

No end to dowry deaths

Increasing awareness needed to tackle it

THE prevalence of the dowry system continues to baffle rights activists and policymakers. No amount of laws and campaigns seems enough to curtail the practice while women, many married off before their legal age, continue to suffer. In the latest case, a 20-year-old in Panchagarh was beaten to death, three years into her marriage, for failing to satisfy her husband's incessant demands for dowry. The husband appears to have been emboldened by the lack of action about his previous attempts to extract dowry, which went unpunished, support from his own family as well as the failure of the local administration to make a timely intervention. It all points to a tacit social tolerance of dowry that refuses to go away despite all preventive measures.

Just how widespread the practice remains can be understood from the fact that at least 25 women were either tortured to death or committed suicide over dowry in the first three months of this year alone. Imagine the number of girls and women who suffer various degrees of harassment because of dowry. The apparent ineffectiveness and lax enforcement of the dowry laws mean that simply criminalising it is not enough; there should be a concurrent change in people's mindsets also. The government must place greater importance on raising awareness in the local communities and engage all stakeholders in the process for a greater impact.

Illegal parking clogs busy roads

Where are the law enforcers?

ABDUL Gani road is a very important road in Dhaka. It leads to the Secretariat, the seat of the bureaucracy (along with a number of other important government buildings) and also heads to a very busy junction of the city. Unfortunately, though there are "no parking" signs on both sides of the road put up by police authorities, vehicles are parked in rows on the side, which has created a mess. A picture in this paper published on October 17 shows a long line of cars parked on the road that has shrunk in width by at least half! And it is not the first time that such a picture has been carried by this paper.

Our question here is twofold. First, whatever happened to the strict patrolling and fining by the police for illegal parking in the city? Are we to understand that since all the buildings on this road are government offices, the people who have kept their cars on it get carte blanche to break the law? The other question is, precisely what is Rajdhani Unnayan Katripokkho (Rajuk) doing to alleviate this situation? Where are the parking spaces in the city? When can we expect multi-storied parking spaces to become available so that car owners may safely park their vehicles (without fear of their vehicles getting a ticket or being towed away) and go about their business in peace?

These are valid questions that authorities will have to answer today or tomorrow. We hope the police higher-ups will look into this matter to expedite traffic on Abdul Gani road. And the sooner the authorities start work on freeing up parking space in buildings and constructing new parking lots, we can all breathe a little easier.

Caution against a future global disaster

Technological developments have brought benefits to humankind but they have also entailed abuse of skills and technology by some people to cause great harm. The two world wars caused enormous loss and damage to life and property. At present super powers of the world have developed nuclear arsenals that have the potential to be catastrophic for human beings.

Since 1950, especially, the world acquired enormous scientific knowledge. But wrongdoers can abuse these developments to cause damage and destruction, locally or globally.

People of all ages today use mobile phones and laptops. But the downside of this obsession is that the young generation is rather going into individual isolation; their mental faculties do not grow as a result. Often they enjoy obscene and objectionable material released by unscrupulous business groups.

Uncontrolled use of toxic preservatives in foodstuff by greedy people for increasing shelf life is another danger. Adulterated food, sold in restaurants and fast food bars, seems to attract the young generation, particularly students and working class. These can cause damage to mainly internal organs.

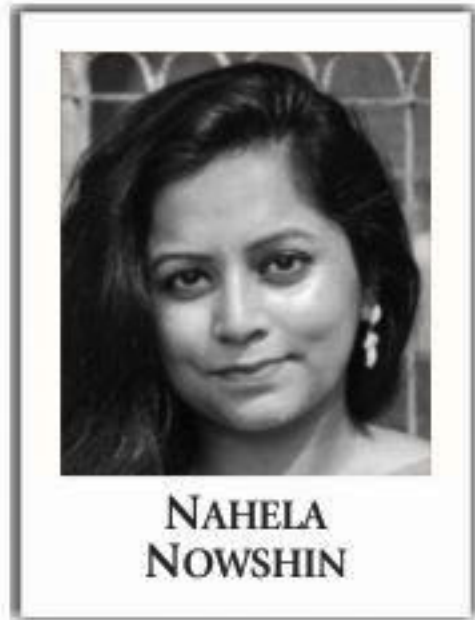
Effluents from industries, transport vehicles and aircrafts are polluting the earth unthinkable. The resulting increase of temperature may cause natural calamities including melting of polar ice caps which may cause rise of the ocean level leading low-level countries to go under water. Due to all kinds of pollution human ailments have been on the rise. This situation will also affect all other living beings on earth.

It seems that the present civilisation in an attempt to solve all human problems has created more problems resulting from abuse of developments in science and technology.

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Why internet access is not enough

Bangladesh has a long way to go in terms of digital literacy



NAHELA NOWSHIN

BANGLADESH is now among the top five countries in Asia when it comes to internet usage, according to Internet World Stats, a website that compiles international population, travel, and internet market research statistics. The country has made leaps and bounds in terms of internet penetration in the last few decades. Over 80 million people have access to the internet today up from a measly 0.1 million in 2000. A great feat by all means.

While the phenomenal growth in internet access is indeed a cause for celebration, we need to ask ourselves what this actually translates to. While we often gloat about the heights that internet connectivity has reached in the country—and the government's efforts to bring rural pockets into the fold are indeed noteworthy—what does this mean in terms of economic development and social mobility for the population at large? We now live in an age where internet connectivity is a necessity. And this is the era of "digital citizens" where people are expected to possess the skills and knowledge to effectively use the internet and other digital technologies at their disposal to participate in society at large—including politics and government. The knowhow

There is a flawed, naïve logic in believing that greater internet access alone will pave the way for Digital Bangladesh without simultaneously addressing the miserable state of digital literacy in the country.

ZARRAR KHUHHRO

AT the risk of outing myself as a Zionist agent, I have to confess that one of my favourite words is "chutzpah". It's a Yiddish word—a language that was used by Jewish communities in central Europe. As with most such words, something is always lost in translation, but it roughly translates as "gall, brazen nerve, effrontery, incredible 'guts', presumption plus arrogance."

It's this word that comes to mind when looking at the Saudi handling of the disappearance of Jamal Khashoggi.

The details of the case—with all its incredible twists, mysterious black vans and alleged interrogation/execution/dismemberment teams—have riveted the world, and will likely continue to do so until the media cycle inevitably moves on to the next



Jamal Khashoggi

attention-grabbing atrocity.

In the meantime, we are witnessing incredible irony and also some rather refreshing honesty. The irony is found in Turkish President Erdogan—a veteran jailer of journalists—cast in the role of the world leader most outraged by Khashoggi's disappearance. To be fair, perhaps not even Erdogan could have dreamed up the kind of caper the Saudis seem to have pulled off, with the incredible disregard they have shown for

of proper ICT use goes beyond simply being able to surf through your Facebook feed. Which is why it is important to look at the state of digital literacy in the country before we bask in the glory of improved internet access.

Digital literacy, according to the American Library Association, is "the ability to use information and communication technologies to find, evaluate, create, and communicate information, requiring both cognitive and technical skills." This means being able to do something as simple as



finding the information you're looking for or something more complicated such as fact-checking to identify fake news. Digital literacy, as its definition states, means having the necessary cognitive and technical skills to navigate swathes of information for a specific purpose. So where does this leave us?

Almost a year back, a heart-wrenching photo of an elderly woman wailing uncontrollably in front of her house which was burnt to ashes was doing the rounds in the media. Her house was one of many Hindu houses burnt to the ground by religious zealots in Horkoli Thakurpara village in Rangpur in late 2017. What triggered the mayhem? A man by the name of Tito Chandra Roy had supposedly made a demeaning Facebook post. Although Tito was later found to be living far away in Narayanganj for four years, and although even the police could not initially verify who the phone number associated with the Facebook account belonged to, the mob that had

orchestrated the attacks were apparently "sure" of Tito's involvement. It should be mentioned that Tito later confessed under mysterious circumstances. The year before that, Nasirnagar in Brahmanbaria suffered a similar fate as angry mobs—furious over a Facebook post—attacked temples and vandalised idols and Hindu homes. Rasraj Das, the man who was purportedly responsible for the post, was later cleared by investigators of the charges of hurting religious sentiments.

At the heart of both these violent

incidents against the Hindu minority was a Facebook post which soon became the talk of the town without a single person willing to at least verify the Facebook account or question those who were spreading the news (not that such kinds of violence can ever be justified). These large-scale communal attacks stemming from social media not too long ago are perfect examples of the dangers of a population having internet access without the necessary digital literacy.

Today, an overwhelming majority of internet users in Bangladesh are online on mobile devices. The number of internet subscribers has skyrocketed largely thanks to mobile telephony and the availability of cheap smartphones. Internet subscribers on mobile devices account for over 84 million users while those on Internet Service Providers (ISPs) and Public Switched Telephone Networks (PSTNs) comprise over five million (bdnews24.com). These numbers in fact reflect existing concerns about the productive use of the internet as a large section of internet users are

not involved in income-generating or otherwise productive activities online. The statistics pertaining to social media and search engine usage in Bangladesh, according to StatCounter, a web traffic analysis tool that monitors visitors' behaviour on websites, back up this claim. As of September 2018, an astounding 89.04 percent of internet users in the country were on Facebook, 7.62 percent on YouTube, and a tiny 0.2 percent on Google. This is in no way reflective of the productive use of the internet.

The largely unproductive use of the internet in the country is problematic for many, many reasons. And one of its unwanted consequences has been social media's role in propagating cyber harassment. Social media is being used and abused as a tool of sexual harassment, stalking, and cyberbullying—and women are primarily bearing the brunt of such forms of cyber violence. Facebook for example has become the go-to platform for publicising demeaning remarks that amount to harassment against an actress or female political activist or TV anchor you don't like.

If we are to address the worrying state of digital literacy in the country, the point of departure must be education. There is no alternative to quality ICT-based education in all our primary and secondary schools. The good news is that the government has already made plans to introduce ICT in primary schools. But without well-trained, qualified teachers—of which there is a major dearth—the results will not bear fruit. ICT education should not simply be about teaching how to move the mouse and use search engines but how to conduct oneself in the digital space.

There is a flawed, naïve logic in believing that greater internet access alone will pave the way for Digital Bangladesh without simultaneously addressing the miserable state of digital literacy in the country. The significance of digital literacy goes beyond economic prospects. It entails, in principle, proper internet etiquette so that we learn to treat each other with respect, despite differences in opinion, and express constructive criticism—not spread malice and hate. It is the ability to recognise the unimaginable power of the internet and put it to good use.

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A red tide

any kind of consequence, but his outrage is likely less due to the disappearance of the Saudi journalist in exile, but rather to the way his country's soil has been used as the scene of the crime. Human rights violations (and even murder) are one thing, but Erdogan doesn't appreciate being made to look like the leader of a soft state.

An ocean away, another aspiring strongman also finally spoke out on the disappearance, with Donald Trump calling it a "terrible, terrible precedent" but otherwise washing his hands off of it and—here's where the refreshing honesty comes in—shrugged off questions about action against Riyadh by saying, in effect, that the military and business deals with Saudi Arabia were too important to jeopardise. Now that's just the plain truth: Republican or Democrat, Trump or Obama, the strategic interests and economic imperatives of the US remain

Inconvenient journalists are generally disliked anyway, with their habit of asking annoying questions and not swallowing state narratives whole. That can lead to often fatal choking, as likely took place in the case of murdered Bulgarian investigative journalist Viktoria Marinova, who was found raped and murdered in a park. Just as we don't know for sure (yet) whether Khashoggi is alive or dead, we do not know why Marinova was killed, though in her last show she conducted interviews with journalists who had been detained after trying to dig out a story involving massive corruption in EU-funded projects. Shortly before signing off on her last TV show, Marinova—the third journalist killed in an EU country in the past 12 months—said, "The number of forbidden topics is growing all the time...Investigative journalists are being systematically removed."

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claims that Khashoggi's Turkish fiancé is actually a man, a member of the Muslim brotherhood in fact, wearing a disguise. The paper also ran a CCTV image of what they claimed was Khashoggi leaving the consulate but was in fact a deliberately poorly Photoshopped picture made by an Egyptian comedian as a joke, but one eagerly picked up by media and social media bent upon proving that the entire episode was a conspiracy against Saudi Arabia.

The goal is simple: if you can't convince them, confuse them. The disappearance of Khashoggi did not take place in a vacuum. For months on end, propaganda accounts targeted him relentlessly, calling him a traitor and worthy of death. Naturally, no proof as such was ever presented (Khashoggi's criticism of the Saudi government was fairly mild) but frequency and ferocity often does the trick. A lie, if retweeted enough, does become the truth for enough people. It's enough to muddy the waters so no one can actually see what lurks in the depths. Just a few days back the hashtag #ArrestEnemiesOfState was trending on Pakistani Twitter, and you get no prizes for guessing who the targets of this campaign were. Here's a clue: they were not those who openly call for the murder of judges with full impunity.

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