

The Daily Star

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Top-heavy imbalance in civil bureaucracy a serious concern

Authorities must implement civil service reforms to ensure good governance

It is imperative for a country to have a strong and effective civil service, without which the process of efficient governance is almost impossible. Which is why we are extremely concerned to see the current state of Bangladesh's civil bureaucracy, where the top posts have disproportionately gone up in number while the lower tiers remain slim, creating an imbalance that has led to a lack of productivity and accountability, and discontent among non-admin cadre officials. According to a report in this daily, this imbalance in some cases is so great that the number of officials holding top positions is more than three times the approved posts, while thousands of posts in lower tiers exist only on paper.

The numbers reported in *The Daily Star* are eye-opening. For example, according to public administration ministry data, more than one in every five posts of Class 1 officers are lying vacant, whereas there are now 309 additional secretaries (Grade 2) against 99 posts, with 210 supernumerary or in-situ promotions in the position. However, among all the 26 cadres, it is mainly the administration cadre that has been enjoying such promotions—which has been termed by other cadre officials as “discriminatory”. According to the government's own data, there are currently 490 officials holding joint secretary (Grade 3) positions against 370 approved posts, and 165 officers holding Grade 4 (selection grade) positions against 135 posts, while the lower tiers are facing manpower shortages—there are 886 senior assistant secretaries against 1,740 posts and 736 assistant secretaries against 1,314 posts.

Why is taxpayers' money being used to give higher positions and higher salaries for holding the same office and performing the same duties as before? According to experts, in-situ promotions are the major culprit in harming the structural functionality of the bureaucracy, and since there are no specific guidelines regarding them, it creates the possibility of candidates being chosen not based on their merit, but on the intensity of their lobbying efforts and for politically motivated reasons.

In June this year, this daily reported on how the government has put present and former bureaucrats at the helm of almost all state bodies, instead of public representatives or professionals outside the civil service. In July, we also saw an absurd proposal placed before the cabinet from the public administration ministry, seeking impunity for retired public servants who have been convicted of committing serious crimes or ethical turpitude (this was, thankfully, rejected). However, in all of these instances, we see the same thread—of top-tier bureaucrats with a disproportionate amount of power and security concentrated in their positions. It is absolutely essential that the government introduce civil service reforms and correct these imbalances in the bureaucracy, before these structural weaknesses render it unable to perform its primary function of delivering public services.

Railway in poor shape

Why is it running with locos that should be in the museum?

A transport service that depends on decrepit and outdated machines in need of frequent repairs is anything but up to scratch. Just to put it into perspective, 67 percent of the 263 locomotives that are in the inventory of Bangladesh Railway are obsolete, and as many as 78 of them are more than half a century old. Those should be in the museum rather than being used for pulling railway bogies. This state of affairs is disconcerting, to say the least.

It's important to note that the railway happened to be the most preferred mode of public transport until recently, it being relatively safer and cheaper than other modes, and it may be hard to believe but once the railway service was known for its punctuality. But these facts may sound like fables now. It is no wonder that with the rundown locomotives, the service would face more frequent disruptions due to breakdowns and accidents. Regrettably, for quite some time, the sector has also been running up losses incrementally every year. The losses doubled between the two datum years. And old engines are like white elephants. The repair and maintenance cost makes the whole business uneconomical, naturally.

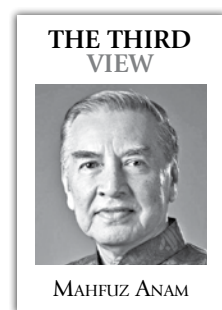
There must be something seriously wrong with the running of the railways. One would have thought that after the creation of a new, separate ministry for railways nearly 10 years ago, people would enjoy better services. But how does one explain the fact that the quality of service has been inversely proportional to the investment? Admittedly, considerable infrastructural developments have been made in this sector in the last several years. New tracks have been laid. New train services have been added to the schedule. But what has not improved is the quality of passenger service and punctuality.

This being the case, we believe a long-term overhaul plan for the railways is in order. The authorities ought to keep in mind that the railway forms an integral part of not only communications within the country, but it is an important cog in the integrated regional communications network. We understand that the government is planning to upgrade the important railway lines with a view to increasing connectivity and trade with other countries in the region, including Myanmar, India, China, Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore, through Ghumdhum via Ramu. Previous upgradation works were also restricted to development of railway infrastructure. However, we believe that the ministry should concurrently and proportionately invest in improving travel facilities by inducting better passenger wagons and locomotives. Only when people find it worth their money and time to travel by train would more people prefer the train. And only then can the railway be expected to make profits.



Predatory corporatisation of the media

Why strengthening the institution of 'the editor' is vital



THE THIRD VIEW

MAHFUZ ANAM

Why do these diverse groups invest in newspapers? Simply because newspapers were good investments and investors saw it as a sector with a good ROI (return on investment). Here is the interesting twist. Investment came to newspapers because of its good ROI, and it was so because newspapers continued to serve public interest—not the interest of the diverse interest groups that owned the sector—and thereby grew their business and thus gave attractive dividends to the investors. The rising corporate investment in the media in Bangladesh is nothing new or unprecedented. It was, to some extent, inevitable. What is, however, unprecedented and not inevitable, is the predatory nature of the corporate control and the total destruction of the ethical foundation of the newspapers. This is destroying media credibility—the life blood of a media's acceptability. If an investor wants to make profit out of his investment in the newspaper, which is not an unnatural or unjustified expectation, then the only way to do so is to allow the media to function in the way that media is supposed to—serve public interest. Through ethical journalism and upholding the common good and promoting freedom of speech and accountability, a newspaper gains

While discussing why a certain business house was bringing out a new newspaper, a fellow editor said that because they were going for a new several thousand crore investment and they needed a media, especially a newspaper, to protect them. This was especially so because the existing leader in that sector, who owned several media outlets, was preventing the former's entry by publishing false and derogatory reports about them.

One can easily imagine what role the new newspaper will play. The underlying meaning of the story is that, as our business houses increase in number, they are investing resource and power, into newspapers (read media in general) that can serve as a part of their arsenal for business growth, fighting rivals and frightening others from exposing their malpractices.

So professional journalism be damned, and along with it, the ideals of freedom, democracy, truth, people's rights, public interest, collective good, unearthing corruption, fighting for justice, equality, fairness, building a just society, etc. The vital role of the media in holding power to account vanishes as does the notion of accountability and transparency.

The threat to a free press comes from many quarters—the government, the advertisers, the owners and even the failure of journalists to maintain their own ethical standards.

The threat from the government emanates both from the regulatory framework that it creates through enactment of various repressive laws and also in the manner in which such laws are put into practice, which reflects the government's overall attitude towards the free press. The DSA is just the latest and the most virulent example of it.

Most laws in Bangladesh relating directly or indirectly to the media are mostly directed either to repressing or controlling the media. There are no laws in our statute books (and I would love to be proved wrong), except for the Right to Information Act (RTI), that either protects the journalist, the newspapers, or the media in general, or proactively help its cause by protecting sources, and whistle-blowers, and preventing police harassment or arbitrary arrests or questioning of media professionals.

The threat from advertising has always been there. A corporation may be looting the country dry but any hint of an exposé would automatically delist a newspaper from receiving their advertisement. This practice is not new, however; its intensity has risen to an unbearable level. One can ask how we can expect a business house to give ads if we are writing against them,

forgetting that we are, in fact, not writing against them but against their unethical and unlawful practice, which must be exposed for the betterment of the society and for the environment.

The relationship between the media and its advertisers must in no way be allowed to impinge on the freedom of journalists to report freely and ethically. It is a complex issue and has become more so due to Covid-19 which has drastically affected the media's, especially the newspapers' business model.

However, our main focus today is on the issue of corporate control of the media, not in general, but the ones they own. We want to confine our discussion only to newspapers about which I happen to know a little. At first it may appear to be an oxymoron, a contradiction in itself. If someone owns something it is only natural that they will control it. Yes, in many cases, but not in all. A person may own a hospital but can he run it on his whims just because he has invested in it? It must be the doctors who run the hospital. Businessmen may own airlines, but are their planes run as they wish without professionals? This is also true in case of the media. Many people may invest in the newspaper industry, but it must be the professional journalists who run it.

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This brings us to the bigger question on what is the role of a newspaper in general. Is it only to serve the interests of the owners? As someone said, “Freedom of the press is the freedom of the owners of the press”. Is that really true? Then what happens to the interests of the society in general, of the people, of principles, of ideals, of a nation's interests? What happens to the fundamental principle of freedom of speech, people's right to know, of holding power accountable?

If the media's role is far bigger than the corporate interest of the owners—and by definition it must be bigger, encompassing the interest of the nation as a whole—then, it must be allowed to function with full freedom with professional journalists at its helm. Some experiences from the rest of the world may help to prove this point.

As the need for higher investment in newspapers grew over time, especially due to technological sophistication of the printing press requiring more capital, individual ownership became difficult and investment from the financial and corporate world began to enter this sector. If we look at the newspapers of any industrialised country, they attract investment from banks, insurance companies, corporations, mutual and investment funds, services industry, etc.

Why do these diverse groups invest in newspapers? Simply because newspapers were good investments and investors saw it as a sector with a good ROI (return on investment).

Here is the interesting twist. Investment came to newspapers because of its good ROI, and it was so because newspapers continued to serve public interest—not the interest of the diverse interest groups that owned the sector—and thereby grew their business and thus gave attractive dividends to the investors.

The rising corporate investment in the media in Bangladesh is nothing new or unprecedented. It was, to some extent, inevitable. What is, however, unprecedented and not inevitable, is the predatory nature of the corporate control and the total destruction of the ethical foundation of the newspapers. This is destroying media credibility—the life blood of a media's acceptability.

If an investor wants to make profit out of his investment in the newspaper, which is not an unnatural or unjustified expectation, then the only way to do so is to allow the media to function in the way that media is supposed to—serve public interest. Through ethical journalism and upholding the common good and promoting freedom of speech and accountability, a newspaper gains

great examples in Tofazzal Hossain Manik Mia, Zahur Hossain Chowdhury and Abdus Salam from the Pakistan period, and Maulana Akram Khan, Abul Kalam Shamsuddin and Abul Mansur Ahmad from the pre-1947 period to inspire us to rebuild the institution of the “editor” in Bangladeshi media today.

The editor is that pivotal person who protects the freedom of the media from attacks from all sides—government, agencies, large corporations, powerful political leaders and from the interference of the owner—and through his courageous, ethical and honest leadership and non-partisan stance, inspires his fellow journalists to reach the highest standards of objective journalism. This is pivotal for the survival of the free and independent media in Bangladesh.

Admittedly, many of us have failed in this task. We have ourselves destroyed this institution by becoming a PR person for the owner. Many of us have used our position to curry favour with the rich and the powerful, peddled influence for personal gains, misused our positions to harm others and twisted facts to be on the right political side, even while knowing that the truth lay elsewhere.

On a different level, many of us did not pay enough attention to our own newspapers as to what were being published, how well-researched they were, what was the quality and reliability of the sources used and whether sufficient due diligence was done before a corporate or personal reputation was questioned.

All this brought down both the prestige of the institution of the editor and the credibility of the newspaper that he led.

This must change for the good of journalism and for the good of the country, which is on the verge of attaining lower-middle-income country status on the global stage.

The emergence of the social media, the tsunami of news portals with an endless flow of unedited, unverified, unsorted news and the deliberate promotion of “alternative facts” by governments and powerful business lobbies have perhaps made the role of the editor the most crucial for the restoration of public faith in journalism. As someone said, “if you do not read the news, you are uninformed, but if you read the news you are misinformed”. This is something that must worry us journalists if we want to save our profession.

As of today, a total of 1,200 dailies are published from Dhaka city. (We should be holding the world record in this). Country-wide, the figure is 3,222. On the face of it, newspapers should be among the most flourishing of industries in the country. What is their business model? Who are their readers and advertisers? Those of us who have been in this field for a while and know well how the market has shrunk wonder as to the sustainability of all these publications. Unless, of course, they will all sing the praise of their corporate owners, fight for their business interest, publish fake news about their rivals and ride on the subsidy of the owners—and all the while professional journalism will fall by the way side.

In one sense, we can rejoice in the words of Mao Zedong: “Let a thousand flowers bloom”. But on the other, we are fully aware how media credibility can be destroyed in the wrong hands and how harmful the media can be in the age of unedited, badly edited and totally fake news.

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