

23-year-old Mabi Mir, a student of the Mechanical Engineering Department of Sonargaon University, doesn't know what she needs to do in case of a fire in her university. In the last two years as a university student, she did not participated in any fire drills; in fact, she has never even noticed whether her university has any fire safety equipment.

Mabi also doesn't know that, according to a recent inspection report by Bangladesh Fire Service and Civil Defence (BFSCD), her university has been marked as a 'Very Risky' place.

The report was prepared in February 2017, after 11 teams inspected 993 schools, colleges, and universities of Dhaka city for the first time in history. The inspection team classified more than 89 percent of the 933 educational institutions 'Risky', and nine percent 'Very Risky'. Only two percent of institutions were 'Satisfactory'.

"It is a matter of great concern that we are paying a pretty big amount of money every semester, but we don't have any fire safety equipment, let alone awareness building programmes. We weren't even informed by our university authorities that we are in the 'Very Risky' list," says Mabi. "This is totally unfair and our parents are also worried about it," she adds.

Since Bangladesh hasn't experienced any significant fire incidents in educational institutions, the safety measures in these places have always been neglected. SM Mahbubur Rahman, Professor of Electrical and Electronic Engineering (EEE), at the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET), informs that depending on the height and occupancy category of a building, every infrastructure must have fire safety measures. This is clearly mentioned in the Bangladesh National Building Code (BNBC) as well. School and universities are particularly vulnerable to fire hazards because they contain libraries and a large number of electronic and laboratory equipment.

"In educational institutions, the respective authorities must ensure the use and proper maintenance of specific fire safety measures, for example, portable fire extinguishers, fire alarms, stringer systems, available water sources, water hydrants, emergency exits, fire evacuation drills and others, on the basis of the number of students, the height and capacity of the building, and the architectural design. And this must be monitored by our inspectors," explains Rahman.

Rahman argues that in Bangladesh, although safety measures have been undertaken in the RMG sector to some extent, there has been little to no implementation and monitoring of fire safety in our schools, colleges and universities. "Since there is funding involved in the RMG sector, and the International Labour Organisation (ILO), Accord, Alliance, and international buyers are overseeing the issue, safety measures have been standardised here. However, no one seems very concerned about our schools," he explains.

The most alarming result was found



PHOTO: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

| FIRE SAFETY |

HOW SAFE ARE OUR SCHOOLS?

NILIMA JAHAN

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by the inspection team of the Tejgaon zone, which discovered that all 45 institutions in the area were 'Very Risky'—including B G Press High School, Government Science College, Holy Cross College, Tejgaon Textile University, Sonargaon University, Ahsanullah University of Science and Technology, Northern University and others.

According to Major Shakil Newaj, Director of Operations and Maintenance at BFSCD, after assessing the schools and universities, the BFSCD inspectors had asked these institutions to fix the problems within the following month. The authorities of these institutions had agreed to do so as well. "We also warned them that if they don't follow the suggestions, the fire service department would have to take action according to the Fire Prevention and Extinction Act 2003," says Newaj.

However, in reality, there has hardly been any progress and it is time for the

fire service inspectors to issue their second warning. There remain many schools, colleges, and universities where no fire safety measures are being taken as per the suggestion of the inspectors.

For example, when contacted, Anjuman Ara Latif, Head Mistress of BG Press High School, admits that they don't have any fire fighting equipment. BG Press High School has 448 students, 14 teachers and four staff members, and it was labelled 'Very Risky' by the inspection team of BFSCD.

Banamali Mohon Bhattacharya, Principal of Government Science College, also informs that they still haven't taken any action, although they have a large laboratory. "We'll try to buy one or two portable fire extinguishers within a very short time," says Bhattacharya.

The condition is the worst in Dhaka City College (DCC), where there are almost 12,000 students and 285 teachers in four buildings. They have no fire alarms or emergency exits. There are only eight to ten portable fire extinguishers for the 12,000 students. "I understand it is very important, but we were very busy with the exams. Now we'll look into the matter and contact the fire service authority to learn about what to do in this regard," says Prof. Md. Shahjahan Khan, Principal of DCC.

Though English medium schools and private universities are doing brisk business by charging exorbitant admission and tuition fees from the students, they too lack proper fire-fighting measures. Although most of them only have a few fire extinguishers or just an emergency exit or fire alarm, in reality, these are not proportionate to the actual requirement. In addition, though many of these places claimed to conduct evacuation drills, they replied in the negative when asked if they maintain a register which is supposed to document

the findings of the drill.

Khairul Bashar, Principal of Cardiff International School Dhaka, says that they have formed a committee to deal with fire and earthquake awareness programmes so that students can know what to do in case of a sudden fire or earthquake. "It is true that our preparation is not satisfactory, but we are improving the situation slowly but surely," claims Bashar.

An overwhelming majority of schools, colleges and universities were established many years ago without following the necessary fire prevention and extinction rules. Newaj agrees that the situation cannot be fixed overnight, and the BFSCD is willing to give them enough time. "They even have the option to let us know about their limitations," he says. "Now we are in the process of assessing the implementation of our first suggestions and will provide further suggestions on what to do next to reach the satisfactory level," adds Newaj.

Advocate and Policy Analyst, Syed Mahbubul Alam, who is also the Secretary of the Centre for Laws and Policy Affairs, informs that according to the Fire Prevention and Extinction Act, all activities must be concluded within the prescribed time limit. "Otherwise, the Director General of fire service department may declare that the building is not usable due to 'incompetence' and there are provisions for imprisonment and financial penalties. Parents and students can make complaint to the DG to take quick actions, according to the laws," he says.

We need to ensure proper fire safety measures and undertake massive awareness programmes in our educational institutions before a major disaster breaks out. Unless respective authorities are willing to step up and take corrective actions to remedy a grave situation, our students will continue to study in danger. ■

| MEDIA |

There was a time when sending hand-written letters to newspapers, and then subsequently waiting for weeks before getting a proper reply, was the only way readers could connect to a media organisation.

This time-consuming process always kept readers on one side of the spectrum. It created a clear division between them and journalists. Today though, with the tremendous increase in the number of social media users, that line has begun to blur a bit.

An ordinary reader today does not just consume news, but also has the ability to become a source of information. Take for instance the case of the video of a police officer mercilessly beating up a driver in Dhanmondi for not paying bribe, which had gone viral on Facebook earlier this year.

There was no professional journalist on the spot to cover this issue. It was only after the video was shared a number of times in the public domain that reporters decided to pursue it. The person who had shot the video was probably just another social media enthusiast who had a good instinct. Eventually, there was action taken against the police officer and the driver was let go.

The incident above is just one of the many examples when journalists have depended upon user-generated content for news. And unsurprisingly over the years, this trend has become more and more frequent. After all, there are at least 300 hours of video uploaded every hour on Youtube, more than 6000 tweets every second, and around 136,000 photos uploaded every minute on Facebook.

With so much information available in the public domain, journalists are bound to find something newsworthy. A good social media editor, with the right skills, can supply some of the most interesting news pieces by just sitting at his or her desk today.

However, the increasing dependence on user-generated content is also the reason why fact checking has become all the more important. You need to know what's true and what's not. It's obvious that not everything shared on social media is true and it's a journalist's duty to filter the stream of information before it is published under the media organisation's banner.

And it's not enough for a social media editor to merely decipher the validity of the information; the person in-charge needs to do it quickly, because there are plenty of other people in rival news organisations who are probably working on the exact same news piece.

This scenario has given birth to a separate entity, fact-checkers, in the world of media. They may work as a part of a news organisation, or they may work independently. Their sole job is to verify a particular piece of content that generally deals with politics or anything

ARE YOU READY TO QUESTION THE NEWS?

NAIMUL KARIM

ILLUSTRATION: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO



that goes viral online.

Fact-checking first became popular in the United States in the early 2000s when fact-checkers would often come to light during election campaigns in order to spot the lies of the presidential candidates.

It has gradually spread across the world. Some of the most popular fact-checking organisations in the world include Politifact, The Washington Post Fact Checker and Snopes. Each of these organisations has a different way of representing their analysis.

The Politifact, for example, uses a 'Truth-o-meter,' which ranges from 'Mostly True' to 'Pants on Fire.' While the

Secondly, the national elections are due in a year's time and specialised fact-checking organisations can actually help the public make well-informed choices, provided that there is an opposition ready to take on the current government.

Until last year, there weren't any official fact-checking organisations in Bangladesh. While there were a few blogs, which worked on deciphering the truth, these lacked a proper structure. From June this year though, an organisation called BDFactCheck (www.BDFactcheck.com), claiming to be the first fact-checking organisation of the country, hit the road.

Still in its early days, BDFactCheck was created by journalists, who are currently employed in various media organisations. The only common thread among all the founders is that they were all students of the Mass Communication and Journalism department of Dhaka University in the past.

They mainly attempt to fact-check social issues that go viral on Facebook and are yet to dive into the world of politics. At a time when journalists are randomly getting jailed under Section 57 law of the ICT act, the launch of an official fact-checking organisation is actually a brave move, and one hopes that this turns out to be a stepping stone for a creation of a more well-informed audience.

Even if you're not a journalist, there are always ways for you to ensure the validity of a video or a picture doing the rounds on social media and you can do that with the help of a number of free tools available online.

For instance, you could use Tineye (www.tineye.com) to find out when a particular image was first uploaded online. This can actually help you find out whether the current picture that has gone viral is a copy.

WolframAlpha, a computational search engine, is another software that users could use in order to analyse videos. It's particularly helpful to get details regarding a location's weather on a particular day. For instance, if a user claims to upload a video on June 19, 2014 and you notice that it's raining.

You could go to WolframAlpha and check the weather on that particular day three years ago in order to verify if had actually rained on that day.

You could also use the Wayback Machine. It's a software that helps you see older versions of a particular website. If someone deletes a particular image or a line from his or her website, you could go back using this software to check the difference.

There are several other tools that could be used to separate facts from fiction online. However, at the end of the day what matters is common sense; what matters is how critical you are of a particular piece of content. After all, Internet tools can't support you if you yourself aren't ready to question.

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