



PHOTO: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

“Predisposed journalism can never grow and sustain”

Matiur Rahman, editor of *Prothom Alo* and president of the Newspaper Owners' Association of Bangladesh (NOAB) speaks to Md Shahnawaz Khan Chanda of *Star Weekend* about journalism in this age of technology, corporatisation and controlled politics.

Under your editorship, we got two leading newspapers in Bangladesh—*Bhorer Kagoj* and *Prothom Alo*. How did you plan the content of these newspapers, and their editorial structure and policy? How did you make them stand out in a market already occupied by several age-old, reputed newspapers?

My previous editorship of the weekly *Ekota*, the mouthpiece of the communist party of Bangladesh (CPB), from 1970 to 1991, and my active involvement with leftist politics in Bangladesh brought me close to politicians, prominent journalists, litterateurs, and artists. I also had a good experience playing cricket. These diversified exposures in life have helped me with the courage to go for a venture like that of *Bhorer Kagoj* in February 1992. In a newspaper, you want to read on various topics. Initially, I had to do everything from going through reports, building a fresh team of journalists, and finding ways to increase circulation.

Along with regular writings, we published some unique content in *Bhorer Kagoj* which had not been published in any newspaper before. For instance, many unknown and untold stories of 1971, which we continue to do; unknown stories of the assassination of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on August 15, 1975, jail killing of November 3, 1975, coup d'état of November 7, reports on corruption and human rights violations during military dictatorship, etc. We collected and published interviews and analyses of many eyewitnesses of those historic

incidents.

I have travelled to many districts of our country and organised group discussions and meetings with readers. I even spoke to newspaper sellers and advertisement agents to learn how I could increase circulation. I have met personally with business concerns who could be prospective ad buyers.

I also wrote a lot. I reported from the field, edited reports, wrote columns, took interviews, and wrote features and commentaries. Thanks to our hard work, *Bhorer Kagoj* became one of the top three newspapers of Bangladesh. When I left in 1998 due to some differences with the publisher, the newspaper's circulation had crossed 100,000 and it had already reached breakeven.

Prothom Alo was founded on November 4, 1998. As its editor, I took only two months' preparation before the launch. Around 80 journalists from *Bhorer Kagoj* followed us there. Around 50 of them are still working with us. After three years, the then Awami League government (in 1996) stopped giving us government advertisements. It was a harsh blow for us because government ads were a major source of revenue for newspapers at that time. The case was nothing different in the tenure of earlier BNP government.

The BNP-led government did the same to us after the election of 2001. However, within just four years of launching, *Prothom Alo* became the largest circulating newspaper in Bangladesh. We diversified our content and depicted every sphere of life in the newspaper—in-depth analyses, investigative reports

and supplements featuring a variety of unique and engaging topics.

After the advent of new media, are journalistic skills still the same as before? What qualities should a journalist ideally have in 2020?

Internet and social media have decisively changed the field of journalism. In close to five decades of my career in newspapers, I have never seen such a big change in the industry. Most of the reports in a newspaper have already been read on the internet by the time they reach the readers in the morning. This has changed the entire function of a newspaper. Now, a reporter of the print edition also has to know how to develop content for the online edition. They have to know how to make video content for the social media pages, how to take photos—in a nutshell, a reporter, at present, has to be an efficient multitasker.

According to several reports, print media is on the decline globally. Circulation is falling and newspapers are shedding staff members to cut operating costs. What explains this situation and is this a trend that concerns us in Bangladesh?

Decreasing circulation of print media is a global phenomenon. It's a reality we cannot deny. Print media is heavily dependent on private advertisement revenues, namely three fourth of its operational costs. With the global decline of print media, newspapers are not getting as many advertisements as they used to get several years ago.

On the other hand, despite the popularity of internet-based news platforms, still, we could not turn our online platforms into a sustainable income source. But the print newspaper is still the major source of revenue for a print media house.

In this critical situation, we have to search for possible alternative sources of revenue. Along with this, we have to think of minimising our operating costs. It is a simple and basic business strategy. If you were an owner of a newspaper, you would have done that too to save your product. We are going through a transition. Skills, products and demands are changing on a daily basis. In such a time, if a journalist cannot update themselves with new skills, they have to pave way for more efficient hands. We have to accept this reality.

In *The Vanishing Newspaper*, Phillip Meyer coined a model called “harvesting the product” which suggests increasing advertisement rate while simultaneously shrinking the newspaper's operations by cutting off manpower and circulation. What do you think of this model which has been adopted by many struggling media houses here and abroad?

I don't fully agree with this model. Print media still matters in Bangladesh. People depend on it to verify news, facts, figures and analysis. I am not saying that internet-based news sources or social media are unreliable, but that you get constant instant updates or breaking news online. The fact remains that when the news is published in a newspaper, it becomes much more credible and acceptable. That is why we say—print is proof.

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