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Summer 2007

NYC Premier of *Deshantori* (The Migrant)

May 5, 2007
New York, NY

Drishtipat, NYBAP, and Adhunika successfully organized the screening of *Deshantori*, directed by Sujan Mahmud and Mridul Chowdhury, a very inspirational and educational event that prompted many to think about motivations for and effects of migration. Tickets for all 99 seats were sold out about two days prior to the film screening, which was held at Pioneer Theatre on the afternoon of Saturday, May 5th 2007.



The Pioneer Theater

As volunteers were helping with the setup, people started bustling in and gathering in the hallway from 3:30 p.m. onwards. Greetings were exchanged and everyone was enjoying the *adda* in a truly Bangladeshi style while they waited for the theatre doors to open. We promised no-show seats to a few people who arrived without purchasing tickets in advance and they patiently waited for everyone to be seated. We were able to ac-

commodate all of them due to some no-shows but also thanks to some volunteers who graciously gave up their seats as they had already seen the film.

The spectators seemed engrossed throughout this gripping film and were left with several ideas, questions and comments that they shared during the stimulating Q&A session. The moderator Hasan Ferdous, who works for an international organization and is a columnist for Bangladesh's newspaper Prothom Alo, began the discussion by asking people to take a moment to think back to the reasons behind their migration to the U.S., and to share some of their stories. The conversation eventually steered to contributing to Bangladesh as a migrant versus making a difference by living in the country.

The co-director, Mridul Chowdhury, was asked many questions about the process of making this film and the goals he had had in mind. His articulate responses were thought-provoking and inspiring. People shared their favorite aspects of the movie and also discussed how they thought the movie could have been made to be more effective. Mostly praises accompanied by a few criticisms made the discussion an extremely engaging one.

The evening ended with mouth-watering food served at Angon, a Bangladeshi restaurant in Manhattan. About 25 people joined Mridul for dinner and enjoyed some more insightful conversation with the director while socializing with the volunteers and other attendees.

The event was a successful one where three different Bangladeshi organizations collaborated with the common goal of creating awareness about migration. By showing this stirring film and providing a platform to discuss this crucial topic in today's world, Adhunika, Drishtipat and NYBAP were able to incite many to think about migration and its substantial impact on the political and economic development of Bangladesh.



A Call to the Middle

By Shamarukh Mohiuddin
April 28, 2007
Washington, DC

Bangladesh has come a remarkably long way from being perceived as the "basket case" that Henry Kissinger infamously termed it in the 1970s. Just this past decade we have seen stunning economic growth rates of around 5 percent—this in spite of the disruptions caused by continuous political instability.

The Growing Middle

Accompanied by this growth has been an expansion in the size of the middle class. What this means is that a larger portion of our national income is now

captured by people in the middle of the income distribution. In addition, the middle class has now become less dependent on the government and state enterprises for jobs and income.

Bangladesh's middle class accounts for about 10 percent of the country's population, still low compared to Pakistan's 18 percent and India's 30 percent, but growing steadily. According to one report, the percentage of poor people in Bangladesh has dropped from over 60 percent in the 1980s to about 47 percent in 2000s. Data on the actual size of the Bangladeshi middle class is sparse, but there is plenty of evidence suggesting its growth.



Window cleaners in Dhaka. Photo by Julien Mailler

A clinical analysis attributes the growth to greater dynamism in the services sector, stronger inflow of migrant remittances which incidentally dwarf foreign aid, and a move towards self-employment and entrepreneurship.

The visual transformation of Dhaka city over the last few years is telling in itself. During my visit to Dhaka last year, after almost a six year hiatus, I noticed how the city is replete with new restaurants, coffee shops, malls and new ways for the middle class to spend its cash.

Which way will the chicken bolt?

Five years ago, the opening of a brand new theme park, Fantasy Kingdom answered the prayers of urban kids with an urge to ride roller coasters and bumper cars. Anyone barely remembers "Shishu Park" where several of us have baby pictures. The opening of

Fantasy Kingdom also occasioned debates about the need for a shiny new theme park when so many problems continue to plague Bangladesh, and so many children still beg on the streets.

Yes, inequality in Bangladesh remains quite stark and most people still earn less than the entry fee charged at the new theme park. But the growth of the middle class should be seen as a boon for Bangladesh, if it can be managed in the right way. This is if the government cuts red tape, allows greater investment in the economy, collects taxes and uses them to make some smart investments to lift the poor.

However, regardless of the exhaustive list of things that the government could be doing with the golden economic egg, the chicken has already hatched. The question is which way the chicken will bolt. The growing middle class has started to participate more frequently in civil society matters, and is in a stronger position to influence political and economic management. But it is not yet clear whether this increased influence will be used to make demands for better governance, fairness, and transparency, and for far-reaching institutional and legal reforms.



Playing video games in Barisal. Photo by Julien Mailler

Some trends have been encouraging. There have already been greater demands by the middle class for stronger property rights, access to credit and policies to improve the investment climate. These demands, if met by the government, could enhance the pros-

perity of the middle class and increase the size of its economic pie.

But it is worth asking whether the middle class will engage in affecting the kinds of changes that will help the many. As their living standards rise along with their appetite for more automobiles, homes and consumer durables, will these middle income folks also demand better checks on political power and more investment in public goods such as education, health and rural roads?

On top of it all, will the middle class play fair itself? Would it pay its taxes? Would it abandon inveterate rent-seeking practices that serve to shut out the many at the expense of a few, e.g., bribing law enforcement officials, school headmasters, healthcare institutions or company officials?

Will the proverbial rising tide lift all boats?

I should hope that it will. My hope also is that the middle class will branch out in other directions toward which middle classes in other successful societies, Chile or India for example, have gone. I hope it will start making louder demands for ethnic and religious minority rights, equal opportunities in the workplace, better stewardship of the environment, and other things that voiceless, poor people in poor countries don't typically have the luxury to preoccupy themselves with.

We need the middle class not only to instigate meaningful and ambitious political reforms, to level the economic playing field for all Bangladeshis, but also to provide enlightened leadership in the management of future risks to Bangladesh. These could range from religious extremism to environmental destruction caused by global warming.

The growing Bangladeshi middle class can certainly rise to the occasion; it is my fervent hope that it will.



London and Toronto *Deshantori* Screenings

London

Drishtipat London had the unique privilege of screening *Deshantori*, a stunning docudrama by Mridul Chowdhury and Sujana Mahmud. Many of you will have heard of this film, the lucky few amongst you will even have seen it by now. Let me just say that it is about as powerful a statement as you are likely to see on the state of contemporary Bangladesh. As the trailer promises, it will make you laugh, it will make you cry, it will make you think, and it will leave you moved and inspired.



Deshantori tells the true story of a group of Bangladeshi migrants who left home in an attempt to reach Spain via the illegal people-trafficking networks of North Africa. It is a harrowing depiction of their sufferings as they tried to make their way across the Sahara desert, crisscrossing the sands of Mali, Morocco and Algeria. Having braved heat and dust, thirst and hunger, they get on a boat to cross the Mediterranean, only for it to break down in the middle of the sea, where they float adrift for many days without food or water. As the death toll mounts for both African and Bangladeshi, the film comes face-to-face with the final extremity of the human condition.

This story made headlines in Bangladesh when it first came to light several years ago. Mridul Chowdhury starts his filmmaker's quest in the

town of Dohar, where he tracks down survivors of that terrible journey. The film is intercut with their interviews, their story in their own words.

However, the film contains much, much more. It is shot through with sharp (and frequently funny) commentary, where young people from all strata of society give their frank views on the state of the nation and what it is that is driving increasing numbers of Bangladeshis to leave their homeland for foreign shores. The frustrated *bekar jubok* from a humble background, the affluent private university student, the returning expat who has bucked the trend to give something back to Bangladesh - they all have their say. It is also enlivened by interviews with Dr Zafar Iqbal, a returnee himself, and the writer Anisul Huq, of *Goddyo-cartoon* fame, who picked up the story of the Spain migrants and turned it into a book. There is also a hilarious puppet drama! Technically too, *Deshantori* is an impressive piece of work for a debutant filmmaker. The script grips the audience for the entire duration, the editing is top-notch, and the subtitles are flawless.

At its core, it is the human story that matters - a story of unbelievable courage and survival - and it left not a few of the audience members in tears. The subsequent panel discussion and Q&A was lively and bore evidence of the strong reaction that the film had provoked amongst its viewers. The event was particularly well-attended by young second-generation British-Bengalis and it was heartening to see that the film had touched a chord within them too.

We would urge all of you - Bangladeshis at home and abroad - to get hold of a copy of *Deshantori* and to hold screenings in your own home for friends and family. Ask over a few of your buddies, break out the *jhalhuri* or popcorn, and settle down for an amazing ride. And let us know what you think!

Canada

The event concluded with, and rippled off to many achievements, including creating a stronger presence of Drishtipat in the Toronto community. By the time the night was over, there was a solidifying sense of hope and vision within the group - especially with the younger expatriates feeling the urge to wanting to also contribute change for the homelands. We received several enquiries on how people may get further involved with us - either by minimal volunteering, joining as a member or financially donating.

The turnout was much greater than our first event and approximately 135 people from various backgrounds attended this screening (in an expected capacity of 150). Viewers comprised of Bangladeshis and non-Bangladeshis - from Academic Integrities, workers in the Social work, Migration & Settlement area and post-secondary students. It was even cool to find Bengali parents who decided to drop in to catch up on the opportunity to enjoy 'a night out at the movies'!

Aside the entertainment aspects of the movie, the crowd was certainly provoked in bringing up debating discussions with Panelists after the screening. Mridul Chowdhury of course generously invited an open floor to share critics of the movie presented. Very modest soul he is! This definitely generated a lot of interesting feedback and different perspectives, considering the diverse public. Due to time constraints though (as time was lost prior to the start in troubleshooting an unforeseen technical conflict), the panel discussion was cut short. However, this did not bring the night to a halt as audience members stayed long after ten o'clock mingling with DP members and approaching panelists individually. It is on this note we like to comment on how a movie like *DESHANTORI* is an excellent tool used to encourage standpoints and create that introductory platform to digress off to complex issues. Eventually people



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like to grasp on to existing bases who do this sort of philanthropic work, i.e. Drishtipat. Many individuals struggle on how he/she can help if they are sitting in another part of the world and that is when Drishtipat is ideal in highlighting this response - which Mridul Chowdhury did during the event! We were of course very lucky to have him here! Thank you Mridul for your participation and we most certainly look forward to your next visit to Canada :)

Last but not least, without the committed members and volunteers we had we would have never been able to accomplish what we did.

Testing Time for Dhaka's Media

By Asif Saleh
June 3, 2007
New York, NY

As published in Himal Magazine

Bangladeshis have been looking to the press for leadership in a time of military rule, but the journalists have allowed themselves to be bullied by populism and cowed by fear of authority.

On 11 January, Bangladesh's interim government announced a state of emergency, and a censorship regime was imposed on the country's media. The following day, the editor of the English-language *The Daily Star*, Mahfuz Anam, declared: "We believe this move to be against the interest of democracy and of Bangladesh. Just as mistakes after mistakes have brought us to this stage of political crisis, the decision of gagging the press is nothing but a continuation of those mistaken decisions." A few days later, Anam wrote an angry editorial about receiving a phone call from an unknown caller giving him "press advice". He promised that his paper would never abdicate its responsibility under such

pressure.

Four months later, even after Bangladeshi journalists had been detained by the authorities for their writings, the *Daily Star* editorial of 8 May was much more conciliatory. On the subject of Chief Adviser Fakhruddin Ahmed, it read:

Actually, there has been no dearth of commitment on his part to press freedom since he took over, but there are certain parts of the government which didn't seem to act in sync with his ideas. Some organs of the government have proved intrusive, making telephone calls, inviting journalists to talk and giving them advice and directives including issuing media advisory and press notes curbing press freedom.

The contrast in the language used by these two editorials speaks volumes about the Bangladeshi media's precarious position over the last four months. On the one hand, the papers had to deal with the restrictions imposed upon them; on the other hand, they tried to play an activist role for potential political change. This, coupled with the lack of standards and consistency, as well as owners' economic interests, has meant that the media's position has come to be both difficult and confusing. But what has become obvious as the months have passed is an overzealousness to protect and support the current military-backed caretaker government. Given this, Bangladesh's vanguard Bangla and English-language press has lost its credibility - something that may prove costly in the long term.

To understand the current media situation in Bangladesh, one needs to look back to a bit of its recent history. The national press saw tremendous change during the late 1980s and early 1990s, when a number of new dailies stormed the marketplace, bringing with them a new emphasis on investigative reporting. As the middle class expanded and international 24-hour

news channels invaded the country, the taste for 'quality' in the news also grew. With Bangla dailies having saturated the market, each of the papers sought to capture specific niches, by developing individualised brands of partisan journalism. While this got dailies such as *Janakantha*, *Inquilab*, *Ittefaq* and *Jugantor* their huge readerships, they lost influence and the ability to shape public opinion due to their partisan positions.



Mahfuz Anam, Editor, Publisher, *The Daily Star*

Meanwhile, Bangladesh's rich and powerful began to invest heavily in the print media, with an eye towards increasing their influence in business negotiations. There were also a few promoters with larger visions for the industry, such as S M Ali and Mahfuz Anam of the *Daily Star*, and Naimul Islam Khan and Matiur Rahman of *Bhorer Kagoj*. Together, these individuals were responsible for the evolution of a 'modern' journalism in Bangladesh. Over the years, the *Daily Star* and *Prothom Alo* (the latter created when Matiur Rahman broke away from *Bhorer Kagoj* in 1998) gained stature for objective and non-partisan positioning on issues, and steadily grew to become collectively the highest-circulating papers in the country.

As more young Bangladeshis took up journalism as a profession, the quality of reporting continued to rise. With the demand for personnel in the electronic media, the competition for able journalists became intense. But while the size of the media sector increased



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exponentially over the past decade, it is safe to say that there was stagnation when it came to improving standards. What did and did not get published increasingly became something of a mystery, and such decisions lacked consistency. The freedom of the media came to be commonly regarded as an indulgence of the powerful, rather than as a right.

Self-censorship

That the Bangladeshi media would not be able to sustain pressure during times of crises was first predicted three years ago by journalist (and Himal Southasian contributing editor) Afsan Chowdhury. In his book *Media in Times of Crisis*, Chowdhury observed that powerful business houses had captured much of the print-media space, and highlighted the fact that journalism in Bangladesh had been significantly tied in with various other economic and business interests. The growth of the industry seemed not to have been matched by an increase in quality, as was the initial promise. Various systemic problems were not being addressed.

The trend Chowdhury described accelerated over the last three years, with Dhaka awash with black money, thanks to cronies of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) government. Partisan journalism flourished as never before and, reflecting the polarisation in politics, the motivation behind the publishing of any news story was questioned by suspicious observers. One was having to interpret the news based on the identity of the newspaper's owner. As the interim government's anti-corruption drive followed the imposition of the state of emergency in January this year, some of its frontline targets were the owners of these media houses. One after another, the owners of Janakantha, Jugantor, Jai Jai Din, Shomokal, Ittefaq and NTV came under the anti-corruption dragnet.

Although editors at these organisations

were left largely unharmed, the government's message had gone out loud and clear. In turn, editors imposed strict self-censorship. As such, there was very little media discussion of the government's disregard of due process, or its abuse of the judiciary to fit its needs. Instead, sensational headlines, often leaked by the government itself, took centre stage - for instance, stories of outlandish bank accounts belonging to Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina made the rounds, only to disappear after the chief of the National Board of Revenue issued a denial.

The vanguard sister publications Daily Star and Prothom Alo proved a disappointment, perhaps made cautious by their by now considerable financial stakes. As the regime of Khaleda Zia and the Awami League opposition of Sheikh Hasina continued their vainglorious stand off, Prothom Alo decidedly echoed the public sentiment that politics-as-usual had failed, but it went one step further to look towards the cantonments for a solution to the padlocked politics. Prothom Alo's usually reticent editor Matiur Rahman came live on television to implore the armed services to "save the nation" from chaos and anarchy. When a draconian emergency ordinance was promulgated on 12 January, curbing all fundamental rights, there was little protest from most of the papers. Prothom Alo proclaimed that because the political parties had failed, it was indeed time for the armed forces to play a much greater role.

Questionable inconsistencies

When the lines get blurred between a newspaper's job of disseminating objective news and its desire to act as a country's saviour, alternative views fail to make it from the editor's desk to the public. In the absence of a parliament and in the suspension of fundamental rights, the Bangladeshi media had the responsibility of emerging as the country's voices of reason and as a counter-balance to the government. Looking back over the past

about five months since the take over by the interim government, it is clear that a certain level of consistency was significantly lacking, particularly in demanding due process.

Barring a few exceptions, such as the New Age and the Shomokal, the editorials in most newspapers have generally not dared to cross a certain line when discussing government appointments, key policy decisions, arbitrary rule by ordinance, and the actions of the military.

The media coverage till date has been marked by cheerleading for any step taken by the military-backed caretaker government, without critical analysis. The regime's botched plan for the undemocratic exile of Begum Zia and Sheikh Hasina was not met by criticism from the media; indeed, the dailies generally cheered the move. When Begum Zia's son, Arafat Rahman, was taken into detention and released only after his mother reportedly agreed to leave the country, the sheer barbarity of abusing a mother's anguish for political purpose was not challenged by the leading papers, which greeted the matter with deafening silence.

By the end of February, Dhaka-based journalists began receiving regular phone calls with threatening 'press advice' for articles that were even remotely critical of the regime. The situation was far worse outside of Dhaka, where local journalists were being called "for tea" to military precincts. When a correspondent of the Daily Star, E A M Asaduzzaman Tipu, was arrested for offending the district commissioner in Nilphamari, editor Mahfuz Anam reacted with a surprisingly mild editorial. Although the paper deigned to publish strong opinion pieces from time to time, if only to maintain its position as the most high-profile newspaper in the country, it has come under an increasingly critical spotlight, often for news it was not publishing rather than for what it was.



The headlines of Daily Star's sister paper Prothom Alo have been even more tendentious, often seeming to be specifically timed to help the government's position. Rather conveniently, when the regime was attempting to exile the two begums, stories of infighting within the two parties, and lower-ranking leaders questioning the BNP and AL leaders, were given wide coverage. Prothom Alo and other newspapers took to publishing news from unnamed sources from inside the government, with no corroboration or follow up. Part of this timidity stemmed from the fact the interim government was enjoying huge popularity among the public, and no editor wanted to be the odd man out.

By responsibly critiquing the authorities, these news organisations would have been able to help the government help the people. While valiant young journalists spoke out against the suppression during an event to mark World Press Freedom Day on 3 May, newspaper coverage was devoted instead to the photo-op event set up by the US ambassador for the occasion. Previous charges of corruption against a sitting election commissioner, retired Brigadier Shakhawat Hossain, were published in only two newspapers. Similarly, news about the alleged torture and murder of indigenous leader Cholesh Richil, at an army camp in mid-March, received hardly any coverage in the national media, barring a few op-ed pieces. When Muhammad Zafar Iqbal, arguably the country's most popular columnist, wrote about Richil's demise in Prothom Alo, the column was blocked by his editor for nearly a month.

The citizens' journal

Ever since the interim government's popularity started its dive in April, the regime has been becoming increasingly touchy about criticism, and has clamped down harder on dissent. Doing so has been significantly complicated, however, due to relatively widespread urban access to the Inter-

net, which has made available international media sources and, importantly, Bangladeshi websites and blogs. Indeed, the Bangladeshi blog has come of age as a citizens' journal in the current environment. Even after the censorship of Himal Southasian's May issue (which was allowed to be distributed only after two Bangladesh-related stories were physically removed from the magazine), the magazine's website continues to be accessible within Bangladesh. It seems the authorities recognise the power of new media, as Daily Star journalist Tasneem Khalil was dramatically arrested shortly after midnight on 11 May for writings he had posted on his blog.



Himal Southasian censored May issue

Khalil, a human-rights consultant and an outspoken critic of military rule, had highlighted the case surrounding Cholesh Richil online; and had also written for the Daily Star's monthly magazine, Forum, about the link between Khaleda Zia's elder son, Tareque Rahman, and his appointees at the national intelligence service with militant outfits such as the International Khatme Nabuwat Movement. However, that issue of Forum was pulled off the stands by its editor, and was only reprinted without the article. Following

Khalil's arrest, an appeal from his wife went out to his e-mail contacts, and Bangladeshi bloggers sprang into action - printing the censored article, contacting international human-rights organisations and politicians, and generally spreading the word of the detention. Even after mainstream news websites in Bangladesh had blacked out reports of Khalil's arrest, his status was constantly updated on his blog. Within 24 hours, a worldwide campaign to free Khalil had sprung into action.

Daily Star editor Mahfuz Anam did subsequently go to the army camp where Khalil was being held, and it is partially due to his influence that Khalil was released after 23 hours. Nonetheless, Anam's considerable credibility was damaged by the meek press statement that he put out during the episode, in which he noted that he had been informed that Khalil's arrest had been due not to his work for the Daily Star, but to what he had posted on his website. Anam went on to baldly state that it was "because of the caretaker government's policy for the freedom of the media" that a release had been agreed upon.

By April, four months after his courageous commentary on press freedoms at the time of the military takeover, Anam seemed to have come full circle with his tepid statement on Khalil's release. This episode encapsulates the situation of the Bangladeshi media under military rule, in which the partisan press is cowed by strong-arm tactics, while the commercially powerful media seek to deprive the public (the very public that made them powerful) of its right to be informed. This has been coupled with a lack of daring to challenge the populist tide that carried the consuming classes in the initial months of the military regime. It would be prudent for the long-term health of the media, and of Bangladesh itself, if editors were to be steadfastly vocal about their freedom to print and publish as they see fit.



I'm Sorry, Choles Ritchil

By Naeem Mohaiemen
April 6, 2007
Dhaka, Bangladesh

As published in *The Daily Star*

I'm sorry, Choles Ritchil. I didn't believe the evidence of your body. I kept thinking the torture report was a hysterical invention. So much damage to one corpse, it seemed impossible. No, it is impossible. Isn't it? It must all be lies. Those human rights groups - we know they always exaggerate just to get foreign funding and create a bad image for Bangladesh.

I'm sorry, because I couldn't find the courage. We're all so invested in getting out of the AL-BNP strangle corridor and we're so euphoric that the godfathers are being arrested that we don't want to upset the process by drawing attention to your case. Must be an aberration; somebody got a little too enthusiastic. Anyway, let's move on. For heaven's sake, don't make a fuss.

I'm sorry, because I couldn't find tears. How easy it was to dismiss your face on that poster. You look nothing like me. You have what my classmates so crudely called "chinky eyes." No one in my family has ever married anyone who looks like you and even if we did, we would make sure you converted to our religion. You see, you don't really exist. This is a country for Bengalis, not anyone else. Now you realize that, slowly, surely.

I'm sorry, because I read Nirmalendu Goon's poem with a stony heart. Then I busied myself with translating it. E-mailing friends and asking, "What is Chuniya village?" Is Goon being sarcastic about March and "freedom?" Is "elegy" a better translation than "requiem?" Distracting myself with aesthetics - anything to blank out the

memory of those pictures.

I'm sorry, because when a blogger posted the report, somebody else complained about the gruesome picture. The picture was quietly removed to page 2. A nice disclaimer was added: "Warning: Graphic Photo." Anything to protect our delicate sensibilities. How inconsiderate of you to die with so many wounds.



Dead body of Choles Ritchil

I'm sorry, because I said to a Pahari friend the other day, "Welcome to *shadhin Bangla*," and she replied, "*Ami tho Bangali na*, how am I *shadhin*?" I laughed and dismissed her. Oh these people! They will never be satisfied. What do you want anyway? Land rights? Your Language? Parliament Seats? Ministries? Quotas? Autonomy? Come on, that was for us. That was 1969. It's 2007 now. Don't you remember what Sheikh Mujib said? "From today you are all Bengalis." And some of you are now dead Bengalis. That's equality.

I'm sorry, because I know how this will go down. There will be outrage. NGOs will issue memorandum. Bloggers will buzz. Newspapers will write. Thrithio Matra will debate pros and cons. Seminars will be cranked out. And always, some "hero" filmmaker will make a documentary and win awards. Then, just as quickly, we will forget. Amnesia is our gross national product.

I'm sorry, Choles Ritchil. You lived and died protecting the Adivasi people and Modhupur land you believed in. You were gentle and nonviolent, and we paid you back in a different coin.

I'm sorry, because I'm a citizen of a nation that after 36 years fails to see you as anything more than a nuisance. My class, ethnicity and religious privilege (and army family) gives me insurance to write these words. You don't have any such protection - naked to the world, to Eco Park, and to our vengeful fury.

But don't think you're an *agacha* on our national *boto brikkho*. When there are visiting dignitaries or sports events, your people are very useful. You sing, you dance, you wear exotic, colorful clothes. A readymade National Geographic tableau: "Hill People of CHT." "Gentle People of Modhupur Forest." Ah, the permutations are endless.



An activist poster

We want to keep all of you in a museum vitrine and bring you out on special occasions - when we need a dash of color. But please don't demand your rights. And don't even think of raising your voice. *Etho boro shahosh!* You see what happened to Choles. Don't make us be sorry again.

Naeem Mohaiemen wrote the chapter on ethnic minorities for ASK's 2003 Human Rights Report.



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Unholy Alliances, Part One: Media & Politics

Shumon Jahan
May 12, 2007
Dhaka, Bangladesh

The Axis of Media and Politics

Media players need content. They have a lot of “real estate” to fill, whether on paper, on air or on the internet. The more critical the content, the more eyeballs it will attract, which then can be converted into advertisement dollars. And nothing attracts attention like crisis - it is an evolutionary mechanism of all life. So, “crisis content” is King! The more, the better. William Randolph Hearst, the media mogul of another era, created crisis content when there was none. Let us not debate whether Rupert Murdoch of our era does the same, but at least stipulate that crisis is very good for the media business. A market condition absent of fear and confusion, although very good for mankind, is not so for Media.



Political players create News. They pose to influence others. And this posing needs attention. Crisis, whether real or imaginary, is also good for their business. They are often the secret sources of insider information of their opponents’ activities that provide content for Media.

It is difficult to consume vast amount of information on a daily basis for the average Media producer, then form intelligent opinions and finally write a piece to “feed the beast”. They are always working on a deadline. Once again, political players make it easier by pointing out what’s important and

what’s not. This helps Media form opinions that is then transmitted to the masses.

News: Information without Intelligence

News by definition is anything that is out of the ordinary, the “new” thing. Creators of News have no incentive to create intelligent information that shows patterns because patterns reduce content. Pattern recognition is an act of intelligence. A simple parallel may be that to a person who knows the concept of “chair,” every instance of “chair” is not anything new. Not so for someone who has no concept of “chair.” To him/her every instance of a chair is “News.”

Violence without Context

It is very disturbing to watch news about Bangladesh. It’s one crisis after another, whether political, economical or environmental. The most frequent amongst these three, is of political unrest. Expatriates probably receive the worst of these images. This impresses that violence is random, everyone is in danger and it is not safe for anyone to live in Dhaka (“*kono nirapot’ ta na!*”).

The majority of the time, political violence is not random and there are no innocent bystanders. It’s a waste of energy for any political party to use violence randomly. Targets, whether people or institutions, are selected for maximum effect. The images of such violence may seem chaotic and ruled by an unconscious mob, but a few amongst the mass are the leaders of the violence and know exactly what they are doing.

Second, after an instance of violence, we are told X number of people died. This is regrettable. But what we are not told is that these people were at that place and time to *do* violence. They were part of the mob. Usually a big *michhil* (protest) that moves through the streets is preceded by

party members on motorbikes that clear the road ahead. Usually there are plenty opportunities to close up shop and take detours.



Yes, there are some losers in this sad state of affairs. It is usually the lower class. They usually don’t have a choice to move and there is no one to protest on their behalf. So, political parties know that they can be targeted to create powerful images for the Media without any consequence. Not to mention, logistically, it’s easier to alight make-shift bamboo and wooden structures than those of brick and mortar.

Culture of Fear and Intimidation

Transmission of information of violent political acts by this or that party acts to spread power and influence of that party. Media, in the name of providing information, increase their power. This technique is used elsewhere without the noble cause of journalism. It is an interrogation technique.

Torture in itself is not a good technique to get reliable information. One, if the torturers aren’t professionally trained, the victim very quickly realizes the kind of information needed to stop the pain and will provide it. Second, it takes a lot of time and energy both physical and emotional to go through the logistics of it. And third, one has to maintain a cadre of very unsavory characters who can carry these acts out without any hesitation and perhaps even a touch of pleasure. These folks are not easy to manage on a daily basis.



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However, if one among a group of ten is tortured and the suffering communicated whether the sound of their screams or images of the acts, the other ten will begin to talk without as much as a pin prick. Some even use photo albums to keep the record... but why use a photo album when one has the modern Media as a willing accomplice?

An organized attack on a mosque, let's say, whether *Babri* or *Ahmadiyya*, is crisis content. But when it is broadcasted, it becomes a tool of intimidation. The party that organized the attack does not have to spend resources to do it again in another place because the Media publicized their ability in one instance. So, only a party of few need be sent to the next one to get cooperation.

Violence without Consequence

A disturbing pattern begins to take shape. Due to a quid pro quo relationship between Media and Politics, there seems to be no consequence for criminals who act out publicly. The unblinking eye of the Media is ever present at all political events. They record public crimes but do not show the consequences as prominently. All public crimes are not prosecuted, but in the minority of instances that they are, it is not given as much attention as the initial violence. Resolution or justice is not crisis content and therefore is not news.



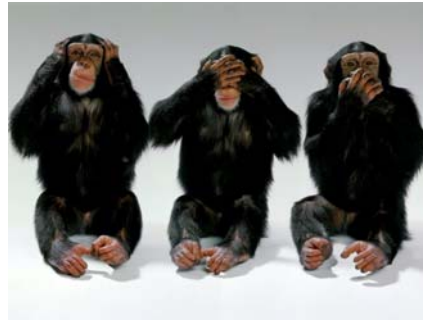
Politics and Media in Bangladesh (and elsewhere) are the manufacturers and the distributors of fear via the vehicle of News. It does not harm the body but it kills the spirit. To be hopeful

about the future seems naïve, perhaps even childish. But what if the Media publicized justice more than crimes? Wouldn't future criminals hesitate before acting? Alas, this would be a deterrent scenario. After all, what would fill the News?!

See no evil, Hear no evil, Speak no evil

Is there nothing we can do? (This is not a "News" article, so...) Yes, there is.

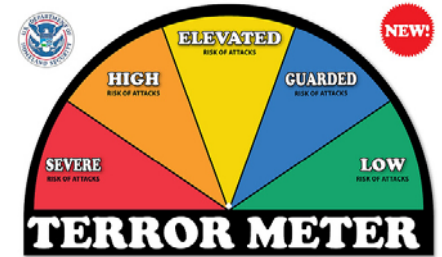
Less critical minds accept that only monkeys do not see, hear or speak evil because at one time or another they have seen varying renditions of three monkeys doing (or not doing) just that. But critical minds must ask, "Why monkeys?!" Surely we are not monkeys and should not do as they are.



This powerful image disrupts our intelligent tendency and promotes our evolutionary one. As animals, we want to share crisis information with one another in the hopes of warning others and perhaps resolving it for the longevity of the species. But when that warning is constant and there is no resolution, then that crisis information becomes a poison itself that infects the mind from acting intelligently.

The world, as represented by the Media and politicians, is not the real world. Crisis, the real kind, represents perhaps less than 0.1%, or even less, of all human activity. Yet, it is the majority of all information shared. A constant doom and gloom scenario is

commonplace and perhaps the fad of our era. Most of us know this, but rarely does anyone consciously do anything about it. Yes, that monkey image creates an unconscious disruption, but I hope it's not so anymore now that it has been pointed out.



Both the Media and the political players are trapped institutionally because it is in the nature of these institutions to do as they do. Even a good person entering either of these fields will eventually succumb to the institutional pressures. However, the prognosis is not so bleak because they both share an Achilles' heel. They both need attention. Without attention, Media can't move content that is accompanied by advertisements and the politician's words aren't heard and therefore can't influence anyone.

So, are you part of that captive audience? Can you turn off CNN?

Here is where critical minds are asked to play their role. I do not claim to be right, I just want you to reconsider exactly how news and politics affects your daily life and whether it is helpful for you to pay attention to any of it or even be reactive to it. You need to act. Do not bother to even battle them. To engage them is to be infected by their death culture. What you must do is *create*. To be a force of life! It is more powerful than any defense you can surmount. This is creative destruction. It is the only weapon we have against the uncivilized that have no understanding of our humanity or life.



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A Sweater for a Smile

Winter 2007
Toronto, ON

Winter can be a fun season for some Drishtipat members in Canada, but for many who live back in Bangladesh, it can be a very difficult time of the year. The recent cold wave that hit the northern region of Bangladesh brought temperatures plunging lower than those in Toronto!

In response to this extremely cold weather in Bangladesh, Drishtipat Canada along with Sumaiya Sharmeen from the University of Toronto organized an immediate online fundraiser in an effort to help as many people as possible in Bangladesh.



Facts to consider:

- The average winter temperature in Northern Bangladesh is below 10 degree Celsius
- Of the 7 million children living on the streets and in villages of Bangladesh, 84% of them do not have winter clothing (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2003)
- The official number of deaths caused by the recent cold wave is over 110 people since 1st December, 2006

Drishtipat Canada would like to thank all the generous donors who came forward immediately and helped save hundreds of lives that were at risk because of the extreme temperatures hitting northern Bangladesh. Thank you for your support, and for bringing warmth and smiles to so many people. Our goal was to collect C\$1000, and we eventually raised C\$1,246.00.

Funds raised through this campaign was used to save hundreds of lives in Jessore, Kurigram and Parila (a village in greater Rajshahi), where the extreme winter temperatures had made it close to impossible to survive given the living conditions. The raised funds were used to provide winter clothes and blankets for the affected people in these areas. Priority was given to children and the elderly while donating winter clothes and blankets. This

project will potentially be extended next winter by raising funds to build makeshift winter shelters for the homeless.



- 100% of the money raised was spent on buying sweaters and blankets. Since we conducted this campaign through personal contacts, there were no administrative costs.
- The sweaters and blankets purchased were of good quality, and were donated in-person at areas affected by the cold wave.
- This project was conducted as a continuation of the 'A Sweater for a Smile' campaign organized by the University of Toronto Bangladeshi Students Association.

About Drishtipat

Drishtipat is an internet-based, non-profit, non-political expatriate Bangladeshi organization committed to safeguarding every individual's basic democratic rights, including freedom of expression, and is opposed to any and all kinds of human rights abuses in Bangladesh. We are based in the United States, and our active membership extends across the globe. Drishtipat has chapters in New York, Chicago, Washington DC, Boston, Virginia, London, Australia, and Canada that have undertaken numerous campaigns since the organization's inception in 2001. Our web-based approach achieves maximum outreach and provides a cost-effective vehicle for coordination.

From its inception, Drishtipat has successfully completed several campaigns and many petitions and appeals, including: the Women of 1971 Campaign, the Arsenic Project Campaign, the Tipu Sultan Campaign, the Saving Bhubodoho project, Garments Workers Rights campaign, a project for the rehabilitation of paralyzed people, and many others. Drishtipat's success stems from the compassion of people who have come forward to support these humanitarian efforts. Drishtipat thanks our current and past supporters for their interest and involvement and is always in search of new members and supporters.

Contact info@drishtipat.org for more information on all events, to get involved, hear, speak out, or help.



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