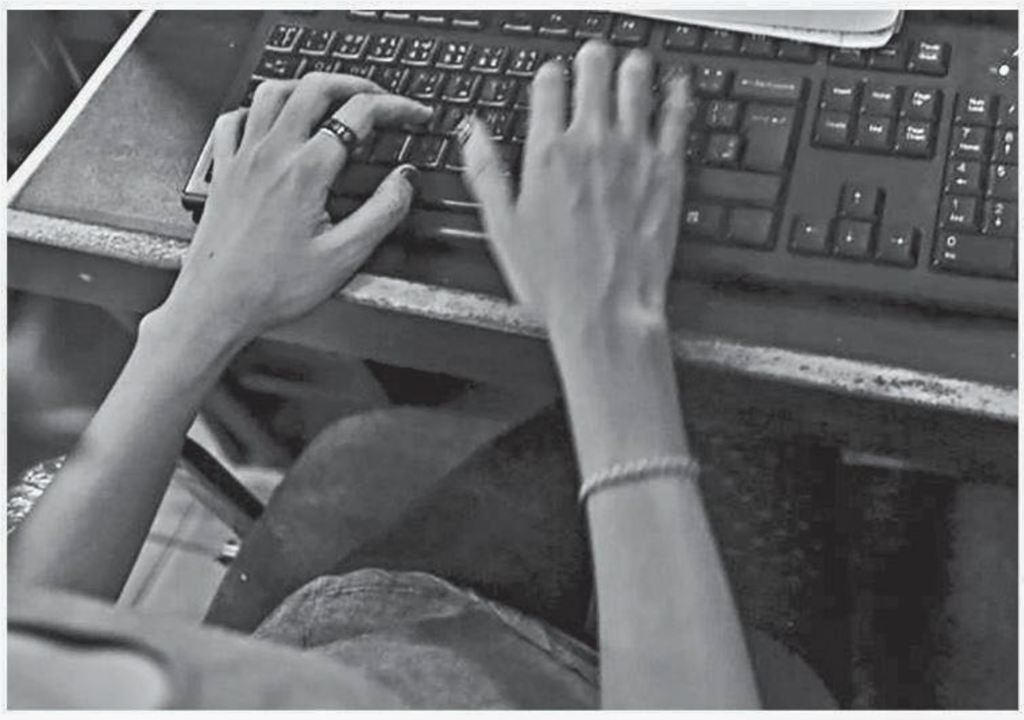
Where is thy freedom on the internet?

FAHMIDA ZAMAN

SINCE the Indian Parliament approved the Citizenship Amendment Bill on December 11, hundreds of thousands of Indians are protesting against the controversial amendment, which critics claim marginalises Muslim minorities of the country. In the wake of these protests, New Delhi's police department ordered the country's largest telecom carriers to stop voice, text, and internet services on December 18. Similarly, following revoking of the special status of the Indian administrated Kashmir, internet access has been blocked in the region for over 135 days. The consecutive internet shutdown in Kashmir is now being called the longest ever internet shut down in a democracy. Internet shutdown by states, especially during protests, is not unique to India. In Bangladesh, the government has sometimes blocked independent news websites and arrested ordinary citizens for social media contents deemed critical of the government. During the 2018 road-safety protest, there were allegations of slowing down mobile networks to limit internet usages and there had been cases of arrest of social media users for "spreading fake news."

Internet, and social media platforms, and the cyberspace in general, have become the new battleground for democratic norms and values. In 2019, Larry Diamond described social media as a "major threat to democratic stability and human freedom" acknowledging the dismal shift in social media's role in promoting democracy and freedom.



Deteriorating internet freedom is followed by suppression or co-option of traditional news sources. PHOTO: REUTERS/SOE ZEYA TUN

Internet and social media platforms in their early days emerged as a beacon of light so much so that prominent political scientists Larry Diamond hailed them as "liberating technologies." Diamond argued that these technologies "can expand political, social, and economic freedom" and can even be used for "mobilising against authoritarian rule." Of course, one could claim that the Arab Spring in 2011 provided empirical evidence in support of Diamond's argument. The Arab Spring protesters across North Africa and the Middle East used the internet, mobile phones, and various social media platforms to mobilise and overthrow four dictators—Zineel Abadine Ben Ali of Tunisia, Muammar Gaddafi of Libya, Ali Abdullah Saleh of Yemen, and Hosni Mubarak of Egypt.

In Bangladesh, the Shahbag movement in 2013 used platforms provided by the internet to organise and spread its messages. Most recently, the road-safety movement has relied heavily on social media to mobilise and disseminate information not only because of the conveniences of quick information spreading but also due to a lack of trust in the traditional news sources. Yet, the increased usages of digital technologies by state apparatus to control cyberspace has not gone unnoticed. Following the lead of China over the last ten years, numerous countries around the world including Bangladesh have used tactics of internet surveillance, particularly in attempts to curb anti-government protests, and imposed legal restrictions to control cyberspace.

This rise in attempts to control the cyberspace and restrict freedom of expression online has been called digital authoritarianism. Digital authoritarianism refers to the means through which authoritarian and repressive governments surveil and repress dissent on the internet. These are done by creating laws, policies, and regulations such as the Digital Security Act in Bangladesh. Governments are also adopting more covert policies to delegitimise criticism, for example, by claiming such opposing opinions as fake-news.

To that extent, Freedom House estimates that the level of internet freedom globally has declined for the ninth consecutive year in 2019. A few important takeaways from the Washington D.C based think tank's Freedom on the Internet 2019 report, which described the level of internet freedom for the year 2018, are that, first of all, governments are not only limiting freedom of expression online but also taking active legal steps against citizens. Of the 65 countries assessed for the Freedom House report in 2019, that law enforcement agencies in 47 countries arrested people for posting political, social, or religious content online. Secondly, an increased number of countries, 40 of the 65 countries in 2018, are adapting to the new culture of digital authoritarianism by instituting advanced social media surveillance programmes. 15 of 40 countries that are using advance social media surveillance, it was only in the past year that such programmes were either expanded or newly established. As a result, 89 percent of internet users, close to three billion people, are being monitored on social media. Finally, since 2018, overall internet freedom, measured by a country's obstacles to internet access, content limits, and user rights violations, declined in 33 countries. This indicates, as noted earlier, the rise of digital authoritarianism around the world. The report also revealed that Bangladesh, along with Sudan, Kazakhstan, Brazil, and Zimbabwe, witnessed the biggest decline in internet freedom in 2018.

What does such a continuous decline in internet freedom in Bangladesh and around the world tell us? The diminishing freedom on the internet is indicative of the ongoing democratic backsliding and shirking of freedom of expression around the world. The democratic backsliding has been marked by a global shift towards authoritarianism, diminishing press freedom, limits on freedom of expression, and the rise of right-wing populist ideologies in all corners of the world. Over the past 13 years, democratic norms and values have sharply declined in both long-standing democracies such as the United States and the UK and other regimes such as in Turkey, India, and Bangladesh. All in all, democracy, along with citizen's freedom online and rights to freedom of expression, is in danger.

Furthermore, efforts to control the internet and social media are responsive to concerns over the government's ability to maintain domestic political control. Governments that perceive their power or legitimacy to be threatened by a mass display of dissatisfaction online or through protests are more likely to enhance restrictive measures online. Such restrictive measures online are aimed to limit the role of the internet and social media in spreading critical discourse or mobilising protests. For example, India has been regularly shutting down the internet. In fact, according to the Software Freedom Law Centre, various levels of authorities in India have shut down the internet 376 times since 2012 including 134 in 2018 and 104 times in 2019.

Deteriorating internet freedom is followed by suppression or co-option of traditional news sources. Populist leaders, for example, in India favoured media outlets that are flattering to the governments while isolating, harassing, or even denying licenses to critical news outlets. In other countries, harassments and killings of journalists have become more common. The 2018 murder of Jamal Khashoggi, a fierce critique of the Saudi government, was the most infamous recent case, but it was hardly unique. Given the shirking press freedom, it is not surprising that repressive governments would like to curb the scope of information dissemination through the internet and social media, particularly when these platforms become an alternative source of information due to the lack of legitimacy of traditional news sources among citizens.

Internet, and social media platforms, and the cyberspace in general, have become the new battleground for democratic norms and values. In 2019, Larry Diamond described social media as a "major threat to democratic stability and human freedom" acknowledging the dismal shift in social media's role in promoting democracy and freedom. Authoritarian and repressive governments are employing tactics and tools of digital authoritarianism to constantly monitor citizens' activities and eliminate any perceived dissents on the internet. Preserving internet freedom, however, cannot be separated from preserving freedom of press and freedom of expression offline as these are intrinsically connected and major components of democracy.

Fahmida Zaman is a PhD student in Political Science in the United States.

The 'Londoni' Connection

ISMAIL ALI

IT is said that Sylhet, the northern metropolitan city, is the London of Bangladesh. Nearly 150 people from my native Bangladeshi village of Kewali Para are now proud British citizens. The majority of them living in London's inner boroughs, Tower Hamlets in particular, have nice but empty houses and own almost half of arable but abandoned land in the village.

Although they experience a range of socio-economic problems in their everyday life in London, they play a pivotal role in the development of the village they left behind, apart from supporting their relatives. When I met the Member of Parliament (MP) for this constituency during his recent London visit and requested him for the completion of an important road, he said it will be built in the next few months with the help of "Londonis" (a popular term for Bangladeshi British).

The same applies to every British of Bangladeshi origin, almost 600,000, according to the 2015 census. Among them, 95 percent come from one particular region: Sylhet. A large number migrated to the United Kingdom (UK) during the 1950s and over a period of say 70 years they have transformed their land of origin, too.

British Bangladeshis have also made their mark in their new home: the UK. As professionals, diplomats and MPs they make significant contributions to this country. The success story of Bangladeshi restaurants (mainly Sylheti) is well known. It adds 4.5 billion pounds yearly to the British economy and employs 150,000 people. Meghan Markle, the American-born wife of Prince Harry, needs to know that the Chicken Tikka Masala is Britain's national dish to pass the British citizenship test.

The London-Sylhet connection is historically deep. Brick Lane is a mini Sylhet and many things in Sylhet are reminiscent of London. British schools have included the Sylheti language as a separate subject.

However, the fourth-generation of British-Bangladeshis are detached from the roots of their grandparents. Compared to the first-generation, who left their loved ones behind, the new generation feel Britain is their home. The consequence of this detachment concerns many.

A 2009 study by the University of Surrey found that the financial relationship between Londoni families and those in Bangladesh was "rapidly changing". "In 1995 20 percent of the Bangladeshi families in east London were sending money to Bangladesh whereas in the 60s and 70s, 85 percent were remitting their savings." Today the proportion may be even smaller than 10 percent.

During the 1990s, there was a trend of marriages between Londonis and native-born Bangladeshis. Young men and women would visit Bangladesh to get married. However, this generation is more likely to get married in the UK within the British culture.

This change of heart is apparently an unavoidable reality. For a large number of families in Britain the rising cost of living severely constrains any regular financial commitment towards their relatives back home. The family reunion process has resulted in conflicts over land and property between members of a household divided by migration. Occupying Londonis' land, houses and businesses is a worrying trend in Sylhet. Complaints piled up when Abdul Momen, Bangladesh Foreign Minister, also a Sylheti, visited London recently.

"Is London getting poorer?" asked one of my nephews during a recent telephone conversation. When I enquired why, he replied that most of the Londonis he knows talk about selling their Bangladeshi assets these days. 10 or 20 years back the opposite was the case, as my nephew recalled.

The fourth-generation of British-Bangladeshis are detached from the roots of their grandparents. PHOTO: REUTERS/MICHAEL DALDER/FILE PHOTO

Coming back to the point of remittance, it is true that most of the money has been spent on buying land and constructing luxurious mansions even in a rural landscape. As Ayub Korom Ali, a former Labour Party councillor in the London borough of Newham, observes, big Londoni houses in the area of Uposhohar are standing vacant and the upper floors of many shopping centres in Sylhet remain unoccupied.

Nevertheless, the flow of remittances (a billion dollars each year) is not only crucial for Bangladesh's economy, but for many families in Sylhet it is also their lifeline. Sylhet was known to be one of the richest cities in Bangaldesh after Dhaka, thanks to the remittances sent back home by the Londonis. But this prosperity may not be sustainable in the long run.

He also highlights, "There are few large industries and agricultural production is low compared to other districts. Where farmers in other regions grow three crops a year, most of Sylhet produces only one."

Thereby, Sylhet and many other townships in the region—Maulvibazar, Beani Bazar, Biswanath, and Goalabazar—will become vulnerable when the London connection disappears and remittances dry up. Nearby upazila of Jagannathpur and Chhatak in Sunamganj district, enjoying the same London connected lifestyle, will also feel the pain.

Policy makers need to think about this important issue urgently. Setting up a proposed Special Economic Zone in Sylhet (rich in natural resources like gas, stone and minerals) can not only attract British multinational corporations, but also transform the economic landscape of the region. Moreover, investing in Sylhet can open up trade potential for British businesses with neighbouring India.

Perhaps keeping the above in mind, the British High Commissioner in Bangladesh was considering exploring the London-Sylhet connection and establish a long-term commercial relation with Sylhet, when he said, "British Bangladeshis are at the forefront of everything we do."

With a sustained eight percent growth rate, Bangladesh (one among Next-9, after BRIC—Brazil, Russia, India, China, according to American Investment Bank Goldman Sachs) is an attractive investment destination. And Britain, being the largest development partner, second biggest foreign direct investor and third highest export destination for Bangladesh, is a country of the highest importance.

Finally, the fourth generation of highly educated and entrepreneurial British-Bangladeshis can transform the remittance-dependent economic relationship into an investment driven win-win bond with the place from which they originated. Like one of my brothers-in-law, a born-and-brought up Sylheti-British, recently started a Manchester-based (UK) perfume manufacturing company collecting raw materials from Sylhet. But the host must ensure the appropriate environment.

Ismail Ali works for Catholic Agency for Overseas Development, an England based organisation.

QUOTABLE Quote

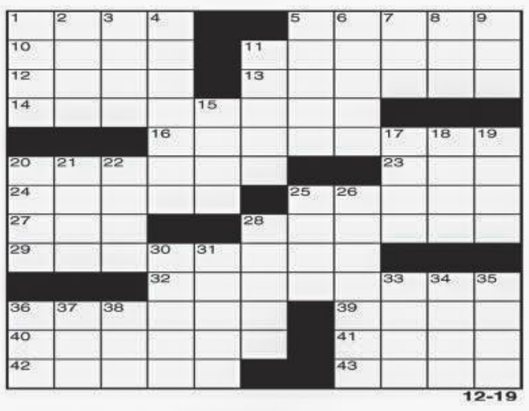
TAMA J KIEVES
(Born 1961)
American writer and career coach.

If everyone is speaking caterpillar, don't be afraid to speak butterfly. When it's time to awaken, nothing else will suit you.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS
1 Surgery souvenir
5 Straight beater
10 Superb
11 Skull protectors
12 Got larger
13 Snappy answer
14 Looked into
16 Injustices
20 Rider's seat
23 Fiddling need
24 Clinic worker
25 Animal life
27 Wrath
28 Siamese baby
29 Penn State symbol
32 They may be settled
36 Game quest
39 Nick Charles's wife
40 Cheers
41 Greek vowels
42 Tribal leader
43 Declares

DOWN
1 Hangs down
2 "Downton Abbey" countess
3 Over again
4 Bounties
5 Psychoanalysis pioneer
6 Barista's creation
7 First número
8 Polite address
9 Bowler, e.g.
11 "Gladiator" star
15 Hay unit
17 Touch on
18 Solitary
19 Symbol of grace
20 Salon sound
21 Surrounding glow
22 Sketched
25 Shark features
26 Brings into harmony
28 New Zeland natives
30 China piece
31 Less common
33 Greek vowel
34 Waiter's aid
35 Pertness
36 Bishopric
37 Maximum amount
38 Craze



12-19

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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