

## Navigating Corporate Pressures: An Investigation of News Selection During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Print Journalism?

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**[Abstract:** This study examined the corporate influence on the choice of news during the Covid-19 crisis by analyzing the conversation with the working journalists, policymakers in the media, and the owners. Based on the theory of the political economy of communication, this study analyzed data on the conversation of the key informants. Remarkably, it dissected the reasons beyond the newspaper's service and intention to the corporates in average time and this pandemic. Results indicate that the newspapers in Bangladesh have a more significant influence on the corporate sectors. In the time of the Covid-19 pandemic, corporate sectors took the chance to flourish themselves, and the only tools they used to get to people were the media. The findings widen our understanding beyond the corporate interest of media, revealing the deeper problem of ownership, political influence, and authoritarian perspective on freedom of expression.]

**Keywords:** Newspaper, Corporate Influence, Covid-19, Bangladesh, Political Economy of Communication

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented new challenges for the already struggling newspaper industry. The newspaper industry has been struggling for survival worldwide, including in Bangladesh, where the influence of corporations on the news industry is a concern. This study aimed to bridge the gap between the actual influence of corporations and how news workers and owners perceive it in Bangladesh.

This study investigated the impact of corporate influence on news selection during the COVID-19 crisis in Bangladesh, focusing on the perspectives of journalists, media policymakers, and owners. By analyzing conversations with critical informants using the political economy of communication theory, the research revealed that the newspapers in Bangladesh significantly influence the corporate sectors, particularly during the pandemic when corporations relied heavily on the media to reach people.

The traditional news media worldwide struggled to survive, and the COVID-19 pandemic added a new challenge to the already struggling newspaper industry. Despite the shift in media ownership from state-owned to industry-based in Bangladesh, media's lifeblood remained advertisements or commercials, and media companies must consider their sponsors' interests. Beyond corporate interests, the study uncovered deeper issues of

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ownership, political influence, and authoritarian perspectives on freedom of expression in the news industry.

While previous research has examined the influence of selecting news based on corporate interest in Bangladesh, this study provided a unique perspective on how this has changed during the pandemic. As the pandemic continued to impact the world, it became a crucial issue in global and local media, particularly in Bangladesh, where politicians and businesspeople own newspapers and have relationships with health-related sectors.

Therefore, it is essential to understand how newspapers covered the crisis and to what extent they kept their corporate interests. Overall, this research provided valuable insights into the workings of the news industry and highlights the broader political and economic factors that shape it, particularly in times of crisis.

### **Literature Review**

Corporate influence in news choice has always been a contentious issue in the media industry, and the COVID-19 crisis brought it to the forefront once again. The crisis put enormous pressure on print journalists to report accurate and timely information while balancing the interests of their corporate owners. However, some media scholars and professionals have raised concerns about the extent to which corporate interests are dictating the news content related to the pandemic.

The pressure on journalists to prioritize profit over balanced reporting has led to several issues, such as the promotion of specific products or services by corporations, ignoring or underreporting some critical issues, and sensationalizing news to attract more viewership or readership. This led to the public being misinformed or even misled about important issues related to the pandemic, such as the efficacy of various treatments or vaccines.

Several studies have examined corporate influence's impact on news choice during the COVID-19 crisis. Newman et al. (2022) found that many journalists faced pressure from their corporate owners to report news that favored their corporate interests, even if it was not in the public interest. Another study found that corporate ownership significantly impacted the framing of COVID-19 news stories in the print media (Thomas et al., 2020). To mitigate the impact of corporate influence on news choice, media scholars have suggested various measures. These include encouraging journalists to adhere to journalistic standards and ethics, such as objectivity, impartiality, and accuracy (Caceres et al., 2022; Han et al., 2022). Additionally, media organizations must establish independent bodies to oversee editorial policies and decision-making processes (Wager & Kleinert, 2013). This would ensure that the public's interest is always prioritized and that corporate interests do not influence the media.

The media landscape has undergone significant changes in recent years, with the rapid rise of digital media and the decline of traditional print journalism. These changes have profoundly affected the news industry and how news is produced, distributed, and consumed. One of the significant outcomes of these developments is the increasing trend of news organizations relying on corporate ownership as a strategy for financial sustainability. Corporate ownership of news organizations has become a common practice in the media industry, and many news outlets are now owned by large corporations that prioritize profit over journalistic integrity (Wilding et al., 2018). This has led to concerns that corporate owners are using their influence to shape news coverage to suit their interests rather than providing accurate, impartial, and balanced reporting. Such influence can take various forms, including editorial control, funding, and advertising pressure.

Numerous studies have explored the impact of corporate ownership on news coverage and journalistic practices. One notable study by the Columbia Journalism Review (Downie, Jr. & Schudson, 2009) found that corporate ownership has led to an increased focus on profit and a decline in journalistic quality. The study also highlighted how corporate owners often use their influence to control editorial content, leading to biased reporting and a lack of critical coverage of corporate interests. Another study by the University of North Carolina's Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media (Ardia et al., 2020) examined the impact of corporate ownership on local news outlets. The study found that corporate owners prioritize national news over local news and often use a cookie-cutter approach to news coverage, resulting in a need for more diversity and depth in local reporting.

Furthermore, the impact of corporate ownership on news coverage during the COVID-19 crisis has been a significant concern. Forman-Katz & Jurkowitz (2022) found that news coverage of the pandemic varied significantly depending on the political affiliation of the news outlet and its corporate ownership. The study suggested that news outlets owned by large corporations tended to downplay the severity of the crisis and prioritize profit over accurate reporting. Several studies have examined the relationship between corporate ownership and news content during the COVID-19 crisis. One study found that news outlets owned by large media corporations were more likely to report on the financial impact of the crisis on businesses rather than the impact on individuals and public health (Anwar et al., 2020). Another study found that journalists at news outlets owned by large corporations were likelier to report favorably on businesses that had donated to COVID-19 relief efforts (Afrin et al., 2022).

Apart from corporate ownership, advertising revenue has also been recognized as a significant factor influencing news coverage during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has significantly impacted the global economy, leading to a decline in advertising revenue for many news organizations. This financial pressure may cause journalists to prioritize stories that generate more ad revenue, leading to concerns about the accuracy and balance of the news coverage. Several studies have investigated the impact of advertising on news coverage. Colistra (2014) found that advertising can influence news content, especially regarding the topics and issues covered. Similarly, Allen (2011) found that news organizations often prioritize more engaging stories to advertisers. These studies indicate that advertising revenue can affect news coverage and lead to biased reporting.

Furthermore, studies showed that advertising can affect the framing of news stories. Gal-Or et al. (2012) found that news stories that were closely tied to advertisers were more likely to be framed in ways that were favorable to the advertisers. This suggests that advertising can impact the selection of news stories and how those stories are presented to the audience.

This paper explored the extent of the influence of corporate ownership and advertising revenue on news coverage during the COVID-19 crisis. Specifically, this paper investigated how much control corporate owners have over news coverage content and to what extent advertising revenue impacts the selection and framing of news stories. Additionally, it could examine the ethical implications of these influences on journalism and whether they are consistent with the principles of journalistic integrity and the public interest.

**Theoretical framework**

The theoretical framework for this study draws on the Political Economy of Communication (PEC) to understand the relationship between media, politics, and corporate interests. The PEC framework posits that media is not a neutral entity but is shaped by political and economic forces. The influence of corporate ownership and advertising revenue on news coverage during the COVID-19 crisis is an essential issue within the PEC framework.

McChesney and Schiller (2003) argue that global media is closely tied to world advertising, and spending on advertising has led to the exploitation of media outlets. Rahman (2012) notes that informal elites with political, social, and corporate influence play a significant role in media policy in Bangladesh. This has encouraged joint ventures between corporations and media firms, creating a situation where corporate interests are intertwined with media coverage.

Mosco (2009) explains that the PEC framework examines the connection between politics and the economy and their impact on the social structure. He emphasizes the dominance of media owners over the governance and policy level and how cross-ownership, advertisements, Public Relations events, and Corporate Social Responsibilities can be used to control the industry. McChesney and Schiller (2003) further argue that the traditional partnership of the press with the capitalist system can change the editorial perspective, leading to pro-capitalist and anti-labor perspectives.

Bhuiyan's (2002) observation of mass media in Bangladesh reveals the relationship between the media and political and social elites, which can impact media coverage during the COVID-19 crisis. The study suggests that the interaction between national and multinational corporations will significantly influence media coverage. This is particularly relevant in the current context. Many news organizations need help financially due to declining advertising revenue, leading to concerns that they may prioritize stories that attract advertisers over those in the public interest. Therefore, Bhuiyan's prediction is significant, reflecting the need to examine the political economy structure during the pandemic. Investigating the political and economic factors that influence media coverage during the COVID-19 crisis can shed light on the extent of corporate influence on news coverage. By examining the interplay between media ownership, advertising revenue, and informal elites, the study can contribute to understanding the dynamics of media coverage during a crisis and help policymakers and media professionals address potential biases in news reporting.

In the context of the COVID-19 crisis, understanding the role of political and economic structures in shaping news coverage is crucial. As the literature suggests, corporate ownership and advertising revenue have been identified as significant influences on news coverage, with corporate owners using their influence to prioritize profit over accurate reporting. Moreover, informal elites in Bangladesh have been observed to significantly influence media policy. This study examines how these factors impact news coverage during the pandemic in Bangladesh, particularly in terms of setting agendas to focus on corporate interests. By utilizing the PEC framework, this research analyzes the interdependence between politics, economics, and media and provides insights into how these factors shape news coverage in Bangladesh during the COVID-19 crisis.

**Research Questions**

This study seeks to contribute to the existing literature on media influence, explicitly focusing on corporate ownership and advertising revenue. The literature review and

theoretical framework highlighted the growing trend of news organizations turning to corporate ownership to stay afloat and the impact of declining advertising revenue on news coverage during the COVID-19 crisis. These factors had significant implications for agenda-setting and decision-making within newsrooms, as journalists may face pressure to prioritize stories that align with the interests of their corporate owners or advertisers (Gans, 1980).

The research question of this study covered three interconnected areas: corporate influence, agenda-setting, and decision-making for a newsroom. The study aims to investigate the extent to which corporate ownership and advertising revenue influence the agenda-setting process within newsrooms and how this may impact journalists' decision-making regarding which stories to prioritize and how to frame them. Following the study of critical analysis of the political economy of communication framework Carpentier (2011), the study will examine how the interplay between media, politics, and corporate interests affects the news coverage of the COVID-19 crisis in Bangladesh. The questions are:

1. How have corporate ownership and advertising revenue influenced the news coverage in Bangladeshi media during the COVID-19 crisis? To what extent have journalists faced pressure to prioritize corporate interests over the public interest?
2. How have informal elites, including political, social, and corporate elites, influenced media policy and the shaping of news coverage in Bangladesh during the COVID-19 crisis, and what impact has this had on the public's access to accurate and balanced information?

### Research Methodology

The methodology employed in this study involves a qualitative approach that seeks to critically analyze the coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic by newspapers in Bangladesh while maintaining their corporate interests. The research questions were addressed through semi-structured, open-ended interviews with key informants. Due to the pandemic, data collection and interviews were conducted remotely using cellular phones, and the necessary data was also collected through online sources.

To select the participants, the study utilized purposive sampling, a non-random sampling method to find individuals who can provide relevant information about the research topic based on their experience, knowledge, or active participation. We interviewed ten journalists, with seven participants selected from national dailies based in Dhaka and three from local dailies in Bangladesh's North, South, and East regions. The participants included senior reporters, news editors, a newspaper owner, and a member of the journalist forum. They worked for The Daily Star, The Daily Prothom Alo, The Business Standard, Samakal, Bonik Barta, Ajker Patrika, Bangladesh Protidin, Daily Korotoa (Bogura), The Dokhinhanchol Protidin (Khulna), and The Daily Azadi (Chittagong).

The key informants were asked about how corporate interests were prioritized over human interests, even during a pandemic. However, there were limitations to the data collection due to the Digital Security Act 2018, which led to self-censorship and restrictions on tapping phone conversations by security intelligence. Therefore, the key informants may have hesitated to disclose the extent to which they served corporate interests (Etikan et al., 2016).

Similar qualitative research conducted by Gans (1980) also utilized purposive sampling to select participants and semi-structured interviews to collect data. He examined to examine the role of corporate influence on news decisions. Additionally, by

employing the hierarchy of influence framework, Ferrucci and Nelson (2019) conducted interviews with reporters at digital nonprofit news outlets and staff members of foundations that financially support nonprofit journalism to gain insight into how foundation funding affects journalistic practices.

### **Results and Analysis: Corporate Interest or Human Interest?**

The media industry around the globe has transformed into a commercial enterprise that is heavily influenced by large corporations (McChesney & Schiller, 2003). Ownership and corporate concerns can result in stories being discarded or relegated to obscurity. Furthermore, the intertwining of business and politics has been an established trend for an extended period. In Bangladesh, the media system plays a significant role in informing the public, with numerous print, television, and radio channels available and an undetermined number of online portals, most of which are owned by private entities. This research aims to determine the extent of the influence of the commercial sector in news selection. Given the current worldwide crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic, this study will focus on evaluating the coverage of this epidemic.

The media landscape in Bangladesh is vast and diverse, comprising various print, television, radio, and online channels. According to government sources, there are 1248 daily newspapers, 45 private television channels, 28 FM, 32 community radio stations, and more than 100 online news portals (Riaz & Rahman, 2020). Despite the rise of TV and the internet, print readership has remained consistent, and leading newspapers are adopting new technologies and features to maintain their audiences (Azad, n.d.).

Understanding the dynamics of the media industry in Bangladesh can shed light on the challenges and opportunities facing the country's media landscape. While the number of media outlets is substantial, information about the workforce and financial data related to these organizations is not readily available. However, an online report suggests that the media industry in Bangladesh is valued at 27 billion takas and is expected to grow 10-12% annually (Ghosh, 2016). This research highlights the need to explore the influence of the commercial sectors on news selection, particularly concerning the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

The impact of the Covid-19 outbreak has been significant in the newspaper industry, as evidenced by the fact that only 86 newspapers remain in business while 254 have been forced to shut down (Sharifuzzaman, 2020). This has resulted in a grave situation for these newspapers' employees, as salaries have been held for months due to the financial strain on these organizations. This has created a dire situation for journalists and other staff members who rely on their salaries to support themselves and their families. The situation highlights the severity of the economic impact of the pandemic on the newspaper industry, which has led to the closure of many organizations and jeopardized the livelihoods of many employees.

### ***Covering the Covid-19***

The interviewees, all experienced journalists, and editors, have followed the Covid-19 outbreak since its first case in Wuhan, China, in December 2019. They revealed that news related to the pandemic is being edited and self-censored due to the interests of businesses. Sometimes, news outlets withhold important information regarding pharmaceuticals, hospitals, and medical equipment businesses. While journalists are trying to serve the interests of policymakers, they are also attempting to protect the public by not revealing the truth about the scarcity of oxygen in hospitals, excessive charges at



private medical centers, and the rising prices of goods used for Covid-19 recovery and protection.

The interviewees acknowledged that working without corporate advertisements and endorsements is nearly impossible for news outlets as they do not have any other revenue means. Consequently, ownership patterns often determine news treatment, which may prioritize corporate interests over human interests. However, most interviewees mentioned that their offices are trying to be more human-centric and focused on something other than news related to pharmaceutical companies or private hospitals. According to one senior editor, they are attempting to avoid causing panic by not revealing the truth about the shortages of medical supplies and hospital beds in government hospitals.

These findings are consistent with the literature review, which indicates that media ownership patterns can influence news coverage, prioritizing corporate interests over public interests. This can result in edited or self-censored news to avoid negative publicity for corporations. Additionally, the literature suggests that corporate advertisements and endorsements can impact news selection and coverage, further highlighting the importance of understanding the financial aspects of news media (Perreault and Perreault, 2021).

#### ***Ownership and the Relation to the Corporate***

The ownership structure of Bangladeshi media is complex and multi-faceted, as revealed by research conducted by Riaz and Rahman (2021). The ownership is divided into three main categories, namely family networks, political affiliations, and big business groups, with all television channels being connected to ruling party leaders or business groups. This interconnectedness is further evident in that most media outlets receive significant advertising revenue from banks and telecom companies, primarily controlled by ruling party leaders and business groups. For instance, HRC Group directs One Bank, while Salman F Rahman, the owner of Independent TV, runs Beximco (Pharmaceuticals, RMG Business) and IFIC Bank. Similarly, S Alam Group directs Al-Arafah and First Security Islami Bank, while Gazi Group's directors are also on the Director's board of Jamuna Bank. Even HaMeem group chairman A K Azad is also the Director of Shahjalal Islami Bank, highlighting the close relationship between the media and the financial sectors. Some media outlets are also connected to individuals in the energy sector and the housing and real estate business. Overall, the complex ownership pattern of Bangladeshi media has significant implications for media independence and freedom of expression.

The Daily Star and The Prothom Alo are both associated with Transcom Group, which has a pharmaceuticals company, Eskayef. These two widely published newspapers claimed (Prothom Alo, 2020 & The Daily Star, 2020) that Eskayef produced Remdesivir, a drug used to treat Covid-19 patients. This claim was contradicted by their business rival Beximco Pharmaceuticals (The Independent, 2020). Salman F. Rahman owns Beximco. Beximco owns Independent tv, a 24-hour news channel, and the Independent, an English national daily of Bangladesh. But when a journalist and an editor were asked about this issue, they did not answer this question because of losing their job as if someone was taping their phone, which is not an uncommon phenomenon (bdnews24.com, 2017) in Bangladesh.

In recent times, the media landscape of Bangladesh has witnessed an increase in conglomerate ownership, as highlighted by the Beximco group. The group owns various media outlets such as Independent Television, the Independent (English Daily), and Muktakantha (Bengali Daily). Another conglomerate, the Bashundhra Group, has a

diverse media business that includes East West Media Limited, News24 (24-hour news channel), Kaler Kontho (Bangla Daily), Bangladesh Protidin (Bangla Daily), The Daily Sun (English Daily), banglanews24.com (online news portal), radio capital (FM Radio), and T Sports (Sports only online portal). Additionally, the Bashundhra Group has many businesses, from real estate to food, printing and publishing, and sports patronage. The group is also one of the largest advertisers in Bangladesh and advertises on other media outlets while having its media to ensure maximum reach. The group's opening of a 2000-bed hospital near its real estate business area, which received widespread coverage, is an example of its influence. However, the hospital was not utilized due to poor planning by the health department, as reported by The Daily Star in 2020.

According to Rahman (2012), Bangladesh's ownership patterns and media formats are changing due to conglomerates, cross-media ownership, and digital convergence. This trend is leading towards vertical and horizontal media integration, which includes media, entertainment, and telecommunication co-operations, and is becoming a global trend. However, these changes in ownership patterns and media formats are also impacting the media landscape in Bangladesh. As reported by a journalist in the interview, it is not easy to go against the policymakers of the media company or owners themselves, and it is also challenging to write against government offices if there is any evidence. Self-censorship is widespread in Bangladesh, which further impacts the media landscape.

#### ***Covering the Covid-19 outbreak and the fear of censorship***

Since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, it has dominated the news cycle globally. Journalists in Bangladesh have also been covering the pandemic since its emergence in Wuhan. However, this is the first time they have covered a pandemic for many of them. They need help to navigate the challenges of prioritizing news related to Covid-19 while also serving corporate interests. Respondents working at the field level have expressed their concerns about how most of the news related to the pandemic seems to serve the government's agenda and corporate interests, leading to a rise in surface-level news. Bangladesh's freedom of expression status is also declining every year, ranking 133rd out of 161 countries, the lowest among its neighboring South Asian countries (TBS, 2021). The recent arrest of journalist Rozina Islam has further created a sense of fear and threat among journalists and activists (Ahmed, 2021). The Bangladeshi government's misuse of the Digital Security Act 2018 to arrest journalists and critics has been well documented by Human Rights Watch (2020).

According to the respondents, the business page of newspapers in Bangladesh mainly serves corporations' interests rather than the general public's. However, regarding Covid-19-related news, most respondents claimed that their newspapers prioritize human interest over corporate interest. Despite this claim, one journalist mentioned receiving threats from the concerned authorities after writing about the mask business at Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Medical University (BSMMU). This suggests that although newspapers may prioritize human interest, they still face challenges and pressures from powerful entities when they report on issues that might affect corporate interests. Such challenges limit the freedom of journalists to report on issues that are in the public interest.

#### ***Global Trend of Corporate Interest in Media and its Impact on News Prioritization***

The respondents' observation that media concentration is a global phenomenon is consistent with previous research findings. According to Bagdikian (2014), media



concentration has become a global issue due to the conglomerates' emergence and consumerism's rise. In the United States, for example, media ownership has become increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few large corporations, such as Comcast and Disney (McChesney, 2014). A similar trend has been observed in India, where a few conglomerates control most of the country's media outlets (De' et al., 2020).

The power of media to influence public opinion and the potential for bias in reporting health-related issues have been well-documented in the literature (Tejedor et al, 2020). This underscores the importance of media outlets prioritizing human interest over corporate interest in reporting, particularly during a public health crisis like the Covid-19 pandemic. Moreover, the respondents' comments about the marketing policies of UK and USA vaccines and the negative response to vaccines from China and Russia highlight the importance of media in shaping public opinion.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, this study sheds light on the political-economic struggles in the newspaper industry in Bangladesh during the Covid-19 pandemic. By conducting interviews with newsmen, we have demonstrated how the media's ownership, corporate relations, and political elitism have influenced the news coverage of the pandemic. Our findings suggest that the business-concentrated media model is a global phenomenon, and Bangladesh is no exception. Moreover, the decline of freedom of expression in Bangladesh and the government's increasing use of the Digital Security Act 2018 to suppress journalists and activists have further threatened media independence. As one senior journalist commented, "the economic, business, or financial page results from the need to please corporates and publish their advertisements."

Although some respondents claimed that their newspapers prioritized human interest over corporate interest in Covid-19-related news, the interviews revealed the pressure on journalists to keep their promises to cover corporates and please the owners. This raises questions about the extent to which the news media can be truly independent and serve the public interest. Therefore, more research is needed to understand the media business's ownership and share system, corporate relations, and the number of people working in this sector. Rahman's (2020) work shows how the politico-economic nexus influences media licensing and television journalism, and similar studies could be conducted for print journalism.

This study highlights the importance of media independence, freedom of expression, and transparency in the newspaper industry in Bangladesh. One respondent stated, "Journalists must be brave and honest, and they must be allowed to do their job without fear or favor." It is crucial to create a conducive environment where journalists can work freely and independently and provide accurate and reliable information to the public.

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**সার-সংক্ষেপ:** কোভিড-১৯ সময়কালে সংবাদের উপর কর্পোরেট প্রভাব নিয়ে উক্ত গবেষণাটি পরিচালনা করা হয়েছে। সাংবাদিক, মিডিয়ার নীতিনির্ধারক ও মিডিয়া মালিকদের সঙ্গে সাক্ষাৎকারের উপর ভিত্তি করে এই গবেষণাটি পরিচালনা করা হয়েছে। যোগাযোগের রাজনৈতিক অর্থনীতি-এই তাত্ত্বিক ভিত্তির উপর পরিচালিত গবেষণাটি স্বাভাবিক সময়ে মিডিয়ার উপর কর্পোরেট প্রভাব ও কোভিড-১৯ সময়কালীন সংবাদের উপর কোভিড-১৯ এর প্রভাব বিষয়ে তুলনামূলক আলোচনাও করা হয়েছে। এই গবেষণার মাধ্যমে প্রমাণিত হয়েছে সাধারণ মানুষের কাছে নিজেদের পণ্য, সেবা বা আইডিয়া পৌঁছানোর জন্য গণমাধ্যম ব্যবহার করে নিজেদের স্বার্থ হাসিলের চেষ্টা করেছে গণমাধ্যম মালিক ও কর্পোরেট কর্তারা। কোভিড-১৯ সময়কালে সংবাদের উপর কর্পোরেট প্রভাব-এর উপর গবেষণা করতে গিয়ে গবেষক মিডিয়ার মালিকানা, রাজনৈতিক প্রভাব, মত প্রকাশে বাধা ও সরকারের কর্তৃত্ববাদী মনোভাব এ বিষয়গুলোর প্রত্যক্ষ ও পরোক্ষ ভূমিকা পেয়েছেন।]