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When opinions become culpable

The woes of Jhumon Das are a case in point

It is disquieting to learn of Jhumon Das' travails from a report by this daily that has, once again, exposed the urgent need for the government to revisit the most draconian piece of legislation in the country's parliamentary history—the Digital Security Act (DSA), 2018. It also highlights the need to ensure that laws are applied equitably, and no one is treated above or below it.

Jhumon has been in jail for the last six months. Police showed him arrested and produced him before a Sunamganj court on March 17, after which he was sent to jail. He has been there since then, without bail. The reason for his arrest is a Facebook status he posted, where he questioned the activities of a Hefazat leader. It was merely an opinion which any free person in a free society should be entitled to. But not in case of Jhumon, who was handed over to the police, reportedly to assuage a violent mob that set upon the houses of the Hindu minorities at Noagaon village in Sunamganj's Shalla upazila. The so-called Hefazat supporters vandalised and looted about 90 Hindu houses following Jhumon's comments on Facebook. While Jhumon has been rotting in jail, and his family suffering unimaginable hardship, the perpetrators of the vandalism are roaming with impunity. Why is it so?

Interestingly, it was not under the DSA that Jhumon was arrested initially, but under another equally punitive law: Section 54 of the Penal Code. The undesirable and deplorable aspects of the DSA have been highlighted in all sections of the media, and we deem it unnecessary to repeat those. Suffice it to say that human rights activists and watchdogs, both at home and abroad, have repeatedly called for its revocation as several of its provisions strike at the fundamental rights enshrined in the country's constitution, as well as the universal principles of freedom of expression. Since the law came into effect, the randomness of its application has been painfully experienced by various sections of society—the media in particular, but also individuals. Such unfair and indiscriminate application has vindicated our position that this law is not for the benefit of the citizens, but rather to serve the interests of those in power.

This becomes further evident when we consider that no palpable steps have been taken as yet to fulfil the assurances the law minister gave in March this year. He promised to undertake measures to ensure that no one would be arrested or sued under the Digital Security Act before the investigation or formation of a monitoring team, and prevent abuse or misuse of the law and its rules regarding when to provide bail and when not to. Regrettably, nothing noticeable has been done in that respect over the last six months.

Shortage of manpower could jeopardise vaccine drives

More healthcare workers must be urgently recruited

THE planned inoculation of two crore people against Covid-19 every month starting from October, along with that of 2.5 to 3 crore children annually under different immunisation campaigns, will be quite an impossible task for the government's workforce commissioned under the Expanded Programme on Immunisation (EPI), health officials have warned. They said the workforce and logistics under the EPI were already overtaxed—mainly due to their active involvement in the nationwide Covid-19 vaccination campaign, making the planned inoculation an insurmountable task for them.

Besides regular immunisation of children, around 15,000 field-level EPI health assistants in the country have been assigned for Covid-19 inoculation. Additionally, they are having to collect samples for tests, enter data into the system, administer jabs, and ensure that people are quarantining at home. The tasks they are having to do are already a huge burden—especially in the absence of any additional manpower. Ultimately, this will hamper both the Covid-19 vaccination drive as well as the regular countrywide immunisation of children against other diseases.

That is not a scenario anyone would like to see. Given our enormous struggles with the Covid-19 pandemic over the last year and a half, it has become clear that we must do everything to protect the population from the disease—including and especially through mass vaccination. At the same time, it is essential not to become careless about other diseases, which is why the authorities must not neglect the regular immunisation of children in the country. However, as the health officials have expressed, achieving both with the current resources is a pipe dream.

We have previously seen the government's mass vaccination drive against Covid-19 stumble and stall due to vaccine shortage. Now we cannot afford another botched drive due to a lack of manpower. That is why we call on the government to immediately recruit more healthcare workers under the EPI. In that regard, we understand that the Directorate General of Health Services has submitted a proposal to recruit 11,500 health assistants to the Ministry of Health. The proposal should be reviewed and approved—with any necessary changes—on an urgent basis. The government should also consider setting up a dedicated Covid-19 cell to keep the government's vaccination programme running smoothly, and to also ensure that none of the vaccines that the government is planning to procure ends up in the black market.

Are you sure you're not suffering from unconscious bias?



LAILA KHONDKAR

"MY business partner and the co-founder of the company is female. She is every bit my equal in the company and in the design of the products and services we are

rolling out. She has to fight twice as hard, and for twice as long as me for anything. Nine out of 10 emails to the company are to me, even when replying to a query or question raised by her. We play meeting 'tag' because the technical questions invariably get asked to me. I then defer to her (as she is far more competent than I on many of the technical aspects we deal with) only for the next question related to the answer she gave to be asked to me again."

The remarks above are from a segment of a post by a man on LinkedIn, a professional networking site. They are a powerful example of unconscious bias in the workplace, prevalent everywhere in the world. Research works in the fields of neuroscience and social psychology have helped in developing the understanding on this concept. Unconscious biases are formed through how we socialise, the experiences we go through in life, and the representation of different groups in the media. These experiences act as social filters, through which we make assessments of and judgements about people around us. Human beings have a natural tendency to put individuals into social categories. These categories are often based on visual cues such as gender, race, ethnicity, age, height, body type, etc. We also categorise based on social backgrounds, job roles, religious identities or political affiliations.

Social psychologist Dr Jennifer Eberhardt and her team at Stanford University have explored the roots and implications of unconscious bias. Through experiments, she has shown how social conditions can influence the function of our brain to determine our responses to other people. For example, if we are constantly exposed to women as primary school teachers or receptionists, or men as engineers and organisational leaders, these associations become wired into the human brain.

A common form of unconscious bias is affinity bias, which has an impact on organisational decision-making processes. This includes how managers hire and promote staff. This can lead to limited creativity, diversity, and inclusivity in the workplace. Unconscious bias can also affect collaboration between employees, as well as prevent innovation and productivity. In millisecond, people judge whether somebody is like us and

what kind of impact their behaviour may have on other individuals. For example, a woman who gets upset about a sexist comment may also carry stereotyped perceptions about people of indigenous groups, without even understanding that that, too, is a form of bias.

Unconscious biases against various groups lead to discriminatory attitude and behaviour, violation of rights, stress, and an adverse effect on people's well-being.

she talked to Ruth Abrahams about the challenges we face in combining futuristic solutions with values of trust, openness and equality. Alexa, Amazon's voice-controlled assistant, has the voice of a woman. The report states: "As children and adults shout instructions, questions and demands at Alexa, what messages are being reinforced? Professor Neff asks if this is how we would secretly like to treat women." In the realm of law or finance, AI assistance is coded as male. This gives the male computer voice a context of authority and professionalism, the research article says.

AI is about algorithms, and the bias of the person involved in developing the algorithms will continue to influence the products. This could be addressed by engaging a diverse team (comprised of members of different genders, races, ethnicities, etc) in designing AI. Human beings may go to Mars and establish the same prejudiced, discriminatory and unjust system of the present world if we are not thoughtful enough to eradicate such biases.

The first step in combating unconscious bias is to be aware of the various types of biases that we have. We should examine our own assumptions and challenge ourselves when we begin to make stereotyped associations. Do we assume that senior staff members are not good at computer skills, or all young people are wasting their time online? Do you make fun of someone when they speak in the dialect of a particular district?

Each of us can speak up against jokes, comments and behaviours that reinforce stereotypes in our families, workplaces and social settings. In interviews, panel members can deliberately slow down decision-making, reconsider reasons for decisions, question stereotypes and monitor each other for unconscious bias.

I am reminded of a few lines by London-based Nigerian poet Ben Okri: "Each new era begins without/It is an inward event/With unsuspected possibilities/For inner liberation/We could use the new era/To clean our eyes/To see the world differently/To see ourselves more clearly/Only free people can make a free world." We must free ourselves from unconscious biases if we are to create an inclusive society, where all men, women and children will be treated with respect and dignity.

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We need to look within ourselves and root out the unconscious biases we may have if we want to progress as a society.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

belongs to our "inner circle"—those whom we usually favour. Men might favour men, while women might favour women. However, people can belong to different groups, and they like to belong to the "in-crowds" that are powerful. This could mean a woman favouring a man over a woman.

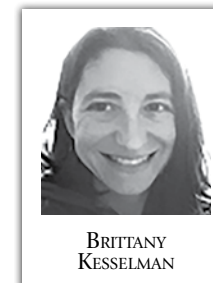
In Bangladesh, we witness different types of unconscious biases; people get constantly judged based on age, gender, skin tone, height, weight, ethnicity, religion, disability, marital status, etc—and insensitive jokes and comments based on these biases are very common. In many cases, people who are victims of such biases—and they might even know when they are—may do the same thing to others without even realising it, or recognising

I have known people whose self-esteem was severely affected because of the negative comments they were subjected to because of their skin colour. I have noticed how highly capable professional women have been dismissed as being "aggressive," while men exhibiting the same behaviour have been praised for their leadership qualities.

Unconscious bias may continue to dominate our future and affect various aspects of our lives if we don't address it soon. Gina Neff, professor at the department of sociology in the University of Oxford, has been asking questions about bias and the balance of power in the development of Artificial Intelligence (AI) systems. In a study report titled "Alexa, does AI have gender?",

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What Covid-19 revealed about hunger



BRITTANY KESSELMAN

IN South Africa, many people struggle to access sufficient quantities of healthy food. Because their diets are high in processed foods, refined starch, sugar, and fat, they face a double burden of malnutrition and obesity, or what is known as "hidden hunger." It is hidden because it does not fit the stereotypical image of hunger created by media coverage of famines. But it is everywhere.

To be clear, the problem is not a shortage of food. In South Africa, hunger is a result of lack of access. Getting enough calories and adequate nutrients is largely tied to income. Beyond the high cost of healthy food, hidden hunger in the country reflects the limited availability of nutritious products in low-income areas, the cost of energy for cooking, food storage, and the lack of access to land for household food production.

The Covid-19 pandemic and the strict measures imposed to contain its spread brought hidden hunger out of hiding, as many people who had been able to afford just enough food to survive suddenly found themselves going without. According to one study, 47 percent of households in South Africa ran out of money to buy food during the early stages of the initial lockdown in April 2020. Job losses, a crackdown on informal vendors, and price increases caused by interruptions in global food and agriculture supply chains all contributed to a sharp rise in food insecurity. Images of long lines for emergency food assistance brought the issue into public view. Increased levels of child hunger in particular were worrying, but unsurprising, given the abrupt closure of schools and school-based nutrition programmes.

The pandemic also made the consequences of hidden hunger more apparent. Because adequate nutrition is necessary for a healthy immune system, food-insecure individuals are more likely to become ill. Additionally, there is a correlation between the severity of Covid-19 and diabetes, a disease associated with poor diets. Data from Cape Town suggests that Covid-19 patients with diabetes were almost four times more likely to be hospitalised and over three times more likely to die from the pandemic, than patients without diabetes.

But while Covid-19 increased food insecurity and highlighted the consequences of hunger, it also produced potential solutions for increasing access

to affordable, healthy food. In the face of disruptions to global supply chains, more localised food systems began to emerge. Where the government failed to implement adequate measures to offset the economic repercussions of lockdowns or the closure of school nutrition programmes, civil society groups sought to fill the void. Across South Africa, community action networks sprang up to address hunger, with volunteers providing

together with the civil society to tackle food insecurity.

In Belo Horizonte, a city in Brazil, dubbed "the city that ended hunger," some of the notable programmes include "popular restaurants" that serve thousands of subsidised healthy meals every day, subsidised fruit and vegetable shops, a food bank that salvages food waste and distributes prepared meals to social organisations, and farm

companies, agrochemical producers, food processors, and retailers—do not have real solutions to hunger. Treating food as a commodity to be sold for profit, rather than as a fundamental human right, is precisely what has led to the crisis of hidden hunger. Shockingly, South Africa's largest supermarket chains managed to generate profits during 2020, even as half of the country's households were unable to afford food. Retailers boasted



Children wait in line for food at a school near Cape Town, South Africa in 2020, during the Covid-19 lockdown.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

meals and other assistance to fellow community members.

Around Johannesburg, for example, the C19 People's Coalition sought to link small-scale farmers, who lost access to their usual markets, to communities in need of food assistance. Unlike most government food packages, which were procured from large corporations and contained non-perishable items with almost no nutritional value, these vegetable packages sought to support the livelihoods of small-scale farmers while also promoting the health of the vulnerable households.

And yet, the state bears significant responsibility for addressing hidden hunger, particularly in South Africa, where the right to food is enshrined in the constitution. And examples from around the world demonstrate what is possible when a committed government works

stalls to connect small-scale producers directly to urban consumers. These and other programmes support farmers' livelihoods and consumer health, while also delivering economic benefits and strengthening communities.

The upcoming United Nations Food Systems Summit claims that it will bring together different stakeholders to create more sustainable and equitable food systems, but grassroots movements, academics, and civil society groups have criticised the summit for bypassing the existing UN Committee on World Food Security to create a new forum tarnished by undue corporate influence, a lack of transparency, and unaccountable decision-making. These groups have called for a boycott and are organising a global counter-mobilisation.

The big corporations that are set to dominate the UN summit—seed

about their food donations while paying their workers—who were designated "essential"—some of the lowest wages in the country.

The real solutions to the crisis of hidden hunger must come from those most affected: the small-scale farmers producing healthy food for their communities, and the low-income consumers who struggle to access adequate nutrition. These voices have been sidelined from the UN summit, yet the solidarity-based initiatives they created during the pandemic represent the most secure foundation on which to build a more just and resilient food system.

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