



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

The government’s search for a columnist



BLOWIN’ IN THE WIND
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SHAMSAD MORTUZA

IN response to the adversarial journalism of some pesky reporters and writers, a ministry-level decision has reportedly been taken to engage third-party agents to counter and mitigate the detrimental effects on the government’s and, by extension, the country’s overall image. There is nothing wrong with such a strategy of recruiting media operatives. However, the open nature of the search robs the ploy of its X-factor and thereby self-sabotages its purpose.

Already, there are some complaints against said announcement of hiring columnists to write for the country – or should I say, the government. Critics are pointing at the overwhelming number of fair-weather friends who regularly write in the government’s favour. The announcement then points at two facts: First, these non-critical writings do more disservice than service to the government. Second, these writings do not have efficacy beyond our borders. There is a serious dearth of skilled writers who can positively present the country in the international media. This is connected with the branding of Bangladesh where a clear, consistent message on the country is missing.

The situation is as absurd as Pirandello’s play where the six characters of the drama start looking for their author. We are heading for a similar absurd situation. The need for an authoritative meaning is deluding us as more and more farcical comments are entertaining us in the name of politics. The late realisation of having skilled writers merits our attention – but we should be wary of using them for the greater sake of the country, and not for any faction. I remember, a few years back the online cricket portal Cricinfo used to be flooded with negative comments against the Bangladesh team. Now that there is a good number of cricket aficionados who can support their team with facts and figures, the commentators are much more careful in slighting Bangladesh even when the team is underperforming. This has been made possible by the collective critical mass that has organically grown with a level of ownership of the supporters of Bangladesh cricket. Similarly, the initiative

to promote Bangladesh in the foreign media requires a much more skillful approach and strategic intervention. While the initiative to have “expatriate diplomacy” is timely, the way this information has been leaked to the press shows a level of inefficiency that exists in our bureaucracy and thereby defeats its purpose.

The government does need a media coordinator or a behind-the-scenes influencer. In absence of such media experts, we get to see the top leaders getting exposed every now and then. At times, they get unnecessarily and unwittingly exposed, especially when they cannot avoid the lure of the limelight. Earlier this year, a list of questions was circulated among the diplomatic correspondents during a meet-the-press event featuring the US ambassador. The foreign minister allegedly wanted the local journalists to ask the envoy about the state of democracy, human rights issues, and electoral participation in his country. No proud patriotic citizen would like to be lectured on issues by a foreigner, of which the foreign lecturers are guilty. Fair enough. We can always point out the double standard in our overseas assessors. But such a genuinely nationalist stance became a source of amusement because of the mishandling of the media. Anyone with the slightest familiarity with the genre of political drama knows that this is not how you feed information to the press. These questions should not have come from the topmost position of a ministry. A junior-level officer with the right training could have briefed the journalists ahead of the event. I suggest the government give casual leave to its officers of information and external wings to watch the American drama series *House of Cards* or the Danish series *Borgen* to understand how spin-doctoring works. The purpose of a spin doctor is to craft a message, interpret speech, offhand remarks or writings of a political leader in a way to highlight its positive aspects or change the direction of the discourse to the desired goal. This is a well-established play in any political scene.

According to press reports, the decision to open an expatriate diplomacy wing to counter the anti-Bangladesh propaganda was

suggested by the parliamentary committee. This, I believe, should have been a confidential policy that should not have come out in the open to give wrong signals. This has further become an issue as our politicians and administrators have constantly transgressed their boundaries to mix up state affairs with those of the government. No wonder, the message has already been twisted by critics to create a public perception that this is being done to help the ruling party ahead of the election. The ground is fertile for such suspicion as we have seen many such examples. For instance, the sanction of some of our uniformed officials over their alleged violation of human rights is seen as a Western stick to size up the government’s eastward tilt. In response, it became immensely important for one such officer to shore up at a UN meeting in New York to change the public perception of travel restrictions. The officer now can use a spin doctor or a media adviser to pitch this information and change the discourse on sanctions.

But the problem with the government is that there are no consistent message centres. Too many people are airing too many ideas. When a government official publicly flatters the foreign delegate for their generosity and hospitality and secretly desires his media men to ask tough questions on his behalf, we get frustrated by the level of immaturity and inconsistency. To make things worse, there are some public comments which humiliate us before the wider audience. We all have heard of some “heavenly” remarks concerning inflation or cringed from the husband-wife analogy about our neighbouring state. In such cases, we need people who can do damage control. But for that, there needs to be a healthy practice of democracy within the party and accountability and transparency within the government offices.

Nobody can deny the power of words – how they shape our reality or change our perceptions. But unless words are backed up by clear, consistent, decisive actions, they can become a liability. Hiring writers will not solve anything if we do not sort out our national priorities. With so many international actors taking interest in the geopolitically significant delta of ours, we need to walk the walk and talk the talk. Thankfully, there are many playbooks to learn to walk and talk from, if we are to present ourselves as a democratic country. Once we know what we want for our country, we will be able to engage the right writers without making a public circus.

Glimpses into the life of a social worker and homemaker



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SYED MUNIR KHASRU

THE lady I am writing about was a silent social worker and an ardent homemaker. She was a graduate in social science who was married to a civil servant in the Pakistan era. While her husband rose to the highest level of bureaucracy, the power, prestige, and privileges that came along with it had no bearing on her as she remained the same simple, humble, unpretentious person.

Being a mother of two sons and living in an era where not many women were encouraged to have a career, she found meaning in doing things that would make others happy. From something as simple as remembering birthdays and pleasantly surprising people with handwritten personal notes, flowers, and gifts, to raising funds to buy blankets for the poor shivering on the footpaths during the winter, she touched lives and healed hearts. When others gave her gifts on her birthday, she would say with a smile, “I have enough sarees and clothes, give me money to buy for those who don’t have any.” She then used it to buy essentials for those who have no birthdays to celebrate.

She spent a significant portion of her life in the once heavenly neighbourhood of Ispahani Colony. The greenery and tranquillity of the colony seamlessly

to go to school, and its classes were held under the shade of a mango tree. Having read this feature, she contacted *Prothom Alo* and started mobilising funds for them to have a proper classroom. Her wish was fulfilled and a tin-shed room was constructed. Now, every year, textbooks are provided free of cost, and during Qurbani Eid, cows are sacrificed there so that poor people can eat meat at least once a year. Inspired by her deeds, I initiated a scholarship programme in



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blended with the personality of the lady who was equally soft and kind. The gentle breeze that traversed the landscape of this hidden treasure of an otherwise noisy and cluttered Dhaka found abode in the soul of a lady who was the wind beneath the wings for many. The poor children of the neighbourhood attended the school she had set up in the backyard of her home. During Ramadan, hundreds thronged her house for *zakat*.

Not having a career, and with her husband being an honest civil servant with a fixed income, she did not have much resources of her own. However, what she had, many with manifold resources did not – her endless compassion for the needy, her relentless pursuit to mobilise resources for the penniless, her ability to inspire the spirit of giving in others, and her unyielding commitment to do something for those who had none to look after them.

In one such instance, there was a school in Rangpur run by a grandfatherly figure (in Bangla it is called “Nana-Natir school”). The Bangla daily *Prothom Alo* carried a feature on this school, which was attended by those who could not afford

Dhaka University for needy students.

In another instance, there was this man with an amputated leg to whom she gave money to start a tea stall. The man not only ended up having a livelihood, but also successfully raised three children, all of whom are self-reliant today. Then there was a poor woman suffering from cancer, a widow with no family support, an orphan with no money to go to school – the list goes on, as did her tireless efforts to put smiles on people’s faces. She may not have had the endowment of a queen, but she had the indomitable will to support those who had none to look after them.

Within the circles of family and friends, she was much adored and loved for the same qualities. She treated people for who they were and not for their social status or material belongings. Her in-laws’ family loved and respected her no less, if not more, than her own family and relatives. Being a great cook, she generously distributed whatever came out of her kitchen. To my friends, she was the much beloved *Chachi* as she befriended them irrespective of their age. Her home was a popular social junction where love, affection, and food were plenty for friends and family.

In the end, she was a simple and pious lady with basic demands from life – to love and be loved, to give and be happy, to heal wounds and feel blessed, and be empowered by the divine blessings of the Creator, who decided on September 2, 2022 that it was time for her to rest under His kind shadow.

The lady was Ms Najma Khasru, who I have been privileged to have had as my mother and who left many footprints to follow. As she watches and smiles from the heavens above, I can hardly be grateful to the Almighty for having unleashed me into this world from the womb of the most sacred of places a soul could have yearned for. May she rest in eternal peace till God is kind enough to unite the son with the mother above the skies.

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CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Havana setting

5 Nautilus shape

11 Turkey neighbor

12 Esprit de corps

13 Diplomatic skill

14 Made amends

15 Caribou's kin

16 Muffin choice

17 Edinburgh natives

19 Kicker's aid

22 Leafy lunch

24 Ancient

26 Vaccine type

27 Ballet bend

28 Usher's place

30 Fists, in slang

31 Stadium cry

32 Like fresh

brownies

34 Keeness

35 Game caller

38 Toothbrush target

41 Fancy dance

42 Not nervous

43 Cruise stop

44 Ocean areas

45 Turn to slush

DOWN

1 Allude to

2 River of Russia

3 Programmer's punctuation

4 Little laborer

5 Stylish

6 Bleaching chemical

7 Magnetic metal

8 Operated

9 Hearty brew

10 Went first

16 Physique, slangily

18 Cry out

19 Hurl insults

20 Pennsylvania port

21 Peepers

22 Take wing

23 Diva's piece

25 Musical work

29 Printer's line

30 Game cube

33 Story meanies

34 Coup d'—

36 First name in scat

37 Took wing

38 Smidgen

39 Pigged out

40 Dem.'s foe

41 Smidgen

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

STEP SWISS
ONACCOUNTOF
RIP AND ORE
DESERT ONES
REACH PEST
SEEME
LYRE REENAL
OVAL ONSPEC
GOTHTOT INA
ONLITFACEOF
TEEMS LUCRE
BEEES

BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

SARGE WATCHES FOOD VIDEOS WHEN HE WORKS OUT?

IT GIVES HIM AN INCENTIVE TO LOSE WEIGHT SO HE CAN PUT IT BACK ON

GREG TAYLOR WALKER

10/2

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

HOW MANY TIMES HAVE I TOLD YOU TWO TO STOP BICKERING?

AROUND ELEVEN JILLION.

REALLY? THAT SEEMS LOW TO ME.

I THINK IT'S ABOUT AVERAGE, UNLESS...

...ARE YOU TALKING LIFETIME OR JUST TODAY?

OH, OKAY. THEN HE'S RIGHT.

JUST TODAY.