

As far as access to internet is concerned, Bangladesh has made decent progress. Going by the latest figures of the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC), there are more than 79 million internet subscribers in the country.

At the start of this year, that figure was 67 million and in 2015, it was around 40 million. The statistics show that in the span of three years, the number of internet subscribers in Bangladesh has doubled. While this is a positive change, the question remains as to how prepared the country is for this shift. What is the state of internet literacy in Bangladesh?

Some of the major components of the definition of internet literacy include the ability to address illegal and harmful contents on the internet appropriately and the ability to protect one's privacy.

Let's take the attack that took place in Harkoli Thakurpara village of Rangpur last Friday into focus. What began with a mere Facebook post ended up with 30 houses being set on fire in the area and several injured. The worst part about the entire episode was that the families from the village did not have any idea why they were attacked.

The profile picture and the name of the Facebook account belonged to a person who had been away from the village for four years and the police say that there is a chance that the account might be fake and that the person in question may not have written anything that demeaned Islam in the first place.

Apart from sharing the post online, copies of that post were printed and shared in mosques as well. There was a campaign of sorts, with loudspeakers and human chains, in the area, which eventually led to the aggression.

Now, it is not as though the attack took place solely because of the Facebook post. In fact, had it not been the post, the people responsible for the violence would have probably used any other medium to trigger the attack. However, using Facebook as a scapegoat for such attacks is increasingly becoming popular because of the response it brings.

The attack in Thakurpara village is not the first time that social media has been used to trigger violence in Bangladesh. Similar cases were witnessed in Brahmanbaria last year and in Ramu in 2012.

According to Professor Dr Sumon Rahman, who works at the Media Studies and Journalism Department of the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh, the credibility of websites like Facebook or blogs—or the lack thereof—is still not clear to many.

“Many equate Facebook with established newspapers. They think that content posted on Facebook has the same authenticity as something in a newspaper. Therefore, when they saw the post being shared online or the printed copies of the Facebook post, many of them thought that it was true. This was a major point that influenced the attackers,” explains Professor Rahman, speaking about the incident in Rangpur.



ILLUSTRATION: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

INTERNET LITERACY WHERE DOES BANGLADESH STAND?

NAIMUL KARIM

Not just a rural phenomenon
It is not just people from the rural areas who have difficulty gauging the credibility of the information that they get online. The issue persists in the urban areas as well. And no sector portrays this problem better than the media. Journalists are supposed to act as gatekeepers and publish news pieces after thorough investigation. However, it is not uncommon to find journalists publishing news pieces based on unverified sources.

For instance, recently *Star Weekend* had written a satire on the arrest of Subodh, the artist whose wall paintings have created plenty of fervour in the capital and someone who is yet to come out in the open. Unfortunately, a number of news websites, including prominent newspapers, thought that this was an actual news report and republished it as a real news update on their respective online pages, without reading the entire

article or verifying the source. It was also probably the most shared article of *Star Weekend* in recent times, but unfortunately for the wrong reasons.

Similarly, earlier this year, a group of Bangladeshi journalists, just to have some fun with their colleagues, spread a rumour that Bangladesh's first ever tour of India would be called Naimur-Ganguly trophy after the players Naimur Rahman and Sourav Ganguly. One of the journalists even put up a Facebook status referring to the name of the trophy.

The next day, one of the country's most circulated newspapers published the news, without any verification. Journalists from India caught on to the news and republished it there. Sourav Ganguly himself believed the news. It was posed as a question in his popular television programme “Dadagiri”. All this happened within a week. The rate at which fake news can travel is unbelievable at times.

The above examples suggest that while there has been a boom in the online media sector, the quality of a number of online media organisations remains questionable.

Teenagers have it the worst
Privacy is another component of internet literacy and numbers suggest that young girls are the worst affected in this regard. Many of them aren't aware of the dangers of leaking sensitive information online.

Section 57 of the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Act has been heavily criticised because of the way it has prevented journalists and many others from speaking out.

However, the public prosecutor of the Cyber Tribunal in Dhaka will tell you that more than 75 percent of the cases under this law are filed by teenage girls. Most of them file cases accusing their ex-boyfriends or people from the community of posting compromising pictures of them online without their permission.

Abul Mansur Mohammad Sharf Uddin who is the Controller of Certifying Authorities of the ICT division and has headed projects on spreading awareness regarding cybercrimes against women and girls admits that a lot needs

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to be done in the field of internet literacy.

“Using the internet is like a knife. You can use it for useful aspects and you can use it for bad things as well. We have to make people aware of that. And so, internet literacy is a must,” he says.

“Have a look at the case of South Korea. They are number one in governance. That's because all their services are digitised. In Bangladesh, we provide 125 services online and we are increasing them. While that is good, we do not have many initiatives to make people aware of the dangers of the internet.

“Most of the initiatives are still in the planning stages. However, as far as the implementation aspect is concerned, that has not happened. These programmes will take place steadily,” he adds.

The future

Spreading awareness is the only way ahead. The faster the government can get their programmes running, the faster such situations can be resolved.

Aside from the government, there are several universities that have begun working on the concept of internet literacy. “Resilient Universities, Resilient Students” is one such project that the



A man from the Harkoli Thakurpara village is devastated after religious zealots burnt his house down.

PHOTO: STAR FILE

University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh is working on.

“Under this project, we train both the faculty and the students with regards to online sources, internet privacy and a

number of other related issues. No matter what course the faculty takes, he or she is supposed to dedicate a small portion of the course's curriculum to internet literacy,” explains Dr Rahman.

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THE INHUMANE HUMAN ACT OF ANIMAL ABUSE

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On November 3, a video of a stray dog getting beaten in a bathroom of a residence in Kazipara in Mirpur went viral on Facebook. The dog had supposedly bitten a 12-year-old in the region and as a result, the child's uncle, the watchman of the residence, and an accomplice were punishing it.

Those who watched the four-minute-long video could easily perceive the amount of hatred the attackers had for the animal. “Why is it not dying? Why is it still breathing?” one of the frustrated attackers gasped before deciding to insert a rod, nearly a metre long, into the dog's mouth. It shrieked, and it shouted, until it stopped moving, for good.

The very same day nearly 40 activists rushed to the spot with the police and demanded that the attackers be punished. A question-answer session with the members of the family ensued. Zahid Hussain, Founder Secretary General, Care for Paws, who went to the spot that day, argues, “First of all, the dog did not bite the baby, rather it was a scratch. Secondly, there was no proof that the dog in question had rabies, since none of the others living in the community were bitten. A rabid dog generally results in more people getting bitten in the community.”

Subsequently, the activists went to the Kafrul Police Station to file a case. Unfortunately, the Officer-in-Charge (OC) of the station did not allow them to file a case, but asked them to make a complaint. According to Hussain, the OC was not aware of the century-old Cruelty to Animals Act, 1920, under which someone can be fined up to BDT 200 and also be imprisoned for at least six months for “killing any animal in an unnecessarily cruel manner.”

“We tried to explain the whole situation to him. But the OC did not allow us to file a case. We were told to just make a complaint,” says Hussain.

After that episode, Zahid and others tried to contact the police a number of times to get an update on their complaint. But they failed to get an appropriate response. They even went to the police station in person on the fourth day. That, too, failed to make any difference.

Eventually, the OC picked up the call and, according to Hussain, shouted: “What's your problem? Why are you calling me for such trivial issues? Don't call me any further and don't come to the police station with this issue.” When contacted by *Star Weekend*, after continued attempts, the OC hurriedly stated that the “issue was under investigation” and that he would talk later.

The reality is that such cases are hardly ever filed, and perpetrators rarely fined, despite the fact that animal rights activists, such as Rakibul Haq Emil, founder and chairman of People for Animal Welfare, popularly known as Paw foundation, has documented many cases of animal cruelty.

“Only three cases in the history of Bangladesh have been filed regarding animal cruelty. From our experience I can say that the police are not keen on accepting such cases and many of these incidents go unnoticed,” says Emil.

At any rate, the fine is so meagre that it can hardly act as



ILLUSTRATION: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

a deterrent. The cabinet approved The Animal Welfare Act, 2016 earlier this year, but it is yet to be passed by the parliament. The proposed law states that any person committing animal cruelty would have to face two years' imprisonment or pay BDT 50,000 fine or both. While this is no doubt a long overdue step in the right direction, without proper monitoring and implementation, it will remain nothing but a false promise of protection for those too helpless to defend themselves against the inhumane cruelty of human beings.

What does an animal abuser look like?

According to Sarah Zarrar, Programme Coordinator of Obhoyaronno-Bangladesh Animal Welfare Foundation, an animal rights organisation that has been working since 2009, most of the perpetrators are street children and young adults.

“This can be due to lack of education and awareness, pent-up anger from abusive parents and most commonly, a false sense of heroism,” she says.

Citing the recent case of two mother dogs and 14 puppies being buried alive in Rampura, Zarrar observes, “That was also the doing of a ‘youth welfare’ club. When they received a complaint about a boy being bitten by a dog, they had to prove themselves as heroes by doing something worse to the dogs.”

Such “heroism,” according to psychologists, is a dangerous sign. “These kind of people suffer from ‘conduct disorder’. People who have this disorder, enjoy violating others’ rights. It may be animals or human beings. If they are not taught to care for others from their childhood, they develop an aggressive behaviour and feel happy in hurting others,” says Dr Mohammad Mahmudur Rahman, Professor, Clinical Psychology, University of Dhaka.

According to a 2016 FBI report, “If somebody is harming an animal, there is a good chance they also are hurting a human.” Another *New York Post* report mentions that “Animal abusers are five times more likely to commit acts of human violence (for example, assault and rape), four times

“It's interesting. Through this project, students get to know, for instance, what kind of online tools they can use to check the information that they receive through social media. They also get to know more about their privacy settings and a number of other related issues. It's all about being resilient,” he adds.

Dhaka University Professor, Dr Gitara Nasrin, however, believes that there is a dearth of research in this field. “Several countries have taken many initiatives to help their citizens become more literate online. But we are yet to get there. There has not been a high-level research conducted regarding internet literacy in Bangladesh.

“I personally feel that the government has to play a role here, because it won't be easy to conduct research like these without any funding,” she opines.

With changing times come different challenges. There was a time in the past when the challenge was to merely provide a majority of the country with access to internet. With close to 80 million internet subscribers in Bangladesh now, the scenario has changed. Judging by the way problems related to internet illiteracy are sprouting up every now and then, drastic steps need to be taken to make people more aware.

more likely to commit property offenses (such as burglary and vandalism) and three times more likely to commit drug offences.”

Shaharia Afrin, Lecturer, Department of Criminology, University of Dhaka, who works in the field of psychology of criminal behaviours, stresses on the importance of including dogs in the socialisation process as children are growing up. “No one is born with an ability to hate dogs or animals. In early childhood, if children learn to hate or abuse animals, s/he may not develop the sense that animals too are their friends. Along with primary learning through family, if schools or religious institutions don't teach them that abusing animals is wrong, s/he might not develop as an animal lover,” she adds.

Zarrar believes that prevention and rehabilitation is the only sustainable solution to stop animal cruelty—the intensity of punishment rarely stops a crime from occurring; instead people find a better way of hiding it. “We must build positive relationships with communities that are hostile to animals, and show them the compassionate way to address their complaints,” she adds.

Cruelty or culling cannot be the solution

A major reason for the violent behaviour against dogs is that people think every dog bite is bound to spread rabies, whether or not a rabid dog bites them. In most cases, cruelty against dogs increases during breeding time, which begins after fall.

But it is a common misconception that culling can resolve the issue of rabies; the reality is quite different. If dogs are attacked and killed in a given area, the surviving dogs start acting in an aggressive manner, trying to defend themselves by barking and biting those around them. This creates further tension amongst humans and dogs in a community.

“Also, dog culling cannot be a solution to reducing the dog population. The surviving dogs simply take up more of the existing resources. This in turn makes it much easier for them to mate and reproduce at a faster rate,” says Zarrar.

According to animal rights activists, the only way to deal with the problem is to sterilise and vaccinate stray dogs. Animal rights organisations, such as Obhoyaronno, Care for Paws and Paw Foundation, along with the city corporations, are working in this regard.

The overall condition has improved in Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC). From 2016, Obhoyaronno, in collaboration with DNCC and Humane Society International, the largest animal welfare NGO in the world, has performed CNVR (Catch, Neuter, Vaccinate, Release) on a total of 4,500 stray dogs from Zone 3 of DNCC.

Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC), however, is facing a resource constraint. With only a six-member team, and one truck, it is not possible for the department to tackle the task of sterilisation and vaccination.

Besides, the common belief—“every dog bite is bound to spread rabies”—needs to be challenged through widespread awareness programmes. But unfortunately, in a country where injustice and cruelty against other human beings is an everyday phenomenon, and financial constraints are palpable in every sector, cruelty against dogs remains low in the list of priorities of our policymakers.