

Combating our fake news problem



THE Cambridge Analytica scandal has put the issue of fake news into spotlight again. It has also renewed conversations as to how best prevent

resulted in some of the worst communal attacks in our recent memory. Last month UN investigators blamed Facebook for spreading hatred towards the Rohingyas in Myanmar, which culminated in a massive refugee exodus into Bangladesh. Yet, the issue remains largely underreported by the media, except for when something big happens.

fake news peddlers from manipulating democracies. The excellent reporting by *The Observer* of London and *The New York Times* revealed how the supposedly "IT service management company" managed to pull off crucial electoral successes one after another for its clients scattered around the world.

Cambridge Analytica developed tactics to discover what issues concern voters the most. After having found the vulnerability, it then disseminated fake news to targeted voters, exacerbating their fear and turning the tide of elections in favour of its clients. The firm honed its method to near precision by analysing millions of Facebook users' data that was harvested without having taken their consent.

The disclosure by a whistle-blower has rattled lawmakers from both sides of the Atlantic. It also ignited public debate in India, albeit briefly, where both the ruling and the main opposition parties reportedly had taken the service of the company. Despite the fact that a major Bangladeshi political party reportedly sought Cambridge Analytica's service for the upcoming election, it did not ring any alarm bells in Bangladesh.

That was understandable. These days one does not have to manipulate voters through Facebook in order to win elections; we are accustomed to more overt ways of tampering with elections, but that does not mean that the Cambridge Analytica scandal and the whole issue of fake news should not worry us. In contrast, the dangerous effect of fake news in our society is worse than we realise.

From Ramu to Nasirnagar, Pabna's Bonogram to Rangpur's Thakurpara, fake news and rumours on social media

Far from combating fake news, the media and civil society have failed to trigger any public debate about this issue. We failed in part because we thought Facebook was out of our reach. The media might have also been concerned about the government's possible interference. It was, after all, these concerns about fake news and rumours that the government capitalised on when it enacted draconian laws such as Section 57 of the ICT Act and Digital Security Act. Another reason behind the media's scant response to this dangerous epidemic was that a certain section of media is itself just as culpable as the so-called news portals for fuelling unsubstantiated and even outright fake news for web traffic and revenue.

In many other countries, the media continue to play a more vocal and proactive role in tackling this issue. In the United States, every major news outlet has a special group of fact-checkers whose sole purpose is to debunk fake news and false claims by politicians and public figures. In addition, there are a number of highly respected fact-checking websites that continue to monitor what's being fed to the public. In Singapore, *The Straits Times* introduced a feature, askST, for readers to ask its professional journalists to check whether a particular news report is true. In India, *The Wire*, an independent and respected news website, frequently calls out mainstream newspapers and TV channels for peddling fake news.

In Bangladesh, due to the media's hesitation to weigh in fact-checking businesses, two websites, Jaachai and BD Fact Check, took it upon themselves to fill the vacuum. Their works are



ILLUSTRATION: NICK NAZZARO/BU.EDU

helping debunk hoax, false or misleading claims surfing on the Internet, but their crusade is largely limited to clearing confusions.

Both Qadaruddin Shishir, who edits BD Fact Check, and the Editor of Jaachai, who insists on remaining anonymous, emphasised on the need for the media to take the lead in the fight against fake news. These fact-checkers, unlike the mainstream media, cannot afford to cross the line by fact-checking certain individuals deemed too powerful. In fact, Jaachai operates

anonymously for the obvious reason of personal safety. On the other hand, established media outlets have more resources and thus can afford to hire more experts to research and dig up the truth.

Not just out of business concerns, they say, the media should play a vital role in tackling the spread of fake news because it threatens the very function of the press. "With the massive spread of fake news, truth loses its credibility. People start to ignore real issues that matter most," says the Jaachai editor.

Since the election of Donald Trump, in which fake news factories played a crucial role, Facebook has eliminated some of its obvious problems. For example, when someone reacts to or "likes" a shared link, the preview of "related links" containing hoax and fake stories no longer appear on their dashboards. The social media giant, as well as Google, have stopped showing advertisements on fake news sites and videos.

However, Facebook is faced with the conundrum of trying to tackle the spread of misinformation without restricting someone's ability to post links to fake news sites. This explains why Facebook brought a blanket change in its algorithm to prioritise posts from friends and family over public posts in one's newsfeed, despite the risk of losing a huge chunk of its revenue.

Facebook has made it clear that it does not want a direct editorial role in determining what constitutes "fake". Instead, it has announced its intention to collaborate with professional journalists who are to flag false stories. In addition, it now allows general users to report "false news". Not just news links, Facebook began "fact-checking" photos and videos from last week to contain the spread of hoaxes and false news. In France, the social media network collaborated with AFP, a Paris-based international news agency.

While neither Facebook nor AFP has disclosed what criteria would be used to determine the authenticity of photos and videos, it's a great leap forward in tackling the spread of fake news. Understandably, Facebook will soon expand this initiative to other countries and partners, and we can expect that the world's eighth most populous nation would not be kept in waiting for too long. Now, we can only hope that when Facebook looks for partners, our media isn't caught unprepared.

Nazmul Ahasan is a member of the editorial team at *The Daily Star*. Email: nazmulahasan@live.com

From Ramu to Nasirnagar, Pabna's Bonogram to Rangpur's Thakurpara, fake news and rumours on social media resulted in some of the worst communal attacks in our recent memory.

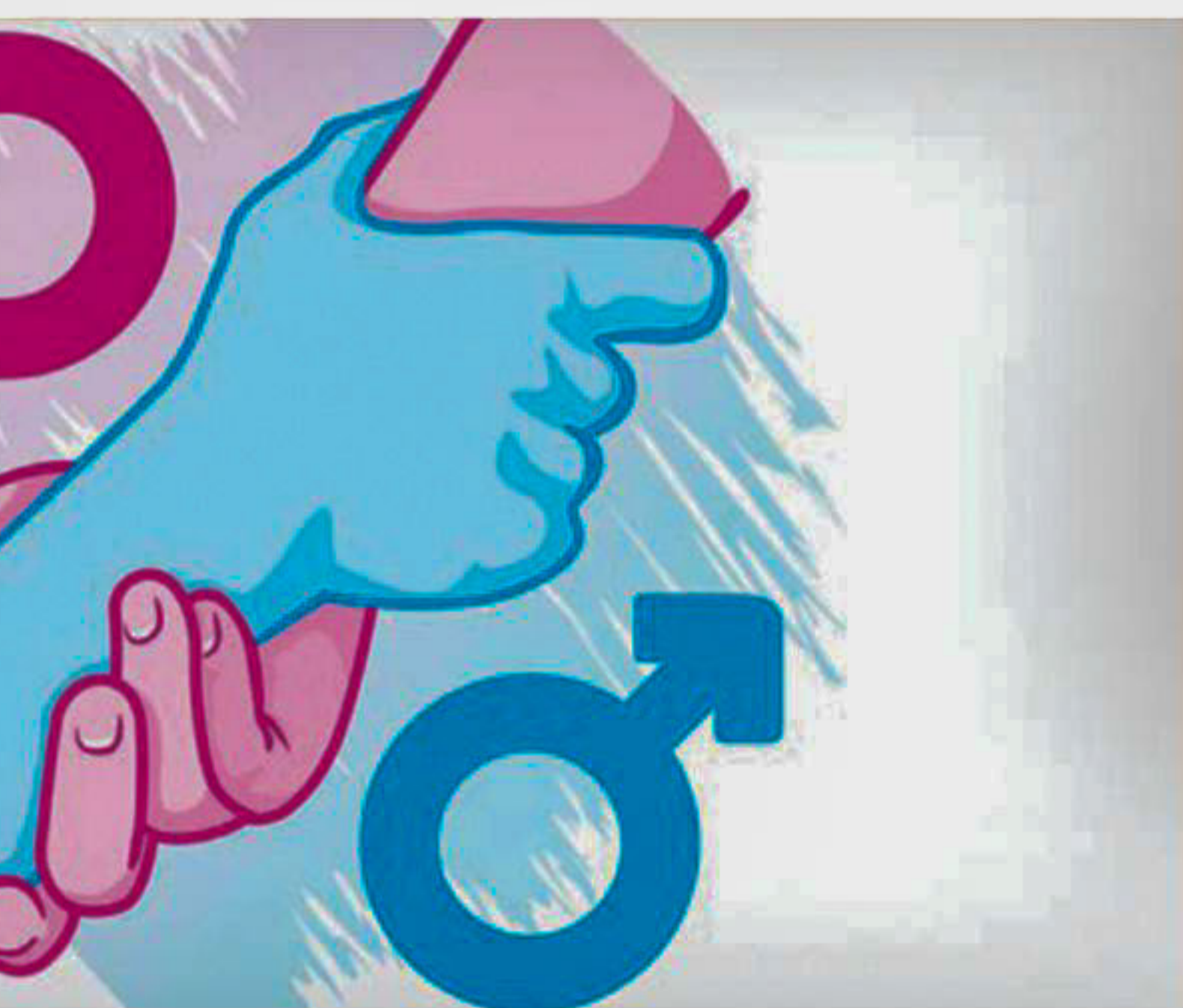
Women's Day shenanigans and a reality check



HUGE drum rolls and pageantry surrounded the recent celebrations of International Women's Day.

We can obviously feel enlightened on this front, having women as the chief executive of the government and that of the parliament. But are we really any different than we were 50 years ago or any different from contemporary Asian countries when it comes to women's empowerment? Statistics of women in power give a very stark picture—out of 77 secretary level officers only 10 are women, out of 300 non-quota members of parliament only 22 are women. There are few or no women serving in the higher ranks in the armed forces, no woman CEOs of banks. These point to pretty much a male-dominated power structure at the top. Of course, some of the affirmative action measures being taken by the nation are commendable such as having 50 reserved seats for women in the parliament, appointing of 9 women DCs (district administrators) out of 64 and generally reserving 10 percent quota for women officers in the civil service. However, the measly quotas are a clear indication that gender parity is still a long way off.

Compared to 50 years ago, the needle of women empowerment has moved ever so slightly for the top echelons of power. However, women's empowerment at the bottom has



certainly come a long way—there is gender parity in primary and secondary school enrolments and nearly a third of our organised or formal manufacturing sector workforce are female. It is only a matter of time before many of these women move up through the ranks in society and occupy positions of power. But if we leave it to society alone then social mobility and gender percolation will be fraught with obstacles and gaping holes as ostensibly demonstrated by the attacks on women at the March 7 rally or the alarming rise in sexual violence.

Such a pervasive culture of male chauvinism is not going to go away

through institutional education alone. In fact, gender parity even at the tertiary level does not automatically guarantee women's empowerment and liberty. One only has to take a look at the standard bearer of the West—the biggest economy and the mightiest nation on Earth, i.e., the USA—to see the fallacy in such an argument. The so-called "land of the free" has elevated a man to their highest seat of power who openly objectifies and denigrates women.

In our country chauvinism runs deep in our social psyche from the elites of society to the poorest of the poor. Two anecdotes come to mind that illustrate this. Some

of a homeless family in Mohammadpur opposite Gonobhaban—the official residence of the prime minister. The family comprised of a young man in his early twenties and two older women, presumably the young man's elder sister and mother. It was apparent that they were making their way through life by begging on the streets. It was mid-day and one of the women was serving lunch for the family on the pavement. All of a sudden the young man was seen kicking the lunch plates. What was the fault of the woman? She did not serve him lunch first! There was no word of protest from the women even though their hard-earned lunch was gone. Such pervasive male-chauvinism did not permeate all

strata of society in a day nor will it be possible to eradicate this scourge overnight.

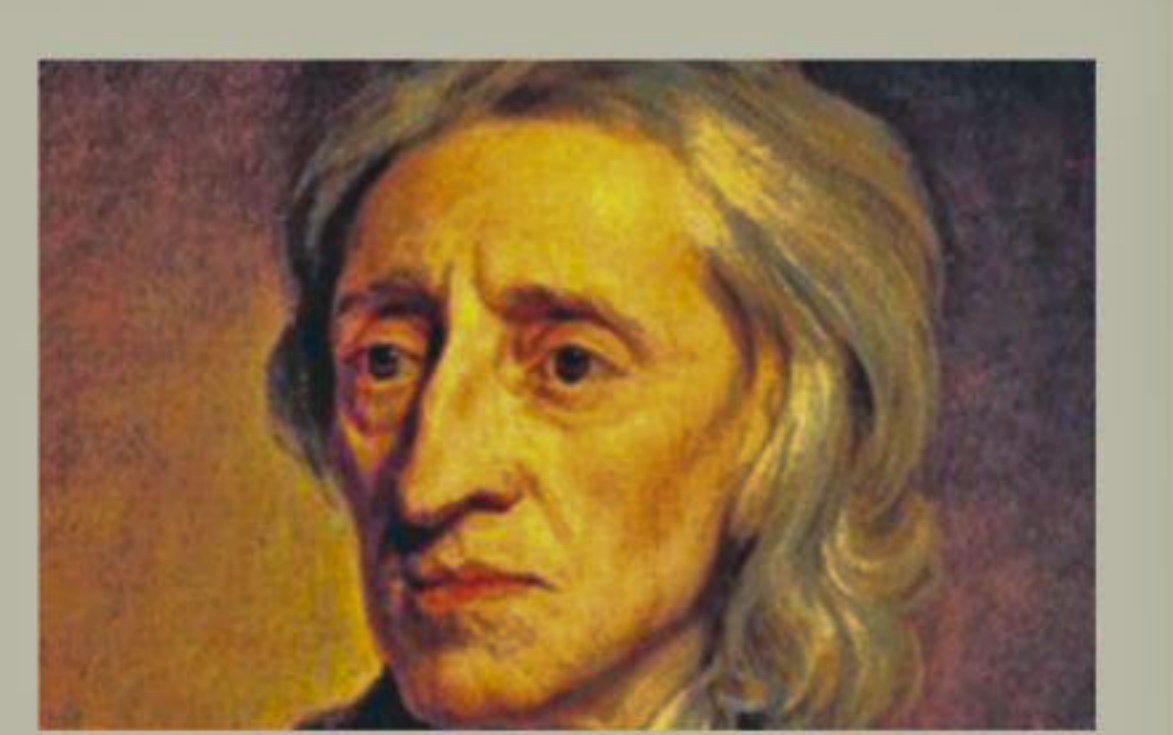
Naturally the question is how do we overcome this social malaise and who do we look up to as role models? The answer most likely lies in how we are raising our children and teaching them to take their position at the dinner table equally. For cultural guidance we only need to look at the Moors of Spain—a 9th–15th century Muslim civilisation that was at the peak of knowledge and economic development at the time, where men and women studied side by side at its universities and other institutions of learning and contributed equally to societal progress.

We must inculcate in our children that men and women are equally ordained as pinnacles of natural evolution and they must recognise their mutually fulfilling roles in the universe as men and women. We must teach them that merits and achievements speak for themselves and no man or woman has a monopoly on human greatness. Such teachings need to be apparent in everything we do on a day-to-day basis and also reflected in affirmative actions at public and private workplaces. And then gradually we shall overcome the long-held gender biases for a truly meritocratic society dreamed of by the iconic women's rights advocate Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain.

Habibullah N Karim is an author, policy activist, investor and serial entrepreneur. He is a founder and former president of BASIS and founder/CEO of Technohaven Company Ltd. Email: hnkirim@gmail.com

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QUOTABLE Quote



JOHN LOCKE (1632 – 1704)
English philosopher and physician

Reading furnishes the mind only with materials of knowledge; it is thinking that makes what we read ours.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- | | | |
|---------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|
| ACROSS | 33 Type a password | 7 Argo skipper |
| 1 Barista's creations | 34 Change from a sawbuck | 8 Cave raider of story |
| 7 Crested birds | 35 Radius partner | 9 Spot for a workout |
| 11 Show up | 36 Game outing | 10 Return address name |
| 12 Balm ingredient | 37 Come together | 16 Suggest |
| 13 "Definitely!" | 38 Juice choice | 18 Caesar subject |
| 14 Portent | 39 Beatty and Buntline | 20 Caesar's tongue |
| 15 German steel city | 40 Contacted, in a way | 22 One out early |
| 16 Spoil | | 23 Straight |
| 17 Take it easy | | 24 Nova Scotian port |
| 18 Change the title of | | 25 Newspaper offering |
| 19 Heaps | | 28 Farm animals |
| 21 Hotel feature | DOWN | 30 Before, in Brest |
| 22 Boater's kin | 1 Cake unit | 31 Join together |
| 25 "East of Eden" brother | 2 Happened | 32 Was a snoop |
| | 3 Roof support | 34 Going rate? |
| | 4 Like Sherpas | 36 Toper |
| | 5 Tied up | |
| | 6 Filming site | |

BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

ARE YOU MAD AT ME?
NO, WHAT MAKES YOU THINK I'M MAD?
YOU SCOWL AT ME... GROWL... IGNORE ME...
NOW I'M MAD!!
I THOUGHT SO

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

CAN YOU HELP ME WITH MY MATH, GRANDMA?
LET ME SEE.
IT'S PRE-ALGEBRA.
OH, DARN!
WHAT'S WRONG?
I'M POST-ALGEBRA.

Write for us. Send us your opinion pieces to dsopinion@gmail.com.