



Challenges to Press Freedom in Bangladesh

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Abstract- The present research aims to explore the situation of Press Freedom in Bangladesh. Theoretical framework of the study is based on hierarchical model of Reese and Shoemaker (2007) regarding organizational influences on media. Qualitative research technique was applied to conduct the study. Ten Journalists from Bangladesh were interviewed to create a better understanding of the influence of pressure groups on situation of press freedom. The analysis of the interviews showed that the journalists were facing many problems from the following pressure groups such as advertisers, criminal mafia, establishment, government, media ownership, political pressure, religious extremists group, self-censorship, society, press laws and prosecution. These factor created enough challenges for the free press in Bangladesh.

Keywords: Freedom of Press, Bangladesh, qualitative research, self-censorship, media laws and censorships

I. INTRODUCTION

The freedom of expression means a person has liberty to express his opinion without any control by the government and political binding (Dicey, 1915; Lieberman, 1953 & Hachten, 2005). Freedom of expression is one of the important issue among developing and developed world. Most of the countries complain about poor situation of press freedom. In developing countries such as Pakistan, India and Bangladesh the situation of press freedom is not satisfactory. Particularly, it was noted that there were lot of challenges in the context of press freedom in Bangladesh. There were political and governmental pressures on press freedom (TJ, 2013). However, the constitution of Bangladesh provided the right of press freedom in the country under the article 39(1). Practically, the government hardly tolerated oppositional media groups and their criticism. Comparatively, print media in Bangladesh was more liberal than electronic broadcasts. The financial interests of the media owners also restricted freedom of press in the country (Islam, 2009). Press council was established in 1974 in Bangladesh. The main objective of the council was to improve working environment for the journalists and create better opportunities for print media and news agencies. Moreover, to grow moral ethics for media professionals. Conversely, it was noted that press council did not take strong initiative to restrict state interferences in the affairs of media. Press served the interests of elites and the government. It can be concluded that Press council had not been successful to secure press freedom in different political regimes in Bangladesh (The Daily Bangladesh Observer, 2002). The previous studies observed that there were many factors which influenced press freedom in various democratic and authoritative governments (Harlow, 2011; Chen, 1998). However, the present research would be helpful to understanding the situation of press freedom in Bangladesh. The research was based on the views of the journalists in order to create a better understanding of the situation of press in Bangladesh.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Lowenstein (1970) argued that free press allowed complete independence and the people have right to criticize with minimal libel. However, Hallin and Mancini (2004) described many forms of restrictions on press freedom. The committee to protect journalists commented that Bangladesh was not a secure place for the journalists. A report mentioned that there were three journalists killed, 133 attacked and 11 arrested in 2005. Such incidents created many challenges for the free press in the country (CPJ, 2006). Huda and Azad (2015) stressed that journalist played vital role in the promotion of democracy, good governance, rule of law and maintenance of human right situation in the country. It was very important to address their problems and limitations. The journalists generally faced many problems such as job insecurity, unclear targets, time pressures and life threats.

Professional stress was a serious issue which affects the performance of the employees. They should be provided job security, better working environment and higher salaries for achieving quality journalism from them.

Adnan (2018) in his article, "Freedom of Press and Broadcasting Media in England and Bangladesh" commented that media played watchdog role in a democratic society and questioned the government regarding its performance. Press freedom index showed that England was at 38 position and Bangladesh was at 144 position. The reason for the difference between the grades of both countries' was due to their economic development, social structure and democratic system which was 300 years old for England.

Galthotra (2014) noted that Bangladesh government had made new broadcasting policy which was stricter in curbing freedom of press in the country. Such policies would help the government to control media in the country. The channels were not be allowed to broadcast any anti state programs and material. However, the definition of anti-state was not clear yet. Moreover, any programme could not criticize or mock law enforcing agencies and media could not on air any broadcast against friendly countries. However, colonial time period had been passed but still the situation of freedom of press was not ideal in Bangladesh. Ahmad (2015) pointed towards intolerant press government relations in the country. It was suggested that existing laws and regulations must be revised and Bangladesh governments must move towards liberal media that would consequently play their role to protect civil liberties in the country.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Ash (2011) was of the opinion that freedom of expression had much importance for self-fulfillment. Because of free press the society got aware of different perspective of life. A restrict media could not provide complete information to its viewers. As MacBride (1980) said, "The principle of freedom of expression is one that admits of no exceptions and that is applicable to the people all over the world by virtue of their human dignity." In this connection, Shoemaker and Reese (1996, 2007) provided 5 levels of hierarchical model regarding the influences on free press. This models discussed in detail the various factors which influenced the free working of press. For this study, the same model had been taken as the theoretical framework for the research. The present study would explore what were the factors which influenced the situation of press in Bangladesh. According to Reese (2007) there were certain elements which influenced the production of media content such as the journalist's biasness, media routines, organizational rules and regulations, extra media influences, ideological influences and professional values.

Research Questions

The following research questions were formulated for the study.

R.Q 1: What was the situation of Press Freedom in Bangladesh?

R.Q 2: What were the prominent factors influencing press freedom in Bangladesh?

IV. METHOD

Qualitative research design was employed in the present research. The in-depth interview was taken as the method to explore the phenomenon extensively. Personal opinion thus could be explained in detail by the various participants. The interview took place by taking into account ten participants from Bangladesh who were journalists and had at least 20 years of working in the media (Islam & Rehman, 2016). They had prior knowledge on the subject matter of freedom of press in Bangladesh, for which the study was conducted. After interviews, the data was transcribed by the researcher.

The grounded theory method of data analysis was utilized for interviews, and thus three step coding was done, i.e. open, axial and selective coding. The various inductive themes emerged after analysis and deductive ones were sidelined. In qualitative research, NVIVO 10 is used for data analysis and coding, which helped in transferring the data into themes.

V. FINDINGS

Since its independence, Bangladesh has been embroiled in controversy between political parties. As a result, all sectors are involved in politics and so is media. There are certain problems with media freedom including threats of murder and bribery etc. Many journalists were killed and tortured. At the same time, few fail to exercise their freedom in appropriate way as they misuse it. Most Informants think that Freedom is something that everyone wants. And when it comes to journalism, they believe that a journalist should have the freedom to express himself. Bangladeshi journalists say they do not get the

freedom they deserve. Most of them were of the opinion that unfortunately there are many reasons to say that we are not free to express. Some of the Informants were of the opinion that although entire freedom is nowhere in the world, but in Bangladesh this situation is even worst. In the military administration, the journalist used to receive many threatening phone calls and the situation has not changed even in democracy. Few had the impression that problems and obstacles existed everywhere in the world, Bangladesh is not the only country which is facing problems. The situation is much the same on every continent. All the Informants were of the opinion that there were many factors that contributed to the violation of media freedom in Bangladesh. The most important of them are discussed here.

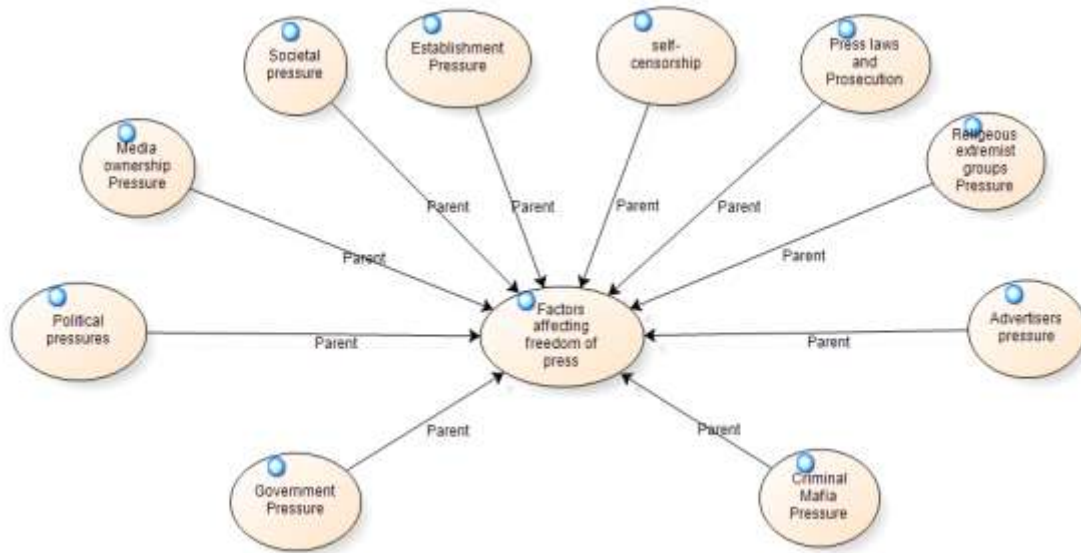


Figure 1.1: NVIVO Model relating to factors affecting freedom of press in Bangladesh

Advertiser Pressure

Corporate sector was one of the important factor which restricted press freedom. The financial interest of a media organization is heavily dependent on advertising provided by governments and the private sector. Most Informants think that everywhere in the world you will find the media with a status that corresponds to negative news related to advertisers. The situation is similar in Bangladesh. All Informants agreed that because of the economic interests of the media, the business sector has a great influence on the Bangladeshi media. The large business sector in the form of advertisers is suppressing media freedom. It is very difficult to cover the news against them. There is pressure from big business organizations. Informant said:

“One of the biggest challenges is to talk about the corporate sector”. (B 1)

Criminal Mafia Pressure

Another factor was criminal mafia pressure. There has been a dramatic increase in crime in Bangladesh during past few years. Journalists were threatened and several journalists had been killed since Bangladesh gained independence. The coverage of Mafia’s was a big challenge. The journalists were always at the risk of torture or even death if coverage went against them. Informant said:

“Criminals can attack you if you report them negatively, there are too many examples in our industry. Many were killed time and time again”(B 1)

Furthermore;

“One of my fellow journalists was badly beaten by a criminal gang while covering up the matter in 2012”. (B 4)

Many of the Informants have acknowledged that the criminal mafia is a challenge to free journalism in Bangladesh.

Pressures from Establishment

Powerful persons and institutions have been a threat to freedom of the media in Bangladesh. Bangladeshi establishment, whether civil or military, has damaged the press freedom in country.

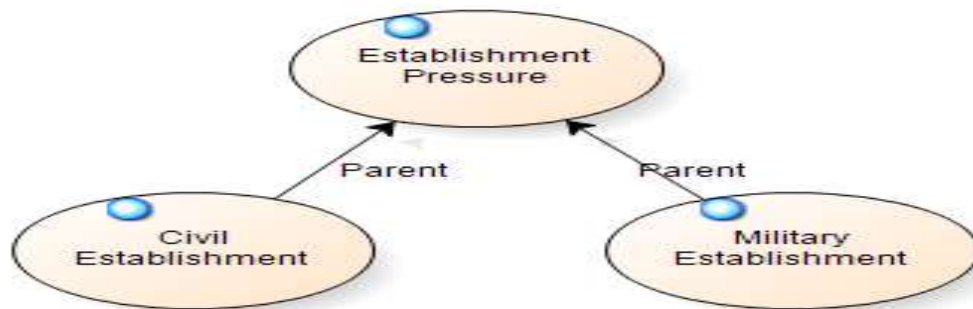


Figure 1.2 NVIVO Model relating to Establishment Pressure on freedom of press in Bangladesh
 Many journalists think that particularly the military establishment has inclined the content of press much in the country. A journalist said:

“Condemning the establishments is a big threat, few journalists have even sacrificed their lives for challenging them and writing against them”. (B 4)

Another Informant told:

“Journalists are often attacked by the state and non-government actors”. (B 1)

Some Informants said that they are afraid of the police and the military when they expose them in press. Many times reporters and anchors receive phone threats and physical abuse.

An Informant said:

"I was harassed by a police officer for writing against him" (B 2) Commenting on orders from the military base, Informant said:

"I have been working for newspapers for many years. Sometimes, we get a call to stop or change the news. This is the kind of freedom we have in Bangladesh". (B 5)

Government Pressure

Bangladesh has faced both forms of Government namely the Democratic and Military dictatorship. The majority of Informants argued that no matter what kind of Government was there, none of them wanted a free publisher. If someone criticizes the government, they may face consequences. Some Informants have acknowledged that the government is a serious threat, and if the media criticizes the government, it could create so many threats to journalists. Sometimes they use the police, sometimes they persecute us. Some Informants said the situation was worse during the dictatorship. Informant said:

“The journalism in Bangladesh has faced dictatorship eras both before and after independence. And you know a military ruler didn’t want anybody to print a news that is against him”. (B 4)

Many informants were of the opinion that the main reason for not giving the media a free hand was to avoid being criticized for it. That is why the government of Bangladesh does not want free publication. There are some journalists who forget their journalistic work and become the mouthpiece of the Government and have no threats. But those who do their work well have many threats. Most journalists felt that the government was punishing the media in various ways. Journalists are physically abused and may even be killed. Rebellion charges are likely to continue as well.

Some Informants have admitted that the government even sought to control the media in Bangladesh. It was once almost a government move to block Facebook for six hours by simply making excuses that it was disrupting students’ studies, but now because of protests the government is not blocking it. The government wants to completely control the media

Media Ownership Pressure

Media owners also violate media freedom. Most Informants were of the opinion that the owners or their representatives often directs the newsroom to broadcast or not to broadcast particular news stories. There can be many reasons for this disruption of media owners as shown in Figure 1.3. A journalist said:

“Freedom of press is being spoiled due to the effect of the Ideology and political affiliation of owners of different media organizations. At times, media ownerships try to influence the reporters and subeditors to play up and play down some news stories. For owners, the most important thing is their business, not journalism”. (B 3)

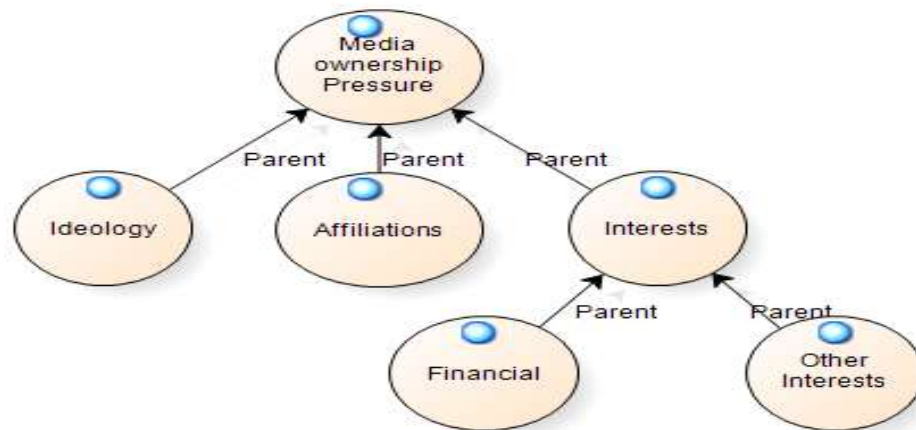


Figure 1.3: NVIVO Model relating to Media Ownership Pressure on freedom of press in Bangladesh
 Experts say that because most of the news media is owned by private owners, there is always the threat of dismissal from the job. Most Informants have acknowledged that improper media interference is a major obstacle to media freedom in Bangladesh. Most of the time your incharge will simply give you a policy line to cover specific issues. Thus it violates your freedom of expression.

Political Pressure

In Bangladesh, political parties are a major obstacle to media freedom. Political activists are also a major threat to press freedom. Some Informants told that politicians are powerful and have a direct relationship with ownership and editors. Sometimes, these politicians threats the reporters directly. Some Informants were of the opinion that political parties were trying to establish good relations with journalists and their owners. Although the current era is a time of media, and the media can be used to create a positive or negative image. They can offer gifts and other incentives for a better and better life. Many informants said that the pressure from the ruling political parties was greater than that of other political parties. So pressure from political parties exists in Bangladesh but its weight is less than other pressures.

Religious Extremists Group Pressure

In Bangladesh Muslims are in majority while Hindus are considered as major minority. Many of the respondents from Bangladesh were of the view that the extremist groups whether they are Hindus or Muslims pose greater threat for press freedom. In this regard, it can be asserted that the religious extremists groups are great threats not only for media but also for press freedom. These religious extremist groups do not feel afraid of giving threats to journalists or even providing harm to them. There are many incidents where journalists who refused to serve their interest were harmed by such religious extremist groups. Few respondents claim that the threats they receive from religious pressure groups are dangerous or lethal in real sense. According to them, these pressure groups force the journalists to publish content according to their own choice and if journalists publish ant news content which is against their interests then journalist have to bear the worst consequences of their actions. Due to this, many journalists lost their lives and they were brutally murdered by such religious extremist groups. In this regard, one of the informants opined as:

“I think that religious groups are the worst threat to press freedom in Bangladesh. Activists of different Islamist parties have attacked journalists and law-enforcers many times. Once even the national flag was burnt by JamaatIslami”. (B 5)

Most of the respondents from Bangladesh were of the view that religious extremist groups are one of the major factors that pose great difficulty to achieve freedom of press.

Press Laws and Prosecution

Press laws play a vital role in achieving freedom of press. As far as the implementation of laws is concerned, in Bangladesh press laws are not properly implemented and this is considered to be the major hindrance in achieving press freedom. Most of the respondents are of the view that the press laws of Bangladesh are sufficient to tackle the issues related to press fairly but in this regard their proper implementation is an issue. According to one of the respondents:

“I don’t think so that there is a need to create or amend the media laws but I think we need to implement the existing laws”. (B 6)

Some of the respondents were of the view that there are many instances where press laws are unfairly used by the government to pressurize media organizations and journalists. Many times government use press laws as a tool to discipline journalists or to pressurize them to publish or broadcast content in its favour. In this regard, the performance of courts is very slow to decide about the cases of defamation or

libel. Such cases of libel and defamation take years till they reach to some conclusion. This slow processing of courts not only creates problems for journalists but also for those who are defamed.

Self-Censorship

The main characteristic of news story is that it should be balanced and objective but due to certain reasons journalists play up or play down the news stories. The journalists who are in practice of playing up and playing down the content lack the quality of self-censorship. As far as the status of Bangladesh is concerned regarding self-censor-ship, here self-censorship is improving as journalists are afraid of press laws. The Digital Security Act is the main reason that the journalists of Bangladesh are forced to follow self-censorship. One of the respondents asserts regarding self-censorship as:

“Many have been arrested under the umbrella of DSA” (B 6)

Furthermore, the fear of being sacked from the service or the threat of being tortured by the government is one of the basic reasons that lead the journalists to adopt self censorship. Most of the respondents also assert that the journalists working in Bangladesh are mostly low paid as compared to the people working in other professions. So the journalists having low wages are not able to bear extreme pressure exerted by government and media owners. As a result they start following self-censorship. In addition to it, socialization of journalist in the environment of self-censorship also trains them to follow it earnestly.

Societal Pressure

Bangladesh is an Islamic country and the society of Bangladesh is also based on Islamic culture and values. As the society of some country exert great pressure on the practice of journalism, similar is the case with Bangladesh as well. In this regard, most of the respondents are of the view that due to societal pressure it is very difficult for journalists working in Bangladesh to cover stories based on sensitive issues. It is also very difficult for journalists to cover stories particularly related to sexual harassment as public does not want to read or listen to such content openly. As far as female journalists are concerned, their job is more difficult when they go out to cover some story in crowded places. Some of the respondents are of the opinion that the society of modern Bangladesh is now different from the past. They are of the view that in this modern time the societal pressure has been decreased and modern journalists do not have to bear much societal pressure.

VI. DISCUSSION

It can be concluded on the basis of above mentioned discussion that Bangladesh is ranked among the worst countries as it does not provide suitable environment for free and fair press. Journalists practicing in Bangladesh have to face many difficulties to perform their tasks freely. They work under many threats. There are many forces that pose hindrance in the way of free and fair press such as the pressures exerted by advertisers, ownership, criminals, political elites, religious extremist groups, establishment, society, press laws and self-censorship.

In Bangladesh military establishment poses great pressure on media organization especially when media deals with the news stories related to national organizations and national security. Mezzera&Sial (2010) also endorsed the same while saying that establishment exerts great influence on media especially when they are dealing stories related to national interest and national security. Furthermore, bureaucracy and corruption prevailing in the country is also a great barrier in the way of free and fair press. Corrupt bureaucrats continuously try to control journalists so that they should avoid covering stories of their malpractices. These bureaucrats try to remain at good terms with media for their positive coverage.

In addition to it, the influence of owners on journalists is another hindrance in the way of fair press. As far as the status of developing countries is concerned, this pressure is much greater. In Bangladesh most of the media organizations are controlled by private ownership. Journalists working in such organizations face the threat of job security. Owners can terminate if they find any journalist going against the policy of organization while covering and disseminating news. So in order to protect their jobs, journalists working in such organizations are bound to follow the rules of organization set by owners.

Media owners mainly pressurize their journalists due to several reasons. One of the basic reasons is their political association or affiliation with the elected members of government. Sometimes owners pressurize due to their economic interests. Political parties also exert influence on the media owners for their interests. Political influence on journalists is also a great hurdle in the way of free press. Political elites or political parties influence media usually when they want to avoid the news coverage against them or to build up their positive image in society.

Government tries to discipline journalists by implementing press laws. One of the respondents asserts that the laws related to defamation are great hurdle to achieve press freedom. As far as the developed countries are concerned, press laws are implemented for free and transparent functioning of media whereas in developing countries like Bangladesh press laws are used to restrict or control the media. The

respondent further argues by saying that there is no great difference in the press laws of India, Bangladesh and Pakistan this is why the condition of controlling media through press laws is also similar in the above mentioned countries. Many journalists, newspapers and news channels have been fined or penalized for covering stories against government and establishment.

Finally, the pressure of society on journalists and media organization is a great barrier in the way to achieve press freedom. In addition to it, self-censorship also poses great hindrance in the way of press freedom. Furthermore, the socialization of journalists in their organization, their ideological approach, their affiliation also poses great impact on the content they cover and disseminate.

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