

## SOME ANIMALS ARE MORE EQUAL THAN OTHERS

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Recap: On April 9 allegations arose that Bangladesh Chhatra League's Kabi Sufia Kamal Hall president Iffat Jahan Isha was torturing quota demonstrators inside her room. The general students brought her out of her room and made her publicly apologise while wearing a garland of shoes. Isha was subsequently expelled by both the BCL and University of Dhaka, only to be reinstated three days later. On the night of April 20, three students were handed over to their guardians because of their role in coercing Isha to confront the general students. Star Weekend takes a look at how BCL treats students in Sufia Kamal Hall.

Her Facebook inbox is now flooded with rape threats. One sender called her a pig and said she should've been raped when she was still a baby in her mother's lap. Another, a Bangladesh Chhatra League member of Sreepur named Shajib Hassan, insinuated that she should sell herself to men. Yet another BCL man from Sylhet called Abu Taher Juned asked her whether she would have sex with him for Tk 200-250. A Qatar-based BCL man called Syed Shupon Augustia Mizan threatened to rape her mother. A Jubo League member from Companiganj called Main Uddin Ujjol threatened to rape her.

And these are just the people directly messaging her. Her photo and the link to her Facebook profile is being freely distributed by BCL activists online with messages like "Get this girl" and "Arrest her", and, of course, rape threats.

All of this was sent to a female student from Kabi Sufia Kamal Hall following the series of incidents that happened over the last two weeks. The student had been one of many who had supported the ousting of the BCL president of her dormitory, Iffat Jahan Isha. "We have shown how to protest against those who oppress us," she had written on her Facebook profile.

"I am constantly afraid that I am being followed," she says, sharing screenshots of the abusive messages with *Star Weekend* while sitting in a corner of the long porches inside the Teacher-Student Center. "A friend of mine who is affiliated with BCL sent me this message warning me to be careful because the political students are looking for a chance to harm me," she adds, extending out another screenshot.

By now most people know about the drama that unfolded in the Kabi Sufia Kamal Hall of the University of Dhaka. A girl was injured, and another—the BCL president of the dormitory—was expelled from the university and then brought back in again; and then three more girls who had demanded the president be removed were first thrown out of the dorm and then taken in again. The university authorities and some political factions are dismissing it as a girls' "hostel-based scuffle" that does not warrant the amount of national attention it is getting. The hate speech in the Facebook interactions described above however indicate otherwise.

This is an incident where a certain faction of students were once again reassured that they will remain armed with the power to treat general students however they want. When a BCL leader is almost punished for oppressing girls, but then comes back from the brink of her fall, guns blazing, it conveys the message that political appointees matter more to the authorities than general students.

"The day BCL hall president Isha was brought back wearing garlands of marigolds, the general students of the dormitory started leaving out of fear that she would now retaliate," says Eity Jahan, a resident of Kabi Sufia Kamal Hall. "I went to the Provost to tell her that the girls are scared but she did not believe me."

"The students dragged Isha downstairs to publicly apologise because they were tired of her abuse," adds the student this correspondent was talking with. "Interestingly enough, Isha was brought out of her room by junior BCL supporters, not the general residents. This is because, as the head of the political unit, she would haze them however she wanted and they had to tolerate it for fear of



Kabi Sufia Kamal Hall BCL co-president Morsheda's foot was injured during a scuffle with president Iffat Jahan Isha over the former's participation in the quota reform movement.

losing their dormitory seat."

There is ample available literature detailing how first-year students have to curry favour with political figureheads inside dormitories to even get a foot in. The political bullies place them in rooms inside the dormitories and use them as their personal lackeys. If the students can then manage an admin-assigned allocation in a room, they are safe—otherwise they need to remain on good terms with the BCL leaders.

"Isha and the leaders made the students do their laundry, cook and clean for them," alleges Eity Jahan. Several other students interviewed also confirmed how political leaders made other girls do their personal chores.

"Those who get a seat politically do not actually necessarily believe in BCL politics. They simply sign up as a BCL worker so as to be able to get a dormitory allocation," says a current resident of Sufia Kamal Hall majoring in nutrition science. "My roommate's cousin, a freshman at music school, had to get in by signing up for BCL but wanted out as soon as possible. When she went to get an official dormitory allocation from the administration, they refused to help her because she was 'under' the political leaders." Had the student managed to shift, the BCL leaders would have lost out on a foot-

soldier they could coerce to do voluntary political work, she adds.

"We sleep two girls to a bed with each room having up to eight girls. They only share their room with one other roommate," she adds.

That political leaders get wholehearted support from the administration is apparent from how Isha was treated, and how the dormitory authorities swooped down on the girls who were spearheading the students' demands to have Isha removed.

According to media reports, the Vice Chancellor Professor Akhteruzzaman justified the BCL hall unit leader's reinstatement by saying "She will not only get back her studentship, but also be rewarded" but said nothing about the allegations of hazing that students accused her of doing.

"I live on the third floor, which is the same floor as Isha. I was one of the first people to run to her room when I heard girls screaming. Isha's friends blocked the entrance but at one point we broke open the door. I went inside to see what was happening and found girls shaking and crying. They said they had been slapped, they had been whipped with a skipping rope, and made to hold their ears and do squats," describes a student who was a first-



BCL president Iffat Jahan Isha being consoled by pro-ruling party members after she was reinstated back to her dormitory room by the university.

hand witness of Isha's actions.

When the Provost of the hall Professor Sabita Rezwana Rahman was asked about whether Isha and the other political students haze their peers, she states, "No student has come up to me to file a formal complaint." On the other hand, she was recorded on an audio clip spread online as saying, "If 2000 had attacked Isha that day then all 2000 of you will have your studentship cancelled. Whoever hit her, please write down your name."

According to all students contacted by *Star Weekend*, the provost had allegedly told the students of her hall not to publicise what was going on inside. A video circulated online on the night that three girls were rusticated from the dormitory shows the guardian of one of the students telling journalists, "We have been asked not to say anything about this," while the student tried to hide her face, visibly flustered.

When asked about whether hall authorities are trying to keep students quiet, Provost Sabita Rahman denied it, saying instead, "I have asked them not to spread false information."

What is true and what is false, however, seems like it is a very subjective matter in this political climate inside the university. ■

As BPSC has finalised the recruitment for 1st class and 2nd class non-cadre posts leaving thousands of posts vacant, the fate of thousands of qualified candidates is now uncertain.

Bangladesh's bureaucrats should realise that such procrastinated and complicated recruitment practices have not only deprived thousands of youths of their employment rights but also crippled a large number of primary schools like Ayesha's where disseminating quality education has become an impossible task.

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## OPINION

The recent quota reform protests took place as much on the streets of Dhaka as it did online, particularly on Facebook. Pitched battles in the middle of the night resulted as people responded to updates in real time. Events at the University of Dhaka (DU) led to uproar spreading to other universities in the city and other major cities of the country, where the youth took up protests in solidarity as well as a shared demand that the quota system, which reserves 56 percent of government jobs for certain groups, needed to be reformed.

Those wanting updates on the situation turned to Facebook rather than traditional news media. The

"Hacked by Bangladesh", a photo of the protests and demands including #Reform Quota BD, #Stop the Genocide, and #Reform Quota System.

Then came the April 11 events at Kabi Sufia Kamal Hall. A graphic photo and posts circulated on Facebook pages reading, "The Sufia Kamal Hall BCL unit president has cut tendons of a resident of that hall for her involvement in this quota movement." This set off a chain of events as other female residents of the hall, provoked, allegedly beat up Iffat Jahan Isha, who was then expelled from both the BCL and DU that very night. Videos posted on Facebook show Isha, made to wear a garland of shoes around her neck.

# HOW THE QUOTA REFORM MOVEMENT WAS SHAPED BY SOCIAL MEDIA

MALIHA KHAN

Facebook pages, groups, and accounts of DU students in particular had live updates every few minutes from the centre of the protests as protesters and activists turned to social media to share news before the media even got there. Social media was the frontline of information, with posts on Facebook being crucial triggers that sparked a movement.

One the triggers was during a brutal police crackdown on anti-quota protesters gathered at Shahbagh and the DU campus on the night of April 8 when a picture of a bleeding male protester, identified as Abu Bakar Siddique, thought to be dead went viral near midnight. He had been shot in the face with a rubber bullet; police had also unleashed batons and teargas on the protesters.

Using social media to organise and broadcast protests is nothing new, having been widely used side-by-side with street protests in movements such as the Arab Spring of 2011 and Black Lives Matter in 2014. Here too, social media proved instrumental in getting the word out about what the protesters were facing, with the help of smartphones in every hand and technology such as Facebook Live. However, just as real images and updates were circulated, so too did 'news' that later proved inaccurate. Word spread faster than it could be verified and the movement was caught up in the rapidly changing events.

Enraged students, including females who had to broke out of their locked university hall gates, took to the streets to join the protesters under fire. In the mean time, it had been learnt that Siddique was alive. But by then, the photo and posts had been picked up by other students, activists, and Facebook pages they frequented.

These pages included 'Troll Du', 'Quota Songskar Chai', 'Basher Kella' and 'Zakir's BCS Specials'. The last, a Facebook page popular among students and BCS job-seekers, had posted "AB Siddiq, a third year Dhaka University student, has breathed his last at a hospital suffering from bullet injuries". All this took place in less than half an hour before it was learnt that Siddique was, in fact, alive but injured—which he later confirmed in a Facebook post.

On April 10, several government websites were hacked with messages on the cause. These included the websites of the prime minister, president, and home ministry's offices which displayed a sign saying

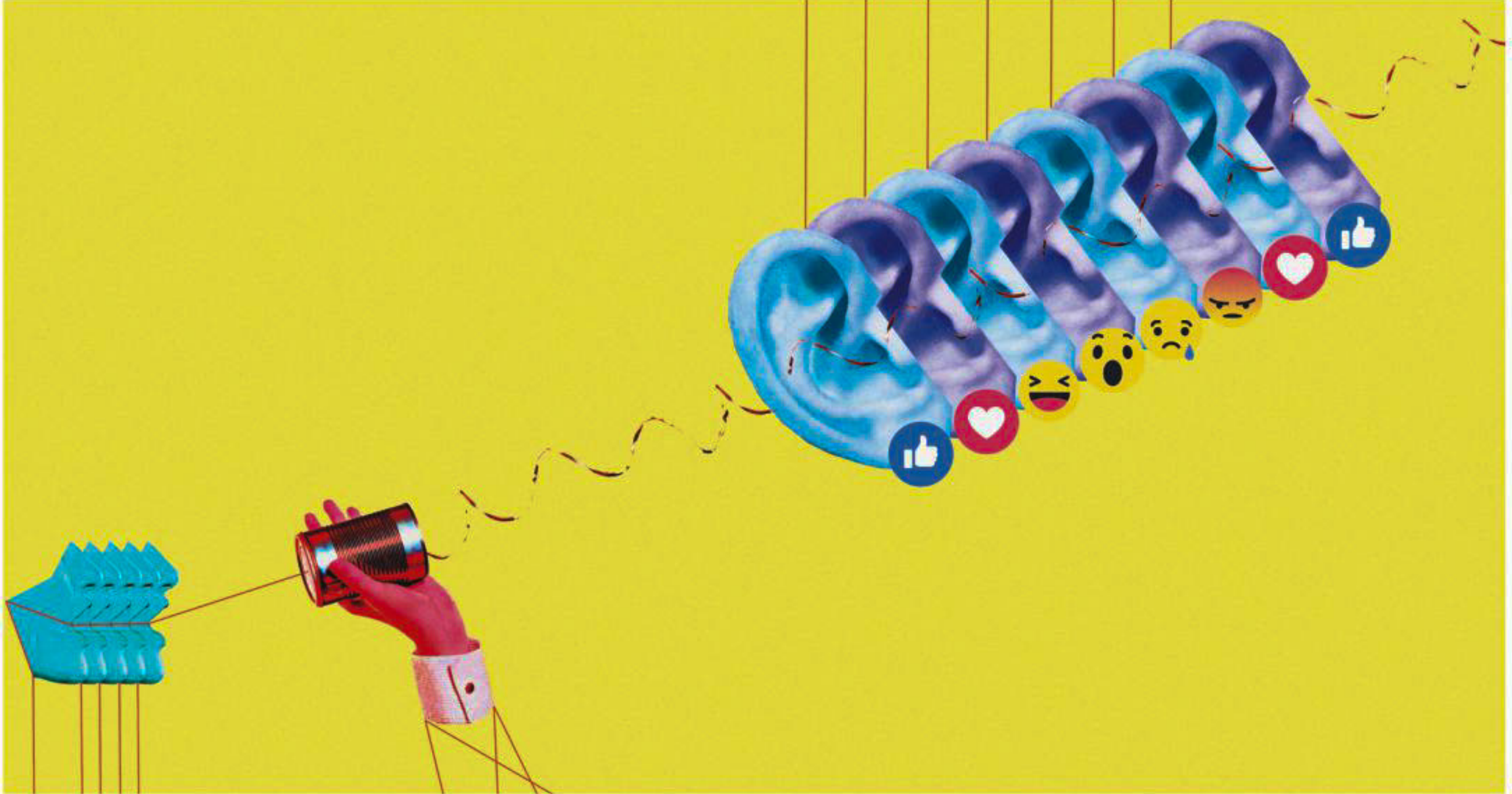


ILLUSTRATION: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

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## Shifting the blame

Following these events at the Kabi Sufia Kamal Hall, the hall provost undertook an investigation into what happened that night and four female students were handed over to their guardians like errant children for allegedly "spreading rumours through Facebook fake accounts" on the early morning of April 11, which the authorities had 'investigated' by going through their phones. An audio clip circulated online of the provost warning students not to give "misleading posts" on social media.

DU VC Md Akhteruzzaman said that their expulsion was "completely a rumour" and "propaganda against the university authorities". On the other hand, students allege that no investigation of the torture of quota protestors has taken place. The events since show systematic efforts to delegitimise the movement by blaming the protestors for spreading rumours and fake news rather than undertaking investigation into the crackdown on protestors by police and members of the BCL.

The backlash since the protests ended has focused on what happened online. Cases have been filed by the DMP's Cyber Security and Crime division which were investigating up to 200 Facebook accounts for cyber crimes—accounts which they said had been identified for "spreading false propaganda regarding quota reform protests on different social media platforms".

"We must find out those culprits who spread rumours through the social media to instigate destructive and subversive acts in the name of quota reform movement across the country," the Home Minister, Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal, told the media.

On April 23, police said they had identified two

accounts which had circulated the misinformation that a student had been killed and that someone had cut the tendons of a student at a female hall. Details of a further 15 IDs have been requested from the Facebook authorities.

Rashed Khan, a co-convenor of Bangladesh Sadharan Chhatra Odhikar Sangrakkhan Parishad, the platform of quota protesters, said that he and his fellow leaders were repeatedly targeted on a Facebook group named 'Gujobe Kan Diben Na'. Their Facebook accounts have subsequently been hacked and their online presence nullified. They, among others, currently face five cases—one of which is for spreading rumours on social media.

Though their safety is in question, they hesitate to file cases against those harassing and intimidating them both online and on campus since the protests ended. "We can't file cases for our protection as we fear that they will plant more such cases against us and detain us indefinitely," says Khan.

Under the broad umbrella of cyber crimes, the protestors are being blamed for spreading rumours and fake news because they broadcast what was happening around them, in the moment. The outpouring of information in the wake of the events is now suspect to investigation for possibly "disturb[ing] the law and order situation". This is exactly what the general public feared, having their social media accounts under surveillance, with the emergence of the Digital Security Act. While a total dependence on social media for accurate news is problematic in such situations, how else would first-hand information from the site of the protests have emerged? ■