

Myanmar must do more to stop drug trafficking

Bangladesh has no choice but to put pressure on its uncooperative neighbour

IN a bid to stop drugs such as yaba and crystal meth—popularly known as ice—from pouring into Bangladesh from Myanmar, the former has rightly made a proposal to India to hold a tripartite meeting with Myanmar to put diplomatic pressure on its government to curb drug trade in the region. For nearly a decade, Bangladesh has sought Myanmar's cooperation in preventing cross-border drug trafficking. Despite many assurances, however, the Myanmar authorities have failed to take any meaningful action.

Myanmar has been a hotbed of drug production and trafficking for many decades. During the last decade in particular, yaba has been pouring into Bangladesh through the Myanmar border, with the amount being seized increasing rapidly every year. Over this period, the Bangladesh authorities have met with their Myanmar counterparts a number of times. On October 27, 2013, the Department of Narcotics Control sent a list of 37 yaba factories inside Myanmar to its Yangon counterpart, the Central Committee for Drug Abuse Control, urging it to take action. The two sides met again in 2015, but Myanmar officials walked away without signing the joint minutes, leaving their promises empty on paper. Later meetings between the two sides produced similar results—with the Bangladesh side handing over lists of drug factories in Myanmar, and the Myanmar side refusing to sign the joint minutes and taking very little visible action with the list handed to them.

Although it is still unclear why they have been so reluctant to collaborate in eradicating the drug problem—which has been plaguing not only Bangladesh, but the region as a whole—the fact remains that Bangladesh must protect its national interest and stop the inflow of drugs in any way possible. In that regard, India could play a key role in finding a breakthrough in the negotiations with Myanmar—especially since India, too, has been dealing with the inflow of drugs from Myanmar. Meanwhile, the influx of certain drugs from India to Bangladesh has also remained a headache for the local authorities. So, the chances of all three countries successfully fighting the drug problem would be much better if they all worked together.

We are hopeful that the Indian authorities will agree to the final proposal for the tripartite meeting and grant Bangladesh all the necessary assistance during the negotiations. What remains problematic, however, is getting the Myanmar authorities to stick to their words. With that in mind, Bangladesh needs to use all its diplomatic channels as well as heighten security measures as part of a multi-pronged drive against drugs entering the country.

Inspiring example of teaching disadvantaged children

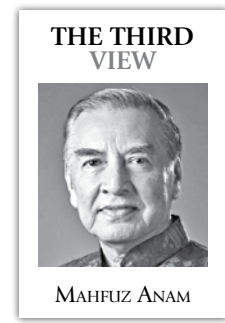
More such initiatives are needed to recover the learning loss caused by Covid-19

IT is heartening to learn about a tutorial centre set up in Jhenaidah to educate underprivileged children for free. Alamgir Hossain, currently a lecturer at a local college of the Jhenaidah town, set up "Shishu Pathshala" some 17 years ago. Since then, he has been providing free lessons to the children who are otherwise unable to pay for private tutors. In this centre, students are not only getting lessons on textbook subjects, but are also being trained in computer operations and essential life skills such as gardening, crafting, etc. Besides, they are encouraged to participate in various extra-curricular activities, such as singing, reciting, arts, and sports, which are essential for both their physical and mental development. The goal is to provide these students a well-rounded education.

What is unique about this tutorial centre is that many children who once studied here (and are now students of various universities) are coming back to teach at the centre, when they have holidays. Another significant achievement of Alamgir is that he has also engaged his wife and daughter in this noble endeavour. In a country where children from disadvantaged communities are still largely deprived of basic primary education, we think such an initiative is inspiring.

We often come to learn about such noble, citizen-led initiatives that, if given proper support, financial and otherwise, can make a big difference. For instance, a few years ago, we learned about a school which was set up for the disadvantaged Manta community in Patuakhali by a group of college students in the district. It was also encouraging to learn about "Anushilon Mojar School" in Khulna, founded by a man who was once a day labourer, to educate the underprivileged children of his village.

Such schools or teaching centres are often founded by people who themselves are or were in financial hardship, and know how education can turn one's life around. These schools, as instruments of social change, thus need to be supported by the government. At the same time, we think that private organisations as well as well-off people in our society should come forward in setting up free schools and other life-enriching initiatives for children coming from low-income backgrounds. Such initiatives are needed now more than ever as students, particularly in rural communities, need to recover the learning loss caused by the pandemic.



THE THIRD VIEW

MAHFUZ ANAM

WHEN we refer to our glorious period of journalism, we usually mean the pre-liberation period. Ironically, compared to today, the media was at its most rudimentary stage at that time. Independent mass media only consisted of newspapers—and that, too, mainly two: *Daily Ittefaq* and *Sangbad*—as there were no private television channels or radio stations; the state had monopoly on both. And of course, the world had no idea of the internet, online media or social media.

However, what we lacked in numbers, technology, trained human resources or general resources, we more than made up for in spirit. Ever since its birth, journalism in East Pakistan—now Bangladesh—was totally immersed in and devoted to our struggles to gain our rights for language, culture, economy, and social advancement. In fact, independent journalism, to the extent possible at that time, was "partisan" journalism all devoted to asserting the rights of the Bengalis. And we were extremely proud of that partisanship. It meant our very survival as a people.

Obviously, a new chapter in the history of our journalism began with the birth of Bangladesh. But before it could crystallise, a most grievous tragedy befell us.

With Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's assassination and the return of martial law and military's involvement in politics, which lasted till 1990, our journalism reverted, and correctly so, to the "fighting mode" for democracy and, in Abraham Lincoln's words, for a "government of the people, by the people, for the people."

The real growth of journalism in Bangladesh, in its modern sense, can be said to have started from 1991 onwards, with the restoration of democracy and elected representatives of the people coming to power, with the parliament playing its constitutionally assigned role of holding the Executive branch to account.

From 1991 till date, we have had a period of phenomenal growth of the media in quantitative terms of various newspapers, weeklies, TV channels, online platforms, etc. As for their overall quality, it is a different story.

As of September 30, 2021, there are 502 dailies and 348 weeklies published from Dhaka alone—perhaps the highest for any city in the world. In addition, there are 777 dailies and 347 weeklies coming out in the rest of the country. Many newspapers should have meant many views, many news sources, and many people participating in the flow of information from their respective social, economic and class perspectives. Whether, in Chairman Mao Zedong's words, a "thousand flowers" actually bloomed or it was a case of many plants producing the same or similar "flowers" is a matter

of record—and it constitutes, in our view, the hidden story of the condition of today's media in Bangladesh.

The advertisement market is not remotely as big as to be able to support such a huge print media industry, and there is no government mechanism to support them either. The individual owners are not financially stable enough to sustain their publications over any length of time. There is, however, the world of government advertisement that has its own strengths and weaknesses—as well as the possibility of bureaucratic and political manipulation.

The natural question that follows, and must be answered as transparently as possible is: What is the business case for so many newspapers? And here the situation gets murky. If it is not the owners' money, if it is not government or private ads, then how are these papers sustaining themselves? Many years ago, the information ministry did a survey

of our media remains a serious one, as mentioned earlier.

In my view, there exists fundamental confusion about the role of the media in the minds of the government, the owners, and within the industry itself—including among the higher echelon of media leadership.

As for the government, we are facing the same obstacles—perhaps a bit more severely—that the media in all new democracies face. After all, our struggle for democracy may have a long history, but our experience in practising it, save for the early years of liberation, is only 30 years old. Compared to governments of mature democracies, elected leaders in the new ones, including ours, suffer from all sorts of insecurities and are super-sensitive to every critical view, failing to even remotely grasp the logic of criticism as a cleansing process of governance. With the passage of time and growing differences, opponents in such democracies begin



A functioning democracy requires an objective media.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

of newspapers in Dhaka and found that many of them had no office of their own; they shared space with others. Several of them had the same address, and many had no office at all. Here is a clue to the hidden story I referred to above.

While the government has an obligatory wage board, its own findings showed that, except for a handful of media houses, no one paid the official salary or anything close to it to their staff. Yet, it is repeated every few years and imposed on a few. Has this helped the growth of quality journalism in any way?

The situation of the television media, whose numbers may have reached half a century, are better in terms of staff salary and investment. Their problem lies in garnering enough advertisement and reaching their viewers on a subscription model, which is totally usurped by the cable operators at the moment.

Some estimates put the number of our unregistered online news portals to thousands. As of now, there are 262 registered online news portals, including the websites of the established newspapers.

There are numerous private FM radio stations as well.

With such a huge proliferation in terms of quantity, the question of the quality

to be considered as enemies. The media, which publishes purely fact-based critical stories, is seen to be a part of the "enemy," and as such treated with suspicion at first, then with derision, and finally with attempted obliteration.

Even within these 30 years of continuous democracy—with a two-year gap when a military-backed caretaker government operated—the present ruling party itself has been in continuous power since January 2009, making for nearly 13 years at the helm. If we add their earlier stint of five years in power, the Awami League has been ruling Bangladesh for 18 years of the last 30 years of our democracy. Given such a long reign, can we hope for a more sophisticated reaction to media criticism in the future?

As for the owners, save a few, most of them have not grasped the speciality of this industry. Unlike what other things they own, the fact that owning a media house is a different ball game mostly escapes their thinking. If the heart of every product is quality, the quality of a media product is "credibility," which comes from objective coverage of the government, all public and private institutions, the business community, and all centres of power in general—including the media owner's own enterprises. Singing undue

South Asia needs a change of approach for agricultural progress

MOHAMMAD JAHANGIR ALAM and LIN CRASE

REGARDLESS of the remarkable progress that some industries across South Asia have achieved, agriculture still remains the primary source of employment and income for a large segment of people in the region. In Bangladesh, for instance, 38 percent of the working population was employed in agriculture in 2019, and more than 40 percent of Indians are still employed in the sector. Efforts to improve the welfare of the poor across the region also rely on achieving higher and more stable incomes for farm households. Simultaneously, improved management of the agricultural sector is required to deliver on food security and political stability. This is especially the case in the Eastern Gangetic Plain—one of the most populated parts of South Asia.

The national policy settings across the Eastern Gangetic Plain differ in some respects, but they also share something in common: all of them have focused heavily on supporting farmers through different subsidies and price controls. While no one is questioning the role of these types of measures, it can be useful to stop and reflect on what really works and what doesn't. Despite agriculture's obvious importance, efforts to raise and stabilise farm incomes in places like Bangladesh, northeast India, and Nepal have enjoyed only mixed success. In some cases, local nuances have played a part so that the success of a policy or programme in one place cannot be duplicated in another. Unfortunately, there has been no systematic process for gathering information about what makes for a successful policy or programme in the region.

This was the focus of a research project sponsored by the Australian government that brought together researchers and

policy-makers from Bangladesh, India and Nepal. The project commenced by gathering information from nearly 100 policy experts who are closely involved with agricultural development. These experts were recruited because of their experiences in this field. After nominating the different policies and programmes of interest, experts were then asked to rank the ones that they thought were most effective at raising and stabilising farm incomes.

On the one hand, it was not surprising to see that the experts, coming from different countries, had slightly different ratings of the policy approaches. But there was a consistent theme across the board.

Overwhelmingly, all the experts indicated that the difficulty of accessing quality inputs was the main barrier to improving the incomes of farm households. This is particularly interesting given that much of the policy attention in the region has focused on the prices farmers have to pay for inputs, and there has been less attention given to quality input access.

In addition, cheaper farm inputs were rated quite low by the experts as a way of raising farmer incomes. This was particularly the case for experts with experience in the Indian policy setting, where access to quality inputs was adjudged as being at least three times more effective than simply offering cheaper inputs. Arguably, this also reflects the fact that input subsidies can make it more difficult for some farmers to acquire seed, fertilisers, and other inputs.

Another important finding was that the experts also had relatively consistent views about the best way to deliver on improving access to quality inputs for farmers. Specifically, the experts from all three countries consistently rated the private sector as the best mechanism for

In terms of the empowerment of women, the project found that giving women access to technology can have markedly different and potentially better impacts, compared to the same technology in the hands of men.

improving access. This was particularly noticeable in the case of experts from Bangladesh and Nepal. In contrast, the government was consistently rated as the least effective delivery mechanism. It points to the growing capacity and enterprise of the private sector and the promise it holds—if leveraged carefully.

Building on these overarching findings, the project investigated other topics, like the specific impacts of fertiliser subsidies in India, the role of information transfer to farmers in Bangladesh, and the empowerment of women across the region. By and large, these studies continued to add weight to the central finding—that access to quality inputs really matters.

For example, in reviewing the impacts of fertiliser subsidies, the project found that subsidies for fertilisers have had limited influence on incomes. The project also concluded that these measures require much better targeting if they are to reach the poor, instead of simply benefiting larger richer farmers disproportionately.

praise of the owners might please them, but it eats away at the media's credibility, thereby damaging the "quality" of the product, which in this case is the newspaper.

Many of the owners consider the media as a publicity wing of their industrial empires and treat journalists as PR persons, hired for their self-aggrandisement. Obviously, such owners do not consider the "media" as an independent business. It is a subsidiary created to run on "handouts" from other enterprises, and never meant to stand on its own. Hence one's own media must, by definition, look after the business interest of the rest of the businesses of the same owner which, at times, include denigrating a competitor.

Confusion among the journalists is just as damaging. Given our long tradition of journalism to support our just struggle for independence, and our long involvement in toppling military rule and autocracy, we have not learnt to distinguish between "advocacy" journalism and "objective" journalism. Here, I would like to make a strong and clear distinction between the period from 1975 to 1991 and from 1991 till date.

In the first period, except for the initial years of Bangabandhu's rule, journalism was devoted to fighting military rule. It was almost a continuation of its role during the Pakistan period. In that "fight," we were partisans for democracy, representative political leadership, accountable government, and all sorts of freedoms. We were not an "objective" judge of the political parties who were fighting against the military, or evaluating the programmes they were putting forward to replace the latter.

After the restoration of democracy, journalism had to necessarily move away from "partisanship" to "objectivity," judging each and every one of our elected leaders and the government they formed. They were to be tested on their performances and not on their intentions, howsoever noble and righteous. Regardless of our favourite political icon, our professional ethos compelled us to take up our pen against injustice, corruption, cronyism, and political partisanship. While earlier patriotism meant fighting for democracy and against military rule, presently patriotism meant unearthing misgovernance, abuse of law, and suppression of all freedoms—especially freedom of expression, which is the core of all other freedoms—regardless of the leadership of the day.

In my view, we as journalists have failed to grasp the fundamental ethos of our own profession and have dragged the old partisan mindset into it, thereby hampering the growth of objective journalism which Bangladesh needs today. It lies at the heart of our transition to the status of a developing country from an LDC.

If nobody else, we the journalists must understand it, internalise it, and practise it. That is our patriotism today.

Mahfuz Anam is the editor and publisher of The Daily Star.

This again brings into question policies that are concerned primarily with the cost of inputs and not their distribution, as was highlighted by the data gathered from the experts.

Access was also a key component of the work on extension and information to farmers. It was found that farmers accessing information was positively related to higher incomes and productivity. In a related analysis of mobile phone use by farmers in Bangladesh, better yields, improved production efficiency, and higher agricultural net revenues were all positively related to mobile phone access and use.

In terms of the empowerment of women, the project found that giving women access to technology can have markedly different and potentially better impacts, compared to the same technology in the hands of men. For example, one study showed that women would be more inclined to sell water from a groundwater pump than men, were they given the choice. That would, obviously, require a major shift in the way women's roles are contemplated in the region, but it does highlight the fact that access matters.

Overall, the project presents a significant challenge to the next generation policy-makers. How can they design and deliver policies that focus more directly on ensuring access for different groups, and focus less on the cost? Subsidies for inputs in agriculture are evidently less favoured by most experts, even if they can be popular in some areas. Phasing them out and replacing them with more targeted and sophisticated support measures can be helped by new technologies spreading rapidly across the region, but the political will to change is key.

Dr Mohammad Jahangir Alam is a professor at the Department of Agribusiness and Marketing in Bangladesh Agricultural University. Dr Lin Crase is a professor of economics at the University of South Australia.