

INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM IN BANGLADESH: ITS GROWTH AND ROLE IN SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

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***Abstract:** More than four decades of Journalism practice in Bangladesh has documented enormous number of investigative reports and last three decades have seen several competitions and prizes which encouraged investigative reporting in the country. Research question of how investigative journalism is contributing to the democratic process along with other aspects of development has been explored. The social responsibility by doing investigative reporting has also been investigated. Extensive literature survey has been conducted to gauge and analyze critically the historical as well as contemporary situation of investigative journalism in the country. The study conducted an opinion survey among the journalists to understand their present perception on investigative journalism as well as the practice in the profession exposing corruption and other anomalies.*

Review of recent studies and research so far conducted on investigative journalism has shown a potential contribution to strengthen democratic process and social responsibility aspect of the press. How investigative reporting may contribute to combat social injustice and establish rule of law in the country has been studied. Exposing corruption in local and national levels, irregularities and unlawful activities and corruption in service providing sectors, both government and nongovernment organizations—have been found analyzing the contents of investigative reports published in different print medium. Some of the private television channels in Bangladesh, are taking challenging stories in special programmes on exposing corruption of service sectors of both government and nongovernment set-ups.

***Keywords:** Investigative Journalism, Investigative Reporting, Corruption, Social Responsibility, Service sectors*

Introduction

Present Bangladesh, the then East Pakistan, before independence had experienced the exploitation, deprivation and inherited the tradition and legacy of the British colonial rule, as well as the rule of military and bureaucracy. Consequently, the use and sharing of information for good

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governance though felt but not recognized for long time. The right to information has been recognized as an important element of human rights by Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948. This right also symbolizes Article 19(2) of the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights, 1966, of which Bangladesh was a signatory. There was no law specifically recognizing people's right to information until the enactment of the Law in 2009. On the contrary, to the spirit of this law the Office Secrets Act, 1923 existed, expanding the tentacles with blanket coverage, depriving people's right and access to information (Rahman, 2006). Right to information may be identified as parallel or part of good governance.

Notable among principle areas for good governance are efficiency of public sector management, independence of judiciary, accountability, transparency, legitimacy of government and rule of law (Rahman, 1993). Governance would mean the ability of the state to manage and give direction to the overall development of the nation (Rahman, 1993). Good governance has four elements- transparency, accountability, predictability and participation. Transparency refers to availability of information to the general public and visibility about functioning of government setups. Right to information opens up government's records to public scrutiny, thereby arming citizens with a vital tool to inform them about what the government does and how effectively, thus making the government more accountable. Transparency in government organizations makes them to function more objectively thereby enhancing predictability. Information about functioning of government also enables citizens to participate in the governance process effectively (Right to Information, 2006).

Investigative journalism contributes to freedom of expression and freedom of information. In Bangladesh, right to information law has been enacted in 2009 which has a direct relation to the people in general. The role, media can play, as a watchdog, is inseparable in democracy. For this reason, initiative to strengthen investigative journalism throughout the world has been underscored, Bangladesh is no exception.

Obviously, ownership structure of newspaper and television has an impact on determining content and its output in Bangladesh. Developed countries'

situation for public service information is different. They can maintain diversity and pluralism in their contents. Our private TV channel owners think first of their business profit and pressure from government and political parties. (Rahman, 2012). TV channels and newspapers are free to express their views and editorials, but sometimes business motivation make them to go for self-regulations of media content.

Investigative Reporting

Usually news reporting shows an objective portrayal of events and occurrences where Investigative Reporting is prepared on objective facts and material. To get a realistic view it is a convincing approach to understand Investigative Reporting from the statement of Hunter and Hanson, “Investigative journalism involves exposing to the public matters that are concealed – either deliberately by someone in a position of power, or accidentally, behind a chaotic mass of facts and circumstances that obscure understanding ... Conventional news reporting aims to create an objective image of the world as it is. Investigative reporting uses objectively true material – that is, facts that any reasonable observer would agree are true – toward the subjective goal of reforming the world. That is not a license to lie in a good cause. It is a responsibility, to learn the truth so that the world can change.” (Hunter and Hanson, 2011, 8). It is also said that there are two species of Investigative Reporting, one is, reporting to expose corruption in public places and second is, solid community-interest reporting to lead to positive social action. Expressing field experience, journalist Saleem Samad (1990) posed a set of points for Investigative journalists while during Pakistan period 10,000 people had to evacuate from their inhabitants because of the construction of Karnafuli Dam and there by the consequences.

Social Responsibility Aspect of Investigative Report

Readers of newspapers and other audience of mass media have a perception of accepting investigative reporting as a public service activity. When corruptions and irregularities of service sectors of government and non-government are unearthed and exposed by reporters they become service to the society. William Gaines mentioned that investigative reporters are almost always appreciated by their readers but never more so than when they expose a widespread consumer fraud or abuse. He emphasized that consumers might

be abused by misleading advertising, unscrupulous salespeople, poor quality or unsafe merchandise, and overpricing. (Gaines, 1994, 149)

Consumer fraud and abuse becomes subject of Investigative reporting in Bangladesh as found in several reports. “Bottle water: only a packaging business” under this series there were five reports that won the prize. Stories like, “98 percent labeled pure- in reality – not bacteria free nor mineral enriched”, “Water bottled in a shoe factory”, “About 50 unauthorized bottling factories in the Capital” and son. Another series report headlined “Pharmaceutical cos-doctors nexus” got award in the contest under which “Fix of freebies”, “No control over drug price”, and “Fake drugs make inroads” were there. The second publication of TIB (2013) printed awarded reports of investigation like: “What are we eating!”, “Fraud by the name of Diagnostic Service”, “Current picture of health service in Khulna city”, “Fraud at Madhupur centering banks, sub-registrar’s office, land office”, “Stories of Vice Chancellors”, “Grafts reign supreme in import trade”, “Heaven of Corruption at Khulna Medical College Hospital”, “Justice delayed, justice denied”, “Business of unauthorized books in Khulna”, “Situation of 250-bed general hospital at Chandpur”, “National Housing Authority” and “Coaching-based education”. Most of these awarded reports were series stories and they were in-depth reports. Awarded items were mostly in the line of public service and of social commitment of reporters of different print media.

Growth of Investigative Journalism in Bangladesh

Investigative journalism started in this region of Bangladesh since 1950s much before the independence in 1971 of the country. Journalists of Bangladesh working in newspapers namely Mozammel Hoque of Daily Azad, Wahedul Hoque of Observer, Abdul Mannan of Ittefaque, Shahidul Alam, Siraj Uddin Hossain, Toab Khan of Sangbad, S. M. Ali participated in a seminar on Investigative Journalism in Lahore, Pakistan. The enthusiasm and motivation of such seminar perhaps escalated the spirit of investigative reporting and we find in 1960-62, a serialized report on “Nishidho Pallir Kahini”(Bengali)(“Story of Forbidden Quarters”) This revealed the horrified story of the sex-workers by Salimullah. Shahidul Haq published another serial on “Commission on Commission” that revealed the irregularities on the publication of Commission reports. Akter Uddin published “Theft of Wheat”, an investigative report and A. Z. M. Enayetullah Khan covered investigative reports like “Mr. Observer Goes to Report Railway”, “Mr. Observer Goes to

See the Condition of People in the Pool”, etc. They caught attention of the readers and popularity. (Khan and Raji, 1996)

After the independence of Bangladesh the first investigative report was published in the then highest circulated daily Ittefaque by Abed Khan revealing corruptions headlined “Open Secret”. Under “Open Secret” several stories on corruption made the government active to take decisions. Based on one of the reports, the then Director General of Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) was removed. It was well rumoured that in 1974 suddenly the “Open Secret” was being stopped for publication. After the change of regime “Open Secret” started publishing, but again it was stopped and the senior reporter Abed Khan was promoted and sent to editorial section. Fayez Ahmed also made a roar by publishing investigative report on Construction of President House (Banga Bhaban) without prior allocation of budget.

During last three decades many efforts of investigative journalism in the newspapers have been seen. Many correspondents of districts and countrysides have contributed in their newspapers reporting from their own regions on corruption and many other fields as investigative reports. Young reporters have earned name and owned prizes initiated by Philips Bangladesh mainly on investigative reports since 1985 (Bangla year 1392). Two different bodies were formed, the first one used to short-list the entries to the competition by individual marking by each member anonymously to the entries and the second committee members gave scores individually to select a winner for the prize of Taka 50,000 and certificate. In the whole process, the name of the reporter and the name of the paper was not mentioned until the final declaration of the award. The initiative by Philips Bangladesh had made an annual event and provoked interest to quality journalism in Bangladesh. Mozammel Hoque of *Dainik Bangla* received the prize in 1985 for his investigative report on ‘Books of Board – Full of Errors’. In the consecutive year, Monajat Uddin got the similar prize for his report ‘Kanshoner Mukh’, which was a mix of field study of remote village as well as investigation. In a personal note of Munajat Uddin (1992) mentioned in his book that a series report of 19 episodes on a village Kanshona of Ullapara *upazila* (sub-district) of Sirajganj district had been published in 1987 in the *Daily Sangbad*. The journalist went again after four years of publication of the report and made follow-up report in eight episodes and published in the same newspaper. After four years how the life of the villagers started changing socio-economically had been reflected in those report. The competition of the Philips continued for about ten years, which entailed many

journalists of the country to investigate and work seriously to report won prizes.

| Year | Recipient of Award | Newspaper | Topic |
|------|----------------------|------------------------|--|
| 1394 | Fazlul Bari | <i>Daily Janata</i> | 'Khash Jomir Halhakikat' (Situation of Vested Land) Investigative Report |
| 1395 | Abu Jafar Shamsuddin | <i>Daily Sangbad</i> | 'Boihashiker Parshochinta' Post-editorial |
| 1396 | Syed Abdal Ahmed | <i>Dainik Bangla</i> | 'Hotel Restorai ki Khachhi' (What are we eating at restaurants) Investigative Report |
| 1397 | Moajjem Hossain | <i>Dainik Bangla</i> | '23 thousand students of Dhaka University victims of session-jam' Investigative Report |
| 1398 | Khairul Anwar | <i>Dainik Bangla</i> | 'Chadabajder Douratma' Investigative Report |
| 1399 | Ashraf Kaiser | <i>Weekly Bichitra</i> | 'Business by the name of Trade Union' (Investigative Report) |

Journalists like Ahmed Nur-e Alam of *Dainik Bangla*, Nur Mohammad of *Daily Janakanth*, M. R. Reusso of *The Bangladesh Times*, Najeemuddin Mostan and Amir Khashru of *Daily Ittefaq*, Fazlul Bari of *Daily Purbokon*, Mizanur Rahman Khan of *Weekly Bichitra* and Shishir Sheel of *Daily Sangbad* became outstanding investigative reporters in Bangladesh. Although *the Dainik Bangla* and *Weekly Bichitra* were the production of Press Trust, controlled and financed by government, but a bunch of journalists of those two publications won awards year after year. *Weekly Bichitra* used to publish at least one story of investigation every week. It was one of the highest circulated magazines of the country.

Based on content analysis of daily newspapers in the 90s it has been found by two researchers, Riaz and Chowdhury, mentioned by Khan and Raji (1996, 28-29) that in one month 58 items were identified as of investigative reports. That contained a total of 1188.2 column inches (785 column inches of cities and national and 403 column inches of rural areas) and those were reported from 40 different cities topic based on national issues or cities and 18 came from rural areas on local issues. The English dailies concentrated on city issues, not any rural subject during the study period. The study also found that 77 percent investigative reports had been devoted on several aspects like business, economics, crime, police, social service and health. Not much investigative items appeared on politics or environment, although we often found reports on those areas. Considering the appearance of the investigative

reports in newspapers, the treatment of those items showed that most news treated with three columns or more and the items appeared in the first page showed their 30 percent covered in the first page itself. (pp. 30-31). The study analyzing appeared stories mentioned about the lacking of solid sources of investigation and reporting. Often those reports were based on the opinions and information of officials (p.31). Regarding sources a study by Riaz and Chowdhury (undated) analysed many investigative stories published in newspapers for their lack of specific sources.

Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) initiated competitions to encourage objective reporting on corruption and to enhance skills of reporters since 1997. TIB published a compilation of book of 13 selected investigative reports in 2005 and another book in 2013. The first book contained reports from 1997 to 2004 and the second book contained of 12 reports from 2006 and 2010. TIB attempted to help journalists to expose corruption and irregularities of different service sectors of government and non-government organizations. By these activities, TIB mentioned that the audience of mass media would be able to know corruption and irregularities that took place, their extensiveness and depth. TIB also thought that by those reports the concerned authorities would be addressed for remedies and could take necessary steps on corruptions and irregularities. (TIB, 2005 and 2013). Bangladesh Centre for Development, Journalism and Communication (BCDJC), a non-government organization (NGO) has been contributing financial and editorial support to encourage investigative reporting since 1994. This organization also conducted competition to award investigative reporters and published books to provide with trainings. Dhaka Reporters Unity (DRU), Crime Reporters Association, and Financial and Business Journalists Association conduct competitions separately on investigative and other areas of reporting. Most of these organizations get sponsorship of some business or corporate organizations for prize money.

Findings from interview of journalists

Table-1: Journalists' perception on Investigative Reports in Bangladesh

| Qualities | Excellent | Good | So-so | Not up-to the mark | Bad | Total |
|------------|-----------|------|-------|--------------------|-----|-------|
| Numbers | 5 | 22 | 45 | 29 | 9 | 110 |
| Percentage | 4.5 | 20 | 40.9 | 26.4 | 8.2 | 100 |

In the study conducted among 110 working journalists it has been found that about 41 percent respondents thought the situation of Investigative Reporting

was “so-so”; 26 percent thought “not up-to the mark” and 20 percent thought “good”. Regarding the state of investigative reporting in respect of print and electronic media in Bangladesh some journalists had stated that print journalism has advanced reasonable in this area, but a couple of television channels had been producing investigative reports, such as *Talash* of Independent TV, *Ekushey'r Chokh* of Ekushey TV, *Crime Watch* of BanglaVision, *Aparadh Sutra* of Shomoy TV, and *Crime Watch* of NTV. One of the respondents had observed as, “The number of investigative reports in print media is larger than in electronic media. The history of print media in our country is very long while the electronic media is relatively new and online journalism is a recent addition. So the news sector in newspaper houses is stronger than that of television channels, radios or online newspapers. Yet as a whole the number of investigative reports is not so high in either media.”

One of the respondents stated that print medium obliges the ‘off the record’ information by not publishing, on the contrary TV channels transmit often live and enjoy the privilege of revealing facts. Daily newspaper *Jugantor* had devoted a page on investigative reports named “Anushondhan” (Investigation) and *Prothom Alo* published frequent investigative items on several issues. A journalist thought that for many reporters three things, like evidence, money and time could not be managed at a time of investigation and those support were not also provided with in many media houses. “Political biasness of the journalists of both print and electronic media very often discourages them in making impartial and qualitative reporting in the arena of investigation”- a journalist stated emphatically. One of the respondents was critical about the integrity of journalists and raised that often a reporter started digging facts, achieving it and turned eyes by not publishing the report on getting personal benefits.

During last 20 years, journalists in a mixed reaction have outlined how Investigative Reporting has progressed in the country. The varied opinions were passed by them like: Previously journalists could not check facts and verify information, at present they can take help of technology and can improve investigation and the reporters cannot escape from obligation of reporting that made a positive change; before decades the reporters could not ascertain authentic sources and often wrote story on assumptions, but now are more based on facts; Investigative journalists gather so many ideas, but cannot bring them in light.... they cannot publish their reports because of their media houses conditions; scope and volume of investigative reports has

increased in the recent years, the media houses also showed interest to pursue investigative reporting; most investigative reports are the results of individual effort of reporters; in the past few years, many investigative reports were published by *Prothom Alo*, *Ittefaq*, *Jugantor*, *Daily Star*, and *Samokal* on extremist activities, bank scam, service sector etc; among many media houses, a few television channels have investigative research cells; journalism has flourished in all extent, newspaper is being considered as an industry, consequently the frequency of investigative reports has increased, but not so much as it could have been; both the quality and quantity of investigative reports is being improved but rather slowly.

There are few organizations by conducting contests on investigative reports have shown their interests in professionalism. Some journalists, more than 60 percent, expressed in positive and stated that there is an impact among reporters to devote their time and attention to conduct serious work for investigation and write reports. A small portion, two among every 11 persons, had reservation of maintaining transparency in the selection process of some competitions. To encourage the journalists and to make them involved in social responsibility, the value/amount of the prize should be enhanced, opined by a few respondents. A portion of respondents, one in every five, expressed their dissatisfaction for organizing financial support for award from business companies and they thought mutual dependency might not encourage unbiased and authentic investigation by reporters. They also questioned the spirit of award for journalists.

In the context of standard of investigative reports appeared in print and electronic media, a majority of the respondents opined that those reports are yet to attain an international standard. Although about 65 percent of journalists found that there were quality reports published in print media. Some reports lack adequate mention of authentic sources. Many of the respondents in the study revealed that a few television channels had been trying to expose corruption, irregularities, lawlessness and various other issues of social discontentment in their special programmes. There are also opinions that by the name of investigative journalism there are attempts to show exploration of facts, but often they are not objective and manipulated with sensationalism. By way of presentation, there are over-dramatization of facts and those productions lacked factual integrity. They are presented as entertainment programmes rather than reports. This tendency is being repeatedly followed by many TV channels in Bangladesh initiated by some channels in India to produce as docu-fictions or docu-dramas, not as reports.

Print journalism has restrained from imitating such practices. The majority of respondents interviewed expressed that gradually the obstacles in collecting information is changing with the introduction of new technological devices like digital documentation, digitized photo, small video camera, fast transferable mechanisms and reproductions. There are challenges like evidence, money and time, mentioned by some respondents could not be minimized at a time. Some journalists and some media houses as well could not comprehensively provide with support in those areas. There were pressures to meet the deadline along with regular and routine jobs of a reporter often became burden to carry out investigative journalism and unless a work is completed a reporter could not proof his/her work-progress. They also opined that in some cases reporters could complete the undertaken investigation because of noncooperation from sources and government offices, lack of support of law enforcing agencies and above all, merit of a case.

The right to information and development of technology, if rightly blended each other would potentially enhance the democratic process of a country. Amidst of political instability and insecurity, the professional journalism has to develop with a commitment of exposing corruptions, irregularities, inequality and injustice prevailing in the society where Bangladesh is looking to be a mid-level income country by 2021.

Conclusion

The subjects of interest covered in investigative reports understood among the journalists as motivated by social obligation factors and they have direct relation of creating a world of reality, not just imposed by superficial societal values, but real facts, information and materials of objective values. This effort is being considered as social responsibility towards an enhancement of culture of democratic values.

The issues and topics, contents of reports and the area of coverage are focused on urban or rural areas of the country. The treatment and volume of coverage have been found from the previous studies that over-all coverage of investigative reporting in Bangladesh exposing corruption in local and national levels as well as irregularities and unlawful activities and corruption in service providing sectors of both government and nongovernment organizations are serious concerns of public exposure and debate. Couple of private television channels among two dozens, in operation in Bangladesh, are taking challenging stories on exposing corruption in government and

nongovernment set-ups as special programmes. The perception of working journalists projecting corruption and irregularities through investigative reports is positive but with mixed reactions. Many of them indicated the growth of investigative reports and its expansion with a limitation of support of media houses to undertake such assignments.

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