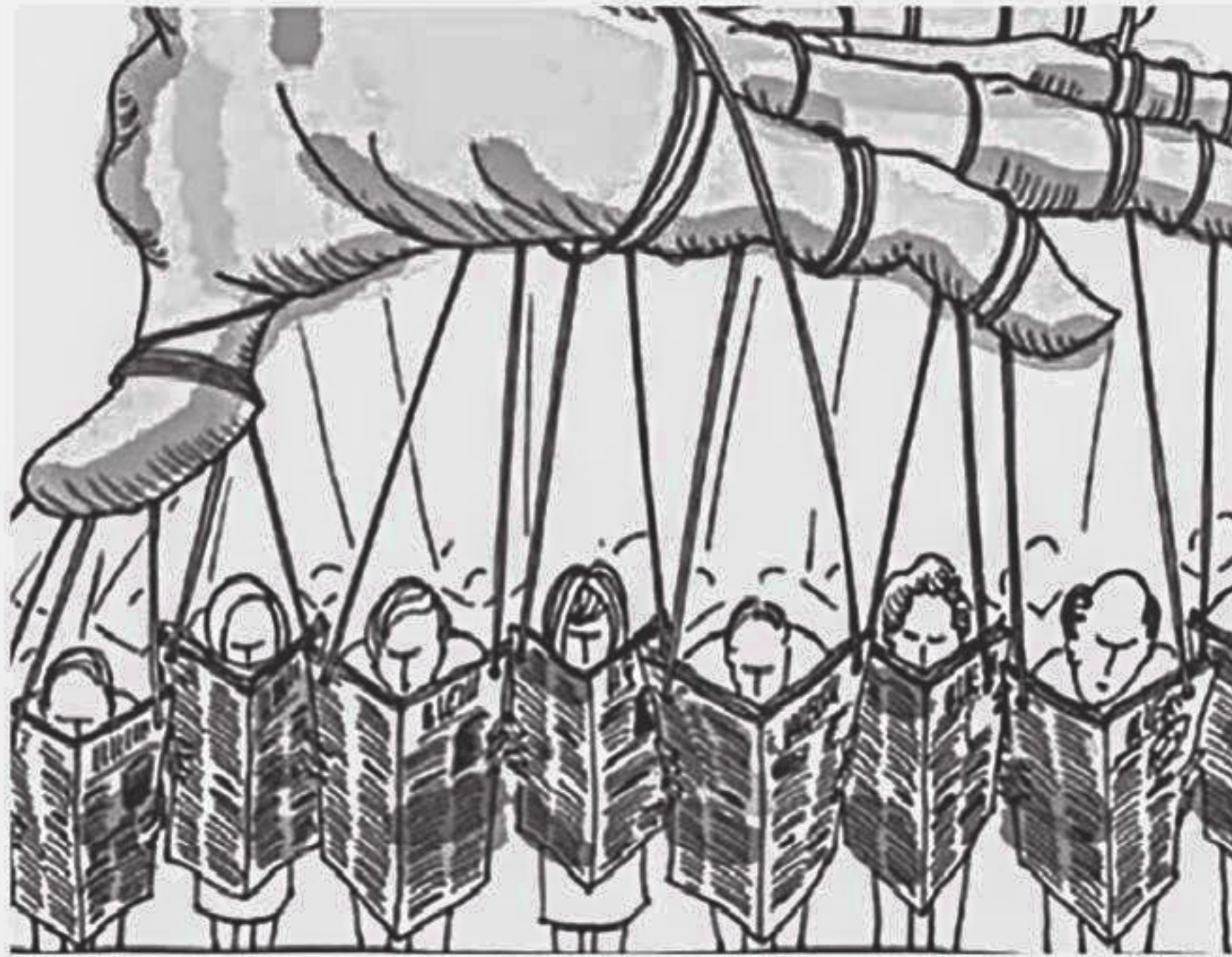
Populism and ultra-nationalism coupled with the rise of religious extremism have made prejudice and hatred an everyday affair, leading to a new height in intolerance that now seriously affects the functioning of free media—one of whose fundamental roles is to bring to light unpleasant truths, question the high and the mighty and uphold all forms of rights and freedoms.

These usually make for critical stories that populism, extremism and authoritarianism abhor. In Orwell's words, "If liberty means anything at all, it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear".

What the media is fighting for today—and doing so ever more strongly and unitedly—is to preserve perhaps the greatest achievement of human civilisation: right to freedom of thought and right to freedom of speech.

The battle is for nothing less.

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The Asian Editors' Circle is a weekly commentary by editors from the Asia News Network, an alliance of 24 media in 20 Asian countries.



multiplicity of views and challenging the very existence of the free press.

Suddenly, not to speak the truth that hurts is "patriotic" and "facts" are no more as sacrosanct.

US senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan's famous refrain that "everybody is entitled to their own opinion but not to their own facts" is now replaced by a different ethos—if facts don't support a particular contention, then invent them.

Over the last several years, we have been witnessing a deliberate discrediting of democracy as a political system.

That it is "cumbersome", "chaotic", "views of those who don't know

development of recent times.

In the past, governments dreaded facing parliaments because of the grilling and drubbing that they would get from well-informed and elaborately researched questioning by highly committed and motivated elected leaders determined to serve their electorate.

The decline of the role of the opposition within the parliaments have greatly added to the accountability deficit we notice all over.

Judiciary's position is not very different either with its eyes not so much on people's rights and protection of all forms of freedom, but more on government's wishes.

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The legacy of a legend



SADYA AFREEN MALICK

It was May 1990. World renowned singer Feroza Begum was on a three-month tour of the United States as part of the first Nazrul Conference in North America. I had the rare privilege of accompanying her on the tour and observing a legendary personality from up close.

Feroza Begum was uncompromising in her art. Whether it be the song selection, the choice of musicians accompanying her on stage or picking out a necklace that would inevitably form part of her ensemble, her decisiveness was well-known. Without fail, she would appear on stage in an elegant saree and immerse the packed audience in a spellbinding performance. She would often start with a Nazrul raga-based song and then drift to several genres of melodies and Urdu *geet-ghazals* treating the listeners to the breadth and depth of her genius. A standing rapturous ovation once when she alighted the stage or when the final curtains reluctantly fell, became the norm.

On a trip from New Jersey to New York we were caught in traffic. To while the hours away, she started to recount memories of how a young girl grew into a virtuoso artiste.

"Singing came as naturally to me as breathing. To start with, I had no tutor; I simply tried to pick up tunes from the gramophone records strewn all over our storeroom. I had little knowledge about the musical nuances. Fortunately, at that time I came across stalwarts such as Chitta Roy (personal assistant of Kazi Nazrul Islam) and later the incomparable composer Kamol Das Gupta."

"As I trained under Chitta Babu for almost two years I was fascinated by the exquisite compositions *Chirorey durey choley jabo*, *Tumi shundor tai*, *Tumi shumitey cheyo na*, *Ekdoshir chand* and other songs by Kazi Nazrul Islam."

The year 1960 marked a turning point in her life. The Gramophone Company of India approached Feroza Begum to record songs for Puja. The Kamol-Feroza pair exploded into the genre of *adhunik* songs. She revived the popularity of Nazrul songs and recorded *Momero putul* and *Duur dwipobashini*. Her unparalleled style added a new dimension to the genre and sold out three months in advance. *Musafir mochh rey ankhi jol*, her second recorded song, took her popularity to new heights.

In those days it was difficult to progress

without singing for playbacks, which she flatly refused. Such was her popularity, that she continued to rise in fame despite turning her back on playback songs.

In 1979, she recorded 3 LP's of *adhunik* and Nazrul songs, which were record hits as well. Astounding though it may sound, she performed a record 380 solo concerts.

It was under composer and husband Kamol Das Gupta that she blossomed in semi classical music. Kamol Dasgupta was training under legendary Ustad Zamiruddin Khan—as was none other than the genius Kazi Nazrul Islam. Belonging to the same *gharana*, Kamol Das and Nazrul Islam, had a similar mindset, and the music they composed together

before signalling her final approval.

I shall always treasure those days when we had the opportunity to work closely with her on different TV programmes that she directed or the first Nazrul Sangeet Sangstha that she formed to bring the country's Nazrul artists under one umbrella. The Nazrul Sangeet singers would have benefited greatly had the platform continued for some time longer.

A year has passed since the songbird left behind her music lovers. The silent masses that had gathered on the steps of Shaheed Minar to pay their last respect was a testament to the love she had nurtured not only with listeners but also with an art that she had helped shape for over fifty years.



Feroza Begum.

PHOTO: STAR

seemed to find its natural voice in Feroza Begum.

As prolific as she was, she had a natural eye for every detail. When I was preparing for a performance at the MIT University hall, she would tip-toe into my room and suggest some new beautiful touches to the song *Porodeshi bodhu... ghuum bhangayo chumi aankhi*. At other times when my husband and I were out at dinner with her, she would pick up on a passing remark and recount interesting anecdotes from her life. Even later, when I recorded my CD "Elo Phuler Morshum" for HMV under her direction, she would listen intently to every note in the master track

With head bowed they listened one last time as she took centre-stage and her song played on the airwaves—"Ami chirorey durey choley jabo, tobu amare dibo na bhuliteye" ("I will leave you forever, but shall not let you forget me for once").

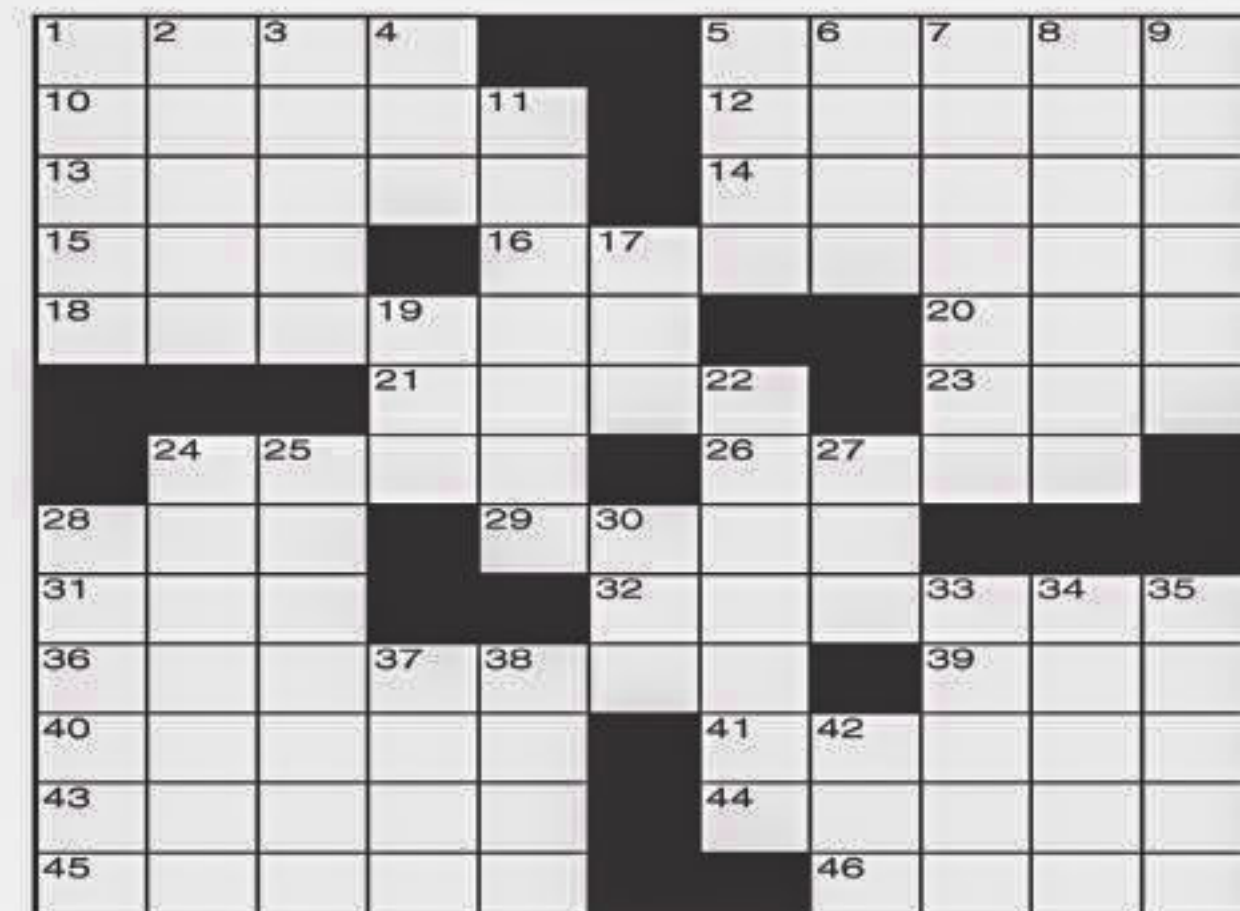
Her lips did not move as her song played but for the sea of admirers who silently whispered the lyrics, this promise was already sealed with love.

Sadya Afreen Mallick is a renowned Nazrul Sangeet exponent and Chief Culture Initiative, The Daily Star.

This article was first published on September 9, 2015. Today (August 4) Dhaka University will be holding the Feroza Begum Gold Medal Award Ceremony.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
1 Christmas travelers
5 Stagger
10 Peace goddess
12 Chicago airport
13 Good news for a buyer
14 Drank to excess
15 "-- was saying..."
16 Tweet symbol
18 Travel woe
20 Purpose
21 Pub orders
23 Roulette bet
24 Act sullen
26 Sediment
28 Fallow
29 Set eyes on
31 Refinery supply
32 Brewing item
36 Plate-cleaning cloth
39 Justice Fortas
40 Loosen, as laces
41 Debate topic
43 Head out
44 High homes
45 Goofed
- DOWN**
1 Singer Nicki
2 Stood
3 "Understand?"
4 One-million link
5 A bunch
6 "I'm in trouble!"
7 Ecstasy
8 Folds
9 Protected, in a way
11 Breathes out
17 Period of history
19 Pet perch
22 Fizz base
24 NASA probe
25 Commodore's insignia
27 LAX info
28 Electronics part
30 Sch. supporters
33 Low singer
34 Borders
35 Gaggly group
37 Workers' home
38 Clarinet part
42 Fall mo.



YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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

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