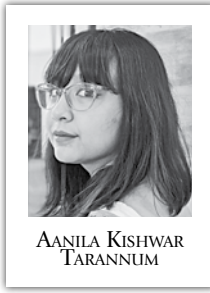


What good is the DSA if it can't protect women from online harassment?



AANIYA KISHWAR TARANNUM

THERE is little I can add to what has already been said about the shaming, blaming and moral policing of women on the internet.

Time and again, people have proved that it does not matter what role a woman takes on when she makes the news; what matters is that she is a woman, and that makes her deserving of hatred. We can look at the following three examples to attempt to analyse different instances where the law and prevailing social values interacted in different ways, while the women took on the role of victim, witness and perpetrator.

Let us begin with a much talked-about incident concerning media personality and development worker Rafiath Rashid Mithila. Her personal photographs were leaked without her consent, resulting in a swarm of hatred towards the previously well-loved celebrity. At the peak of this "scandal", there was little more on my social media than people offering their opinions on Mithila, and very rarely did I see people acknowledge that she was, in fact, the victim here.

"Sure, it's illegal to leak photos, but it isn't immoral to put this bad woman in her place," has been the common consensus on her ever since. It has been around nine months since the incident took place, and I could not find any reports of police taking action against the people who spewed one hateful, dirty comment after another on Mithila's social media. Before

writing this piece, I took another look at her Facebook page, and it is still filled with men (and a few women who have internalised the patriarchy) putting Mithila in her place.

I find it astounding that neither Mithila's impressive educational and professional background, nor her reputation as a talented media personality, could hold a candle to the swarms of lesser men who have decided she is canceled. They do not hesitate to use the vilest of language, and nothing but the threat of a case under the Digital Security Act (DSA) seems to get to them.

Except, what good is the Digital Security Act when it is selectively enforced—only when it is convenient for those in power? Shipra Debnath, the already traumatised companion of the slain Major (retired) Sinha, was dragged onto the social media by two high-ranking police officials. With a dubious narcotics case filed against her and her belonging to a minority group in Bangladesh, men on the internet had a field day until she declared she would file a case against this attempt at character assassination.

Time and again, people have proved that it does not matter what role a woman takes on when she makes the news; what matters is that she is a woman, and that makes her deserving of hatred.

Then the OC of Cox's Bazar police station refused to take her case against the two police superintendents who had publicly shared her photos on Facebook without her consent. The police officials and the people in their comment sections attempted to discredit Shipra as a witness by pointing out that she engages in allegedly "immoral" acts of smoking and drinking. Mind you, neither act is

Women like Mithila are successful because the men have "allowed" it, believes the small-town salesman who uses both vile words and the name of his god (that is equally disapproving of her success, the man is sure of it) in the same comment to demean Mithila.

All of this when women aren't even involved in crime. So what happens when they make the news for something both illegal and immoral?



PHOTO: COLLECTED

illegal. It is funny how the same things that make men manlier, somehow become immoral when a woman does them.

Both of these cases are a testament to the entitlement men feel over women. They feel entitled to have an opinion on the way a woman dresses, the things she chooses to do, and the things she chooses to be. It is difficult to have a conversation with these men because they truly believe that women shouldn't have agency over anything, neither their bodies nor their lives.

The supremely photogenic Dr Sabrina Arif Chowdhury was arrested for issuing fake Covid-19 reports from her organisation JKG Healthcare, and the masses rejoiced at the sight of a conventionally attractive woman in handcuffs. This time, when they picked apart the way Dr Sabrina dresses and carries herself, there was no fear. There was no limit to how vile they can get—after all, she's a criminal. She can't threaten people with the DSA when they upload the 563rd "hot video" with her face edited

on top of borderline pornographic footage. She might have been arrested for the crime of faking certificates, but her original sin was being a woman.

In reality, I doubt that any woman can threaten a harasser with the Digital Security Act. This Act doesn't exist to protect the vulnerable, it exists to shut the masses up when they speak against those in power, as evident from the Cox's Bazar OC's refusal to take Shipra's case.

I would offer suggestions on what can be done to make things better for women on the internet, but I have none. The law does not work, and neither does civil conversation. Men use religion and social values as excuses for hatred against the smallest of things a woman does, refusing to understand that not everyone subscribes to the same set of values. They find it impossible to simply coexist with people who are of a different gender or religion or community or ethnicity, interpreting everything as a threat against their (bigoted) identity.

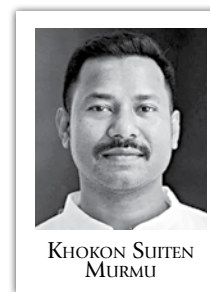
Going through comments on social media gives me anxiety about the future of women in this country. I am sure the men who use horribly graphic words in the comment section wouldn't shy away from forcefully exerting their unearned power over women in real life. Facebook isn't anonymous, yet that doesn't stop anyone. Law enforcers themselves have become part of the problem.

I'm just left here wondering how much more women will have to keep paying for their inherently "criminal" existence in the eyes of the patriarchy.

Aaniya Kishwar Tarannum has spent most of her youth writing about the youth (and other things) for The Daily Star. Email: aaniya.tarannum27@gmail.com

How many of us know about the Karam festival?

We must protect the endangered cultural heritage of plain land indigenous groups in Bangladesh



KHOKON SAITEN MURMU

BANGLADESH is home to around three million indigenous peoples (IPs) from more than 50 ethnic backgrounds, according to the Bangladesh

Indigenous Peoples' Forum. They belong to the most disadvantaged sections of Bangladeshi society and face multiple challenges that include economic, cultural, social and political marginalisation. Indigenous communities, with their distinct languages, traditions, cultures, values and customs, contribute significantly to the beauty, development and sustainability of the country. Bangladesh can surely take pride in these communities who not only present diverse cultural life—their languages and cultures also enrich the languages and cultural life of the majority Bengalis, as many linguistic and cultural experts assert.

Many songs, dances and other cultural elements of the Bengali lifestyle are rooted in indigenous culture. Nevertheless, the cultural, spiritual and religious traditions and customs of the indigenous peoples of the plain land are nowadays conducted sporadically. The disruption of this process has negatively impacted the indigenous people's knowledge system of plants, animals and natural phenomena. Karam, one of the major festival of the Munda, Oraon, Santal, Manjali, Mahato and other indigenous communities from plain lands, is an example of one such traditional cultural expression that also has a close link to nature.

The Karam deity (the god of power,

youth and youthfulness) is worshipped during this festival. Many plain land indigenous peoples worship the Karam tree (symbol of the Karam deity) during this festival as they are a source of livelihood, and they pray to Mother Nature to keep their farmlands green and ensure a rich harvest. It is believed that the worship for good germination increases the fertility of grain crops and that the Karam deity will bring

begin around two weeks before the festival. The devotees keep a day long fast and worship the branches of the Karam tree. Girls celebrate the festival for welfare, friendship and sisterhood by exchanging hibiscus (*jawa*) flowers. During the festival, the young people approach the forests, singing songs and dancing along to drum beats while collecting branches of the trees. The branches are usually carried by young,

tree is equal to the protector. They also believe that in the past, when they were driven away by the Aryans, the Karam deity gave them refuge in the form of the Karam tree. From then on, out of gratitude, they celebrate this Karam festival.

This festival brings together around 3.5 lakh indigenous peoples of the northern districts (16 districts under Rajshahi and Rangpur division) of Bangladesh. However, this Karam festival (an intangible cultural heritage of IPs in north-western Bangladesh) is now at risk due to the threats of modern civilisation, the motivations of people in certain communities and practices that have made the country's intangible heritage extinct or at risk in many communities. Dispossession of traditional land and natural resources has also led to political, socioeconomic and cultural deprivation of IPs living in this region. Additionally, a lack of acknowledgement of their customary laws in the statutory laws of the country have marginalised their indigenous knowledge on the management of natural resources.

The situation has continued to become more aggravated over the last few decades with the coming of the era of economic development, which is being aggressively pursued by private companies. In addition, indigenous peoples are being pushed out or evicted from their ancestral land in the name of conservation of natural resources. According to a report published in this daily in 2013, plain land indigenous communities, including Santal, Hajong, Khasi, Oraon, Dalu, Patro and Pahan, lost over six lakh *bigha* of land to land-grabbers over the last 30 years.

The Constitution of Bangladesh safeguards the rights of indigenous peoples in Article 23(A), which states that the state shall take steps to protect

and develop the unique local culture and tradition of tribes, ethnic sects and communities. However, while the need to promote and protect the cultures of indigenous peoples are acknowledged, a disproportionately higher level of emphasis is placed on the languages and cultures that constitute the "mainstream". Research on national policies relating to indigenous peoples in Bangladesh have shed light on the dire need to make the IPs more familiar with and "involved" in the mainstream in order to protect their cultural practices. Article 11(1) and 31(1) of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples also reaffirms that indigenous peoples have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions, as well as the right to practice and revitalise their cultural traditions and customs.

Nonetheless, indigenous peoples continue to assert and practice their distinctive ways of life, worldwide as well as in Bangladesh, in an increasingly shrinking space. The need for safeguarding cultural diversity, with special reference to the IPs, is presented in the National Culture Policy 2006 as well as the Small Ethnic Groups Cultural Institute Act of 2010, and has also found expression in Article 23A of the amended constitution of Bangladesh. Nevertheless, there is considerable scope for improving the functioning of existing institutions and implementation of their activities to better reflect the commitments of the government to preserving endangered cultural heritages.

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PHOTO: MANIK SOREN

Purohit (priest) telling the story of Karam-Gosai during the festival.

blessings and wealth, along with a good harvest. But due to deforestation and illegal logging, the Karam tree is now becoming extinct.

The Karam festival is held in the Bangla month of Bhadra (July to August), on the eleventh day of the full moon (*punnima*) cycle. The preparations

unmarried girls who sing and praise the deity. Afterwards, the branches are planted at the centre of the festival ground by the priest and adorned with flowers. Then, the *purohit* (priest) as well as the indigenous community conduct the worship of the Karam tree together. They believe that the Karam

QUOTABLE Quote

GEORGE ORWELL
(1903-1950)
English novelist, essayist, and critic.

We have now sunk to a depth at which restatement of the obvious is the first duty of intelligent men.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Plains grazers
- 6 Relish
- 11 Find darling
- 12 Like lambs
- 13 Drive from bed
- 14 Around
- 15 Fling
- 17 Like some wines
- 18 Lyricist Sammy
- 20 Opposed to
- 22 Take advantage of
- 23 Needed smelling salts
- 26 Satchel part
- 28 Lion group
- 29 South-western capital
- 31 Feel poorly
- 32 Mosquito attack
- 33 Third person
- 34 Times for preparation
- 36 Postmark part
- 38 Singer Della Kane
- 40 Comic tribute
- 43 Bring on
- 44 Game host
- 45 Clear sky
- 46 Pale

DOWN

- 1 Tavern
- 2 Altar promise
- 3 Tree of Australia
- 4 Welles of "Citizen Kane"
- 5 Brooklyn team
- 6 Assn.
- 7 Lindbergh, e.g.
- 8 Atlantic resort
- 9 In the past
- 10 Enjoy a novel
- 16 Shop tool
- 18 Use foul language
- 19 Nick and Nora's dog
- 21 "Huh-uh"
- 23 Petty fight
- 24 Falco of TV
- 25 Secluded valley
- 27 Under discussion
- 30 Nourished
- 33 Molecule parts
- 34 Great Lake port
- 35 Let off steam
- 37 Open space
- 39 Bungle
- 41 Notice
- 42 Decimal base

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

H	I	C	K	A	S	C	E	N	D
A	C	H	E	C	A	R	T	E	R
L	E	A	N	E	L	E	C	T	S
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O	C	T	E	T		A	S	H	
B	A	L	L	A	D	E	R	I	E
E	L	A	I	N	E	T	O	R	E
T	E	P	E	E	S	S	P	E	D

BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT