

Faces of reality

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Ghazi Salahuddin

While the focus now must rest on the American elections, our abiding interest lies in the choices we make in the realm of our daily lives. It is true that America, as the sole superpower, casts a shadow across the globe, affecting to some extent the drift of events in many countries. And we, in Pakistan, tend to be more dependent on the wishes and whims of Uncle Sam. But we and other countries which may have a stake in decisions that are made in Washington DC have no vote in the elections being held today. We have had no vote, in the true sense of the exercise, in our own country. Not even when we have the freedom of spending a few moments in a covered booth at irregular intervals. That may be one reason why we have not learnt to look at our own state of affairs and options in a critical and objective manner.

It is this enterprise, that of interpreting the existing situation and speculating about the direction in which we are moving, which keeps us so busy — more emotionally than intellectually. Somehow, this concern has reached epidemic proportions at this time. Every social encounter is animated by fears about the future of our polity. Even those who have no interest in politics seem constrained to mournfully deliberate on such subjects as the economy and its impact on their own prospects or the Talibanisation of the Pakistani society and its impact on their lives and aspirations. You do find some individuals who disapprove of this steaming surge in pessimism. But they too have to concede that Pakistan is seriously ill. We have to do something quickly and resolutely to improve the health of the country.

Irrespective of the quality and the level of anxiety that you encounter, it becomes very necessary to look at the actual state of the affairs. People do need to know the facts and the substances of what is happening to the country. They argue that perception, supposedly generated by the media, becomes more important than reality. In this context, the message from the powers that be is that the picture of gloom and doom portrayed by the newspapers is not accurate. What this means is that the opinions and impressions presented by columnists, commentators and editorial-writers are generally biased and do not accurately reflect the situation on the ground. This would also imply that with a more cheerful and supportive coverage in the newspapers, the morale of the people would improve and the policies of the government would be better appreciated.

As a newspaper columnist, who has also been a reporter and an editor in the past, I think a lot about this matter. Indeed, I have to constantly refer to the debasement of the

entire media as a result of the official control of the electronic media. But a careful look at what the newspapers are doing is frequently prompted by seminar and workshops on related subjects and by criticism that is levelled by high priests of the establishment. As a journalist, I often find myself in a position to defend the print media against stringent censure by concerned citizens. It is very true that like the rulers, many ordinary people are very unhappy with how the newspapers are doing their job, though for very different reasons.

Unfortunately, this antipathy towards newspapers seems quite valid. It is easy to see that the level of professionalism in the print media is not high and it appears to be declining. There seems very little concern on the part of the editors and the publishers to

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set things right in an institutional manner. There is very little evidence that the average newsman — or newsperson, to be gender sensitive — gets the training and advice that is essential to do the job. We know about the dispute that relates to the establishment of a press council. But there is also no affirmation of a code of conduct on a voluntary basis. There are, to be sure, sound reasons for the prevalence of this sorry state of affairs in the print media and this is not the occasion to go into that.

However, this observation does not vindicate the media managers of the government. Far from it. Because if the newspapers begin to do their job well, with a sense of professional and social commitment, the picture that would emerge would be immensely more disquieting. Whether we deserve that kind of a shock therapy is another matter. Yet the reality, if it is to be portrayed in the human context that is the imperative of honest journalism, is fearfully depressing. Consider the

small paragraph that is given to the story of a man who committed suicide by jumping from *Minar-i-Pakistan* in comparison to acres of space dutifully devoted to the oft-repeated remarks made by the chief executive or the president on such issues as Kashmir and national defence.

We know about that trite definition of what is news. Still, dog bites a man every day in our newspapers when you see speeches and statements given more prominence than events and incidents. The stories of the common people, if only in the mirror of such drastic and desperate measures as a suicide, are generally not told. Events like jail riots are often not adequately covered and not in a manner to expose the factors which may have contributed to an explosive situation. Stories of crime, sometimes unbelievably gruesome, are also dealt with in a casual manner. After all, something terrible must be happening to the individuals who are involved in these crimes and this must reflect the state of the society in which they live.

When I have to explain these lapses, I suggest that perhaps newspapers are discouraged from exploring the facts because their reports and revelations do not have an immediate impact. There is no institutional response and those in authority are simply not bothered. For example, what happens when there is a criminal negligence in the management of a cricket match? Nothing. Nobody resigns or accepts responsibility. On the other hand, the next match is a greater disaster, in spite of the supreme leadership that is provided to the gentleman's game. Such instances abound. The authorities should be grateful to the newspapers that they are not able to highlight the true meaning and implications of such failures. Every window that is provided by an event — whether it is a murder, a suicide, a bank default, a ghost school, or a jail riot — would open on a vista of injustice, misery and devastation.

We hear a lot about the freedom of the press. It is true that the government does not interfere with the working of the newspapers and this may be remarkable at a time when the military is at the helm. But I do not know how the verbatim conversation of any gathering of the intelligentsia can be reported in a newspaper. What I hear every day, in parties that are also attended by senior officials, is absolutely depressing. The newspapers, for whatever reasons, are not faithfully recording these things. Some times, you only have cold statistics. We are told that poverty has risen at an alarming pace and now more than 30% of the population may be living below the poverty line. Think of the actual human being who have to suffer this fate, each individual being a separate and moving story. Obviously, the newspapers have not told the entire story and at least the rulers should not be complaining about it.