

TikTok trafficking ring a sign of risky digital spaces

The authorities' priority must be online safety, not the policing of free speech on social media

A police investigation into the rape and torture of a Bangladeshi woman in India has revealed a sinister network of human trafficking operating within the country. In a recent press briefing, the Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) confirmed that a transnational gang involving some Bangladeshis has been trafficking young girls, using the social networking platform TikTok, and forcing them into sex work in India.

While this is hardly the first case of transnational sex trafficking in Bangladesh—according to anti-human trafficking NGOs, around 500,000 Bangladeshi women and children aged between 12-30 years have been illegally sent to India over the last decade—this is likely the first known instance of trafficking on this scale occurring via TikTok. Police also found a Facebook group where the young people meeting on TikTok were added—after befriending the victims, gang members offered them well-paid jobs in India and eventually trafficked them via border districts.

This incident has, beyond a doubt, proven just how unsafe online spaces can be for children and young people who are not well-versed in navigating such spaces. TikTok's privacy issues have been questioned for a while now, since it is a platform where all the content is open to the public. In 2019, it was given a record USD 5.7 million fine by the US Federal Trade Commission for mishandling children's data. However, as previous attempts to regulate online platforms have shown, the use of VPNs means that it is almost impossible to restrict usage, regardless of what country you are in. Experts opine that the only solution is to improve digital literacy and spread awareness in order to ensure safety in digital spaces.

The easy access of this trafficking network to its victims—the gang targeted school and college students, and sometimes young housewives—demonstrates a glaring gap in digital literacy and digital safety in Bangladesh. The authorities must launch a long-term and comprehensive awareness programme to target this gap in knowledge, ensuring that not only children and young people but also their guardians are aware of the pitfalls of the Internet, the potential of being “groomed” by online friends and the importance of protecting their privacy online. The country's Cyber Security and Crimes Division and Anti-Trafficking Monitoring Cell must also be more vigilant. One of the arrested members of the ring admitted to investigators that he had trafficked nearly 1,000 women in the last eight years, so why are we only investigating this now?

It is reprehensible that traffickers are being allowed to operate online so freely, selling young girls into slavery and torture after meeting them on social media, whereas journalists and conscientious citizens are being arrested under the draconian Digital Security Act for exercising their right to freedom of speech on the same platforms. It is clear that the authorities have got the wrong end of the stick when it comes to policing the digital world. They must ensure they get it right before more young women become victims of trafficking.

'New' town, same old mistakes

Why is there no accountability for the gross delay of Purbachal project?

WHAT was supposed to be an “ideal town” to take some of the population burden off Dhaka city has so far been revised five times since its initiation in 1995, with its progress still a far cry from completion. It has now been 11 years since the initial deadline of Rajuk's Purbachal New Town project, and the initial population estimate (10 lakh) has nearly tripled while the initial project cost (Tk 3,312 crore) has more than tripled. Let us not forget that all of these delays and revisions are being financed by public money.

In clear violation of a 2014 High Court order to not “efface, subtract, vary or modify the forest, lakes, canals, urban green, parks, playgrounds” as per the fourth revision and without its permission, Rajuk deemed it okay to allegedly reassign land meant for schools, playgrounds and open spaces to 89 new plots. Adding insult to injury, Rajuk is now dismantling the four-lane road (completed in 2018 at a cost of Tk 275 crore) to put in place an eight-lane expressway that was supposedly in the original plan but did not have the funding for before. According to the secretary general of Bangladesh Institute of Planners, Rajuk is also shifting to an underground cable ducting system from the overhead power lines it had already put in place. As for other utility lines (gas, sewage, water), there is apparently no clear plan.

The lack of planning and accountability would be baffling if we were not already so accustomed to large-scale government projects such as these costing the public time and money beyond their deadlines. Still, we cannot ignore the authorities' sheer disregard for public money and interest when absurdly lengthy delays like this can go on unchecked. How can an HC order be flouted so blatantly without any acceptable reason?

It is high time for Rajuk and other responsible parties to be held accountable for these delays and ever-increasing costs of the Purbachal housing project. They must be made to explain these shortcomings and compensate the public for them, instead of receiving a customary slap on the wrist. The government must be more concerned about such questionable accountability mechanisms since these delays are bottlenecks to its development goals as much as they gobble up valuable resources and funds. We believe this is how such common fallibilities of large-scale government projects should be dealt with—by the government itself.

Testing data: A powerful ally in the fight against Covid-19



TIMOTHY S. GREEN

COVID-19 cases are on the rise in Bangladesh again. The average number of new cases over the last seven days was 1,854 per day, compared to an average of 1,444 a week earlier—that's a 28 percent increase. Some startling statistics recently emerged showing huge spikes in cases in border districts, raising the alarm that we may be seeing a spread of the Delta variant (popularly known as “Indian variant”) spilling over the Indian border. However, to understand the true picture of Covid-19 in these districts, there is an urgent need for more numbers. It's been over a year since the head of the World Health Organization stressed the need to “test, test, test” and make widespread testing, isolation and contact tracing the “backbone” of the global response. But are enough tests being conducted in these districts to be able to rely on the statistics and form an effective response?

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, Bangladesh has conducted just over six million Covid tests in total, which sounds like a lot until you realise that in a country with an estimated population of 166 million people, that represents a testing rate of 36 per thousand (or one test for every 27 people). Now, compare this to other countries in the region: Pakistan has a testing rate of one test for every 16 people. For Nepal and Sri Lanka, it is one test for every nine and six people respectively, and in India, one test for every four people. Indeed, with the exception of Afghanistan, Bangladesh has the lowest test rates in South Asia. Yet, the latest GDP per capita figures show the country has the highest growth in the region. Given the remarkable economic success of the country, it is disheartening that widespread testing has still not been adopted.

A more direct comparison can help give a better perspective of these testing numbers. West Bengal has an estimated population of 100 million (10 crores), equivalent to approximately 60 percent of the population of 166 million (16.6 crores) of Bangladesh. And yet, the number of tests being conducted in the state is approximately 70,000 per day, according to Indian media, compared to an average of around 16,500 per day in Bangladesh over the last two weeks. In short, West Bengal is conducting seven times as many tests per person per day, despite West Bengal itself having been

criticised for one of the lowest state-wise testing rates across India.

Bangladesh has a proven capacity to conduct more testing though. Around the peak of the second wave, for several days between April 4 and 13, the number of tests exceeded 30,000 per day, with the highest number just short of 35,000 on April 12. Indeed, for the two months from March 12 through to May 12, the average (median) number of tests per day was 24,000 compared to the median of

percent two weeks ago. Which leads us to the border districts.

This week, analysis by the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) reported that bordering districts such as Rajshahi, Chapainawabganj and Satkhira (amongst others) have positivity rates in excess of 30 percent. These numbers are very alarming, but how reliable are they?

In statistics, there is a concept called sampling error, the important part here being that working with small numbers

With the outbreak in India clearly becoming uncontrollable by mid-April and with the knowledge that completely closing the porous borders is more or less impossible, stepping up testing in border districts would have been a sensible approach. We know that given the typical delay of a couple of weeks between infection and hospitalisation, by the time hospitals are under pressure, as they are now, the transmission is already well-established. But routine testing in these

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FILE PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

15,500 daily tests over the last six months (and 16,500 over the last two weeks).

In fairness, the successes must be highlighted, namely that Bangladesh does have the lowest death rate per capita in the region (although each of the nearly 13,000 deaths is a tragedy)—so why is more testing even important? Because, knowledge is power and effective decision-making relies on being informed. If we are to avoid the tragedy happening in India, the relevant authorities need to understand and be able to act on the situation as it unfolds, not two weeks later.

Insufficient testing has limited the usefulness of the reported numbers of cases throughout the pandemic in Bangladesh. It has never been known at any one time how many people are infected, how widespread infections are, and importantly, where they are. More cautious commentators have relied on the less direct measure of positivity rate (the proportion of tests which return a positive diagnosis) to vaguely track the situation and general direction of change. Day-on-day increases in positivity suggest an increased rate of infection, such as is happening now—the average national positivity rate over the last week now being 10.8 percent, whereas it was 8.4

can lead to extreme statistical values, and trying to draw too much insight from a small sample is not wise. Take, for example, the case of Rajshahi. The DGHS's Covid-19 dashboard shows that on June 7, the positivity rate in Rajshahi hit a staggering 48 percent. However, in absolute numbers this was 108 cases, which means there were 225 tests, in a district with a population of over two million (20 lakh). From such small numbers of tests, it cannot be known whether this represents a substantial level of transmission across broad areas of the district, or just a targeted testing of a single infected area. In other districts, the testing numbers are even lower, with an average of 72 and 52 tests per day in Satkhira and Naogaon respectively over the last month. At these numbers, a swing of 10 percent in positivity can be achieved by testing of a single infected family of six. Only through routine widespread testing can we be confident that these are not isolated biases in the sampling.

It should be stressed here that an increase in the rise of cases is not in dispute—these figures clearly show a concerning rise in the transmission rate. The problem is that the true extent of this rise is not knowable from the small numbers of tests being conducted.

districts would be a significant weapon in the authorities' arsenal in catching and isolating transmission of cases at the early stages, which is crucial in preventing the spread of new variants. However, so far, that has not been the case. If we take the example of Rajshahi again, we find that the average daily tests in April did increase to 266 during the second wave, up from 186 in March, but then decreased back down to a daily average of 183 in May. Other border districts tell a similar tale.

Data is an extremely powerful tool and has transformed the world in recent decades. It is encouraging to see the authorities acknowledge this by investing in the publication of high-quality Covid-19 data dashboards for public consumption, and the recent announcement of waiving the test fees in specific districts, to encourage more tests, is a step in the right direction. Without a doubt, the best and most effective decisions are informed decisions, and data is the key to that. However, the usefulness of data is only as good as its quality. We must invest in more testing to truly understand and reduce the transmission of Covid-19.

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India's Sedition Law and Media Freedom



PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

TWO orders given by India's Supreme Court in two separate cases early this month have, once again, brought into sharp focus the issue of the colonial-era law relating to sedition in the

context of media freedom. Both cases involve journalists and their reporting. One of the cases relates to the booking of two journalists of Telugu language news channels under Section 124A of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) for telecasting a speech by a dissident leader of Andhra Pradesh's ruling YSR Congress Party, which allegedly spread disaffection with the state government. The other case pertains to an FIR filed against noted journalist Vinod Dua, who was accused of having made remarks against Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his government's handling of the migrant labour crisis during the Covid-19 lockdown in 2020. In the hearings in both cases, the top court has made important observations which have a strong bearing on media freedom and the future of the sedition law.

In the case relating to the Telugu news channel journalists, the apex court underlined that there is a need for examining afresh the scope of the sedition law, given the frequency of sedition charges being levelled against the media for publishing views critical of the establishment. In the case of Dua, a separate bench of the Supreme Court not only quashed the FIR against him but also said, pointing to a 40-year-old ruling of the apex judiciary, that no journalist can be arrested just for criticising the government if he or she did not incite violence against the government or fomented hatred among communities. The bench made it a point to refer to a 1962 judgement of the top court in the “Kedar Nath Singh versus Union of India” case and averred that every journalist would be entitled to protection in terms of the principles contained in the judgement of the case.

The importance of the Indian Supreme

Court orders on June 1 and 3 respectively get amplified when one recalls that a fresh constitutional challenge by two journalists, Kishorechandra Wangkhemcha and Kanhaiya Lal Shukla, is still pending before the apex court.

The media fraternity in the country and the Editors Guild of India have naturally welcomed the two orders of the Supreme Court in view of the growing perception that the 1870 sedition law, which provides

the sedition law comes out clearly when one sees how several sedition cases were filed in connection with major street protests against the Kudankulam nuclear power project in the southern state of Tamil Nadu when Congress party ruled India in 2011, and during the violent protests against the BJP dispensation's Citizenship Amendment Act—which gives Indian citizenship to “persecuted” religious minorities from Bangladesh,

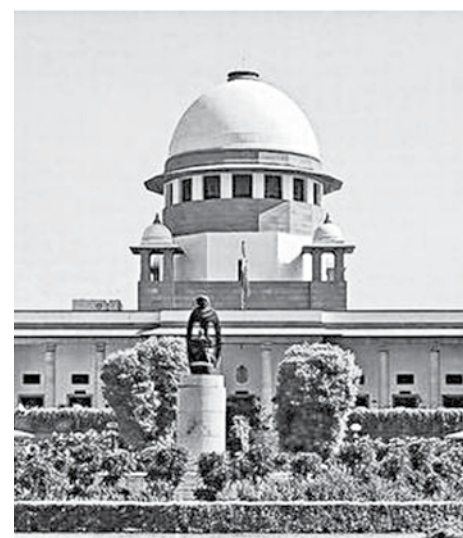
principles mention the situations in which the sedition charge cannot be applied.

Section 124A of the IPC says: “Whoever by words, either spoken or written, or by signs, or by visible representation, or otherwise, brings or attempts to bring into hatred or contempt or excites or attempts to excite disaffection towards the government established by law in (India) shall be punished...” It has been suggested by many journalists that this formulation—particularly words like “hatred”, “contempt” and “disaffection”—is too vague and leaves a grey area that lends itself to open and subjective interpretations. That perhaps is true of several other laws and not just sedition legislation. It has also been contended that whether a remark or action constitutes *prima facie* sedition should not be left for a police officer or the political executive to decide, but rather a committee of legal experts should take a call on where a sedition case is made out for filing an FIR relating to the charge.

Data dished out by the National Crimes Record Bureau show that the conviction rate in cases relating to sedition in India is about 3.3 percent. It is time for the police, an arm of the state often misused by a ruling party to suppress the opposition, and trial courts, which often refuse to grant bail to those accused of sedition, to be very cautious before applying the sedition law. Expression of opinion criticising a government, even if appearing to be toxic at times, can never be held seditious.

The Indian polity has, in the last decade, been sharply polarised. Unfortunately, much of the media too has become highly opinionated bordering on activism, dishing out selective narratives through their news reportage convenient to their political predilections. Such narratives are often presented without a proper perspective on any issue for fear of digging up the past which can be uncomfortable to the ruling party—in either a state or at the Centre. Every story has two sides. But it appears that objectivity as a journalistic value is no longer an option.

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The Supreme Court of India quashed an FIR against journalist Vinod Dua, who was accused of criticising Prime Minister Narendra Modi's handling of the migrant labour crisis during the Covid-19 lockdown in 2020.

PHOTO COLLAGE: COLLECTED

for imprisonment from three years to life, has become a convenient tool in the hands of a government—state or central, and irrespective of political colour—to intimidate and muzzle the media as well as critics of the government's policies and actions.

“Article 14,” a media and research group, was quoted by *The Times of India* as pointing out how the number of sedition cases has risen over the last decade. Scouring data from courts, police and law publications, the group reportedly said that 10,938 Indians have been accused of sedition in 816 cases since 2010, with a majority of them under the Bharatiya Janata Party-led National Democratic Alliance rule.

The political dimension of the use of



Afghanistan and Pakistan—in December 2019.

The anxiety amongst media professionals over the regularity with which sedition cases have been filed against journalists has often boiled over, leading to calls by some for abolition of the sedition law. (*The Times of India* described it as “one of India's worst laws”.) So, the question arises: should the sedition law be done away with? One must realise that even if the law goes, sedition as a crime cannot be wished away. It should be noted that the Supreme Court's 1962 order in the Kedar Nath Singh case upheld the constitutional validity of the sedition law. All that the apex court did was restrict its scope for misuse. In fact, the 1962 ruling's seven