

Note from the Editor

Over the past few months many, like me, in Bangladesh, and, perhaps, some Bangladeshis abroad, have been facing an onslaught of “chatter” by a few dozen “intellectuals” over a score of television channels literally round the clock, often by the same individual, through the magic of media technology, simultaneously on two or more channels, trying to educate the public about the political acumen of the feuding political parties during the “bloody” run up to the general elections this January. Much of the “chatter” on the various “chat shows”, called the “talk shows” which, on any given presentation, always had the potential and almost inevitably turned into a cacophony of meaningless gibber-jabber, which if the “host” was not shrewd enough or lacked the capacity to control, could at anytime turn into fist fights, upgrading from a senseless war of words. Well, all wars are senseless, but none, ever, more so than ones fought daily on the Bangladesh television screens, with each participant trying to outdo others in their naked aggression, with possibly the ulterior motive of becoming a “celebrity”, in the end merely adding a few more feathers in the cap of “notoriety”. How much of the gibber-jabber, which nobody remembers since, succeeded in the avowed aim of taming the political storm is well documented by the total lack of influence on the subsequent events which ended in a questionable general elections, without any end in sight of the feud among the political parties and the eventual killings of scores of innocent civilians and not-so-innocent party-men from all sides.

This abortive and unwarranted onslaught of the intellectuals on the newly instituted mass media got me to question my own understanding of the intellectuals. Being one among them, I have always had a personal interest on the psyche of the intellectuals. I am aware of the role they play/played, for better or worse, on the world stage and have done some works previously on this largely lacklustre group of people. But I had, thus far, refrained from dealing with the so called “public” intellectuals. I always had a tremendous admiration for the intellectuals who brave the authority and jump into the fray for the sake of the public good, sacrificing their own lives if and when warranted. I have always believed that this went with the territory. It was the responsibility of the intellectual to be the “public” voice and that intellectuals, by definition, are public intellectuals. They by their thoughts and actions, through their learnings and creations lead the public towards freedom and dignity, towards humanity and civilization. When they speak, they speak with a thousand voices, a thousand voices echo what they speak and that is what influences politics and brings down dictators.

But what occurred on the television screen, as an onlooker, I could not accept. Let alone lending a voice to the public, all that this band of “public intellectuals” ended up doing was to dilute the issues into worthless babble, confuse the audience to a state of negation, arm both sides of the political divide with greater legitimacy, while Bangladesh burnt! The “public”, merrily, could do without such intellectuals. It was wanton cruelty perpetrated on the unsuspecting public, who needed guidance, directions, a firm voice of sanity, one or more of the intellectuals to “stand up” and “be counted”, “be heeded to” by the feuding marauders, be able to stop the madness. But the failure was utter and complete. They brought down the house with them as I looked on in my own impotency.