

DSA being used to choke freedom of speech and expression

Draconian sections must be scrapped

As citizens of an independent, democratic country, we are deeply disturbed by the number of cases under the Digital Security Act that seems to have been misused to harass and intimidate dissenting voices rather than to protect the rights of the people. According to Article 19, last year, 457 people have been held under this Act, including 75 journalists who have been prosecuted.

What is most disturbing is the draconian nature of this Act—as many as 14 of the 20 sections of the Act are non-bailable. Although a judge can still decide to give bail if he or she wants to, we have seen how difficult it has been for many of the accused to get bail.

That a record number of people from various professions—journalists, teachers, students, folk musicians, cultural activists etc.—were prosecuted and arrested gives a very ominous impression of the level of intolerance for divergent views. Article 19 has found through its research that most of the complainants were either ruling party members or ruling party parliamentarians, union parishad chairpersons and mayors. Some were law enforcers.

Section 25 criminalises anyone using a website or digital device for deliberate distribution of information that is “attacking or intimidating in nature” or false information intended to “irritate, humiliate, defame, embarrass or discredit a person”. This section also considers it a crime if someone publishes material that is deemed as defaming the state or for publishing fully or partially distorted information or data, knowing that it is false. Even the High Court has asked the government to explain why Section 25 and Section 31 of the DSA should not be considered unconstitutional, following a writ petition filed by nine people.

Sections of this Act give blanket prohibitions on publication of content on digital platforms with vague and unspecified offences, giving scope to abuse the law in order to harass individuals.

That these cases have seen a sharp spike during the pandemic year of 2020 is especially puzzling and disquieting.

It is indeed tragic that we live at a time when political satire and criticising a weak healthcare system on social media can land individuals in jail, as has been the case recently. Are there not much worse crimes being committed in this country that deserve more attention and redress? Does the punishment of months in jail without granting of bail, being deprived of seeing family members, fit the crime of posting a cartoon, writing a comment or sharing a post that someone arbitrarily decides to be offended by and claims to be anti-state, anti-religion or anti-peace?

Laws must act to protect the ordinary citizens’ rights. The DSA has, in most cases, been applied to do just the opposite. The government must put a stop to its abuse.

Migrant workers to benefit from skills certificates

The process must be transparent

We laud the government’s latest decision to sign Mutual Recognition Agreements (MRA) with different countries and regional bodies so that international recognition of Bangladeshi migrant workers’ skills certifications can be made possible. Such agreements are required to ensure robust inclusion of Bangladeshi workers in the global market. The Additional Director General (training) of Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET) has mentioned a significant point justifying this decision, which is that providing training will not be enough if the worker’s certificate is not accepted in the global market. It is encouraging to see our government officials thinking pragmatically on how to improve the job prospects of migrant workers.

According to Bangladesh Employers’ Federation (BEF), Bangladeshi migrant workers in the Middle East earn a third of their Sri Lankan and half of their Indian counterparts’ wages. This immense gap can be reduced by issuing proper certification to the workers. Besides, skills training of migrant workers, especially for women migrant workers, will help them to get better paying jobs. At a meeting held on September 22, 2019, Bangladesh Mahila Parishad’s (BMP) then acting Secretary Rekha Chowdhury stated that around 5,000 complaints of harassment, deception, physical abuse and rape had been filed by female migrant workers, mostly returning from Saudi Arabia, between the years 2017-2019. According to a report in this daily, a total of 437 bodies of women migrant workers have been received by the Bangladeshi authorities between 2016 and 2020. One way to reduce these unacceptable consequences is to provide migrant workers with adequate knowledge of the type of jobs and skills training that they will be recruited for and the professional responsibilities that will be associated with them.

However, the government has to be alert about the issuing of fake certificates for financial gains. The concerned authorities have to guarantee that no innocent migrant worker will be deceived while securing a professional certificate through their hard-earned money. Also, necessary checks have to be made so that vested quarters cannot avail a monopoly over the certificate issuing process by using their links with influential figures. The whole affair has to be transparent and systematic in order to be effective and to truly benefit our migrant workers.



FARUQ FAISAL

A documentary on Bangladesh, produced and telecast by a Middle East based television channel, seems to have managed to create quite a commotion in Bangladesh lately. Although the government was well aware that the show would be on air on February 1 through the promotions of the documentary on the TV channel, it did not try to block the show in Bangladesh. The authorities can definitely be praised for that decision. It showed faith in our system and confidence that Bangladeshi viewers would be able to make their own judgements and accept or reject the report as they saw fit.

However, soon after the telecast of the show, different agencies of the government and some journalistic bodies started issuing press releases separately. Some of the rejoinders claimed the documentary to be false and baseless. Even conspiracy theories were brought forward against the TV channel, instead of clearing the air with the truth and facts-based counter-narratives.

The latest development in this regard is the High Court directive to the telecom regulator to immediately remove the documentary from online platforms. The court ordered the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) to contact Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Twitter, if

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necessary, to remove the report.

People strongly believe that the state, more so the people, are far more powerful than a TV channel. The Bangladesh government could have easily countered the substance of the report through investigations and exposed the weaknesses of the report by revealing the truth. Filtering and blocking the content on the Internet is unlikely to yield any positive results for the state. BTRC could

interference with the fundamental right of every person to seek and exchange information and ideas. Secondly, they are notoriously ineffective and amount to a violation of the right to freedom of expression. Thirdly, blocking/filtering decisions usually lack transparency. In the case of Bangladesh, the directive came from the High Court. However, in other countries, this is rarely ordered by a court. Many governments are now in breach

their platforms. However, these rules are often vague and broad, and their application is inconsistent and biased. This means a large amount of content is wrongly removed (or wrongly kept online), affecting our right to freedom of expression, and our ability to be part of public debate and speak out on the issues that matter to us. Too often, these wrongful removals affect those already experiencing discrimination and



PHOTO: COLLECTED

probably be able to block the report on national platforms, but as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Twitter are global platforms and they have their own community policies, they can either decline BTRC’s request or carry it out only for Bangladesh. Only time will tell.

According to human rights organisation ARTICLE 19, “the Internet was designed to enable the free flow of information; however, technical measures restricting access to content are now worryingly commonplace in authoritarian and democratic countries alike.”

Although a growing number of countries are turning to the removal of content rather than merely blocking access to it, ARTICLE 19 remains deeply concerned by content blocking/filtering. Firstly, these measures are *prima facie* an

of their obligations under international human rights law because of their use of blocking/filtering technologies. Much of the world’s online content is now regulated by the community standards and algorithms of a handful of Internet companies, whose operations and processes lack transparency. Internet users’ right to free expression is easily subject to abuse in this regulatory environment, the complexity of which is compounded by the fact that the Internet is a public space built on decentralised private infrastructure.

Companies like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube hold huge influence over our ability to exercise our human rights online, through the application of content rules which determine what can and cannot be shared on

silencing, such as human rights defenders and journalists.

Having informed public and diverse opinions is beneficial to the government. This ensures that the country develops, not only infrastructure wise, but our people also grow and can positively contribute to our society. Free speech and information are fundamental components to the functioning of a democracy, which in turn provides credibility to the government. Thus, democracy and freedom of expression are inextricably linked and are important for ensuring equality, development and non-discrimination.

Faruq Faisal is the South Asia Regional Director of ARTICLE 19, an international organisation working for freedom of expression and the right to know.

We must modernise textile engineering education in Bangladesh

ADMAY SANEY and SYED SAAD ANDALEEB

THE present government has correctly emphasised the need to develop and expand technical education in the country. It has set up various engineering universities and some engineering colleges, which provide BSc level courses in various technical subjects. The roles of these colleges are fully controlled and managed by the universities they are affiliated with. Every year, many students get admitted to the

percent, compared to 7.8 percent in 2017. However, growth has slowed down due to Covid-19. To continue the growth trend, the government has set up a few textile colleges, including a textile university. However, challenges remain, which we bring to the fore to address key issues that are critical to improving the textile engineering colleges.

There are seven textile colleges in Bangladesh; several more are under construction. Each college trains about

Some colleges have been upgraded from offering Diploma to BSc degrees, where Diploma teachers are being promoted to take classes. Although new teachers are hired occasionally, additions to the teaching staff are negligible compared to the need. Lacking adequate training, despite their best efforts, these teachers cannot give the students their best.

The appointment of departmental teachers is critical for the development of any educational institution. However,

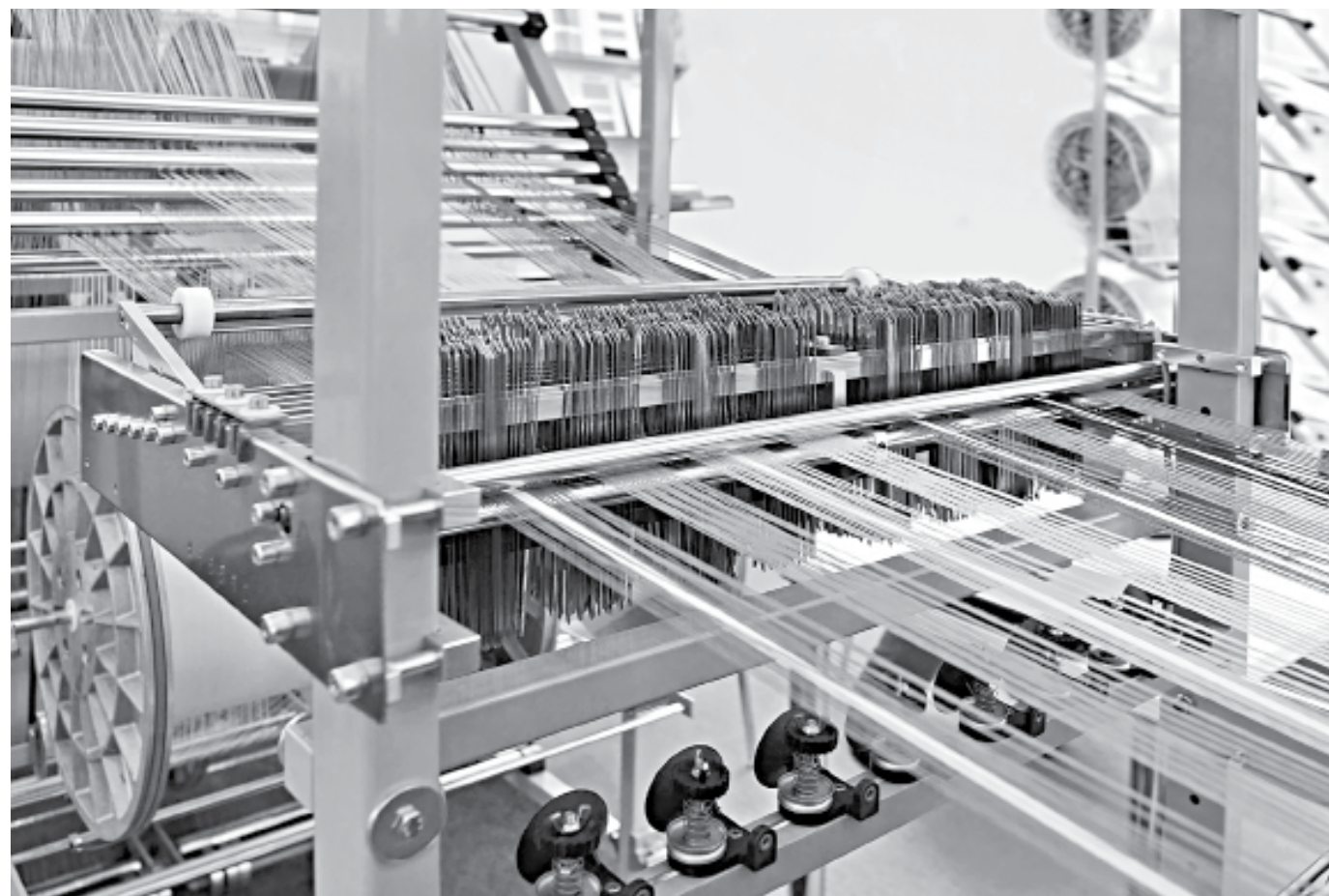
is no equipment in the laboratories that deals with modern textiles and technical textiles like microfibre, fibre composition, and modern dyeing. Thus, thesis work is based on using conventional instruments. How is it possible to improve technical education in the country if we continue in this way?

Last year, students of certain institutions pursued their theses on fibre composition, but it was not practical due to the lack of modern laboratory equipment. Where such equipment is available, research is hampered for a lack of skilled technicians. Thus, the progress of the nation’s engineering colleges and the quality of the graduates are questionable. Where research is the lifeblood of an engineering institution, these colleges do not have a budget for research, nor do they have trained technicians and faculty. One wonders why a decent budget is not allocated to conduct research in our engineering colleges.

Let us also take a glance at the curriculum. The truth is that many of the subjects are old-fashioned. Although the industries have become modern in keeping pace with the times, the curriculum has remained the same. Students also have a two-month long internship every semester to improve their technical capacity. These experiences could be improved in great measure. Graduating students thus face a very embarrassing situation when they land their first jobs in the industry: they lack adequate and modern knowhow.

The present world also demands a move from traditional textile to technical textile. The entire sector needs to change in tandem with the needs of the rest of the world. And for this, we need a rich technical education system based on research. About four million people are directly or indirectly involved in this sector in Bangladesh, where only three lakh people were employed in 2000. In most of the factories, foreign engineers occupy the top positions due to a lack of skilled local engineers. By developing local competence, it can reduce the country’s reliance on foreign engineers and enable the locals to play a pivotal role in taking the country forward. Support from the textile industry through joint programmes and funding support would be the icing on the cake.

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The present world demands a move from traditional textile to technical textile.

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government engineering colleges with the dream of contributing to the economy and the country. How effective are these colleges in making these dreams come true? The general contention is that they provide very mediocre education that does not fulfill the needs of the students.

The textile sector is the source of over 80 percent of foreign exchange earnings in Bangladesh; it is called the country’s economic backbone. The garment industry’s growth rate in 2019 was 11.49

480 students. In Pabna Textile Engineering College, it was found that there are four assistant professors, eight lecturers, six t-instructors, and a few other teachers, but no professors. The conditions of the new colleges are deplorable.

The first problem in every college is a crisis of teachers. Where one teacher is recommended for every 12 engineering students, there are too few teachers in service to meet the student-teacher ratio. Thus, guest teachers conduct many classes.

There is a crisis of departmental teachers and technicians in textile education. Students cannot make much progress due to the lack of seminars, as well as required information and useful guidelines. Consequently, they are very frustrated, and many students want to pursue higher education abroad.

Regarding laboratories, students cannot do their thesis work properly due to lack of equipment and budgetary allocations for laboratory research. There