

The Press — its role in economic development

Journalism

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Addressing editors, senior journalists and columnists for whom she had hosted an Iftar-dinner at the Prime Minister's House, Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto said the other day that pen was a sacred trust and urged that it should be used for nation-building task. "The Press today is completely free and there is no restriction, whatsoever, on freedom to write and speak," she added. However, she emphasised: "Our age is unique because propaganda is resorted to and belived in. But the psychological warfare in former Soviet Union and Germany and other areas of the globe, during the 20th century had proved that victories based on sheer propaganda were trainstory and their defeat was permanent. Truth can be eclipsed for a while but ultimately it has to overcome the artificial phase and prevail".

"It is unfortunate," the Prime Minister further said, "that most of the time and space of our media is wasted in flashing on the confrontation resorted to by the Opposition in the legislature. That is why our Press cannot duly project the economic achievements made by the present government in rescuing the national economy from the state of bankruptcy".

The Press is a powerful institution in a democratic country with a vital role in its socio-economic development. Lord Macaulay said: "The gallery in which the reporters sit has become the fourth estate of the realm". Thomas Jefferson, who drafted the American constitution, wrote: "Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate for a moment to prefer the latter".

In order to review the present state of the Press in Pakistan it will be quite pertinent to understand its past. In the pre-independence period of the present century, the Muslim cause in the overcharged Indian politics had gone by default in the absence of a strong and financially sound Muslim Press. There was no Muslim English daily worth the name, while the vernacular Muslim dailies survived mainly on the doles from the different quarters. DAWN, founded by Quaid-i-Azam made its debut in Delhi in 1942 with Pothan Joseph, a Christian, as its editor.

Here it would not be out of place to narrate a unhappy situation. We Muslims students at that time were frequently taunted by the Hindu students with the words: "You Muslims have at last brought out a good English daily, but edited by a non-Muslim. You could not even get a good Muslims editor." This was sufficient to goad us to devise an explanation which we ultimately did saying: "This Pothan Joseph is actually a Muslim and his real name is Pathan Yousaf. He had gone to UK for higher studies where he changed his name to Pothan Joseph." Of course, some of the well-meaning Hindu students appeared satisfied with this cooked up explanation.

The episode, however, clearly indicated the paucity of a Muslim journalist competent enough to take over as an editor of a good English daily. It was learnt that Quaid-i-Azam had offered to Arther Moore — the famous editor of Statesman who was then retiring to take over as editor of DAWN. But the latter politely expressed his inability as he was too tired after his long career of journalism and wanted to take the much merited rest. It may not be without interest to point out that Statesman had already started a weekly column penned by 'Shaheed', supporting the Muslim cause of Pakistan. That column was excellently written and we Muslim students would eagerly wait for its appearance and would even discuss it with great relish.

Soon after Pakistan appeared on the map of world, Quaid-i-Azam resigned as President of the Muslim League since he considered it politically wrong to combine the office of the Head of the State with the office of the head of a political party. After his early sad demise, when Prime Minister Nawabzada Liaquat Ali Khan became also the President of the Muslim League, the party was split into factions. The Muslim League after that became the king's party — a party of the government, for the government and by the government, irrespective of the fact who was the Prime Minister of Pakistan or for that matter any of its rulers. This political metamorphosis in the country resulted in "politicizing" of the Press in Pakistan. It goes to the credit of THE PAKISTAN TIMES that before it was "nationalised" by Field

Marshall Ayub Khan in 1959 the TIME magazine had described it as the best edited newspaper in Asia. Not only that, THE PAKISTAN TIMES had become the nursery for bringing up journalists in Pakistan. At present most of journalists in the country were born and bred as journalists in this newspaper.

With the imposition of long bouts of martial law in Pakistan, freedom of the Press was killed, professional journalism was crushed and a breed of journalists was created who represented triumph of money over mind. The Press itself generally appeared losing its mission and developing a tendency to become a big business. Its raison d'etre of informing, educating and entertaining the readers was mainly geared to increasing the circulation and attracting the advertisement. It is true that the Press cannot succeed in its mission if it is not a business success, but in an undeveloped country like Pakistan, the Press cannot afford to involve itself too much in politics at the cost of genuine economic development.

However the Press in Pakistan at present generally presents a sad spectacle of having become a statements' gazette. It reminds one of the words of Samuel Taylor Coleridge in his famous poem 'The Ancient Mariner': "Water, water everywhere, but not a drop to drink". The Press in Pakistan is by far full of news but there are hardly a few real news indeed. This scribe had read somewhere that a good news editor is one who knows what is NOT to be published. But in our Press every politician, no matter what is his political stature, is made to survive through his statements daily. Of course, in this process the first casualty is the TRUTH and for the poor reader the truth is being constantly crucified whose confusion is worse confounded. This is not journalism in the least. What a fall of the Press in Pakistan, my country men! The educator himself needs to be educated in my dear country. Because our national Press is "Over-politicized," it is suffering from paucity of genuine economic journalism. Economics was originally called political economy. That defined the scope

and significance of the subject very correctly. Economics and politics are inseparable; rather they are two faces of the same coin. The economic manifesto of a political party is nothing but its political programme. Internationally, politics has become the hand-maiden of economics. Foreign policy of a country is mainly based on its economic interests. A glance through any good foreign newspaper would reveal it full of economic news and views. A good economics is good politics, the performance of any government should be judged by its economic programme and then the implementations of that programme.

The development role of the Press is to motivate, inform, educate and change the behaviour of the masses. In order to play this role effectively, it is imperative that the independence of the Press is jealously guarded. Only an independent Press can deliver the goods. This is what Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto had done in the first tenure of her government and is carrying on with this noble tradition during her present tenure. The Press is now so much free that the Prime Minister has herself become victim of the trial by the Press.

The motivational role of the Press is to serve the needs of the economic policy of the government designed in the larger interest of the economic development of the country and implemented for the greatest good of the greatest number. The information role depends on the reality that the message of economic development can be verified locally. The utilisation of the potential of the educational role demands dedicated journalists well academically qualified and technically equipped to project the development programmes objectively. Such journalists are, however, always short in supply in Pakistan. The ability of the Press to reach the masses for influencing their behaviour depends on the rate of literacy which is extremely low in our country. All these indicators point out that the role of the Press in Pakistan in economic development though limited should be extensively enlarged. The Press should accept this challenge of change to produce positive results.