

## Time to take a hard look at our social media policy

*Govt must preempt circulation of hate content, make way for free press*

THE role of social media in creating communal tensions is once again under the spotlight after the recent spate of attacks on Hindus which, experts say, was set off by a hate campaign over the alleged desecration of Islamic scriptures at a Cumilla puja mandap. That such a campaign, if left unchecked, would have a devastating effect is hardly surprising. It matters little that the man alleged to have put a copy of the Quran at the puja mandap was a Muslim. In a country with generally poor digital awareness and pent-up social tensions and frustrations, social media holds the power of life and death. It can cause unimaginable suffering when used with nefarious intent.

An investigation by *The Daily Star* has tracked over 300 videos on YouTube featuring hate speech on the Cumilla incident, a significant number of which were made and uploaded within hours of the attack on October 13. These videos, uploaded by channels that cater to a specific audience interested in religious content, describe how the religious sentiments and values of Muslims were demeaned, peddling rumours about the possible culprits. In some videos, casualty numbers were also inflated. Imagine the destructive power of such videos when those are widely circulated through Facebook, with many sharing them without verifying the content—thus sparking angry backlash. Eventually, the reliability of such content becomes immaterial, and what remains is the ingrained, unaddressed feeling of hurt—perfect fodder for the communal actors.

We have seen this cycle play out too many times. We have seen this in Sunamganj's Shalla upazila. We have seen this in Nasirnagar. This is why stronger social media regulation is needed to counter fake, hate-filled videos, to stop them before they go viral by debunking the rumours, and trace and block such contents when needed. That said, a blanket social media ban or internet blackout, like the kind we have seen in the aftermath of the Cumilla incident, is not the solution. Going forward, we also need to work on raising digital awareness among people so they can differentiate between the fake and the real. Digital awareness is part of the modern-day survival kit. But will this solve the problem of communal violence?

Given how vast the cyberspace is and how people can still access blocked content with the help of technologies like VPN, it will be unwise to think stronger regulation alone will be enough to counter the adverse impacts of social media. The government needs to offer a reliable alternative to rumours and fake news, and only a free press can do that. That, and a sustained campaign to nurse the communal fault lines through increased dialogue and responsible behaviour from all parties involved, especially the political parties, can bridge the gaps significantly and make it harder for the communal actors to take advantage of people's feelings and sentiments.

## Uncontrolled food prices must be checked

*Govt must keep the market stable, expand its safety net programmes*

IT is really worrying how the rising prices of essential food items have continued to afflict ordinary people over the last few weeks. According to a report by this daily on Tuesday, during this time, the prices of almost all kitchen items have increased by 10 to 70 percent. Unable to cope with the high prices, people from low-income backgrounds are gathering at the TCB selling points to buy these items at subsidised prices. But unfortunately, many of them are returning empty-handed, as the stocks at Open Market Sales (OMS) points run out before they can reach the trucks selling the items.

It is not only the low-income people who are struggling with the spiralling food prices. Our reporters have talked to people involved in small businesses and found how they are also limiting their protein intake to cope with the situation. As more and more people are compromising with the quality of food they are eating, they are bound to suffer from malnutrition and other health issues as a result.

A survey by the Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC) and the Brac Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD) has found that around 24.5 million people have been pushed into poverty in Bangladesh because of the Covid-19 pandemic. Although people have now returned to work, many are doing inferior jobs with lower pay, according to experts. This—the sharp fall in their income together with the sharp increase in food prices—means a double blow that they have no way of overcoming—without state support, of course.

Although the government has been saying that they are taking measures to control the food prices, there is still no sign of the prices going down. It is also incomprehensible why the traders would not sell their products at the government-fixed rates. For instance, when the government fixed the price of sugar at Tk 74-75 two months back, the trader immediately started selling the item at Tk 80-85. This means that the government has no control over the retail market. It is also not clear as to why the government is still unable to break the syndicates responsible for the unexplained increase in food prices.

While the government must act promptly to keep our local market stable, it also must take immediate measures to address the plight of the people. Expanding the government's social safety net programmes should be the first step. The TCB is currently selling essential food items at subsidised prices via its 450 trucks, which should be increased considering the needs of the people. The government should also consider providing direct cash assistance to the extreme poor. In addition, the syndicates that have been formed around the OMS selling points must be apprehended so that they cannot buy the food items from the TCB trucks meant for the low-income people.

# Our Shrunken Mentality



SHAMSAD MORTUZA

**BLOWN' IN THE WIND**

THE sudden onrush of floodwater flowing into the country through the Teesta at a measured dangerous level—soon after the equally sudden disruption of peace and vandalism of temples and altars in different parts of the country—reminded me of the 1974 movie *The Towering Inferno*, which I watched at Madhumita skipping school in the early 80s, only to be thrilled by the idea that an uncontrollable fire in a tall building could be diffused by the controlled explosion of a rooftop water reservoir, allowing the flood to put out the fire.

like words. I do like to represent my surroundings in words, and feel things that eyes cannot see. For instance, musing on rivers and their stories can help you reach many shores that you normally would not travel. That is why rivers are popular motifs for poets. The watery stream can share stories following the flow of the stream of thought.

In the olden days, a flood would have been considered an act of gods. But with proof in the pudding, we know who the eggheads are, and from where the untimely water is heading our way. In the olden days, gods could have been appeased through offerings. What good is a fish offering, however silvery and seasonal it may be, to a god that controls the rivers? They already have what they want. And now they want the waters to be muddied so that they can get the metaphorical fish that they want.

an invisible almighty to secure mental peace. Never did I learn to separate one from the other: both places had their own beauties, their own purposes of keeping us in control, and making us humane. I would carry puffed rice in my pockets for the fish both in the temple and in the mosque. I never learned to distinguish one group from the other.

Throughout history, there have been troublemakers: the proverbial Satan or the *Shokuni Mama*. Provocations are proven ploys to pillage communal harmony. I am working on a book project on Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and currently studying his role in diffusing the tension during the 1964 riots that was triggered by a rumour of theft of Prophet Muhammad's hair from a mosque in Kashmir. History does have a bad habit of repeating itself. We have seen Muslims being lynched in India for allegedly eating

My world is becoming smaller by the day. The size of my world is proportionate to the device I am using to view it. With my shrunken world, my worldview has also gotten smaller to fit the size of the screens. I don't sit in the library of the "other" to learn about their culture. I am rather happy to be fed with garnished images served on the timeline of my devices. So, when I see a holy book at the feet of the god of the "other," I cry foul. Of course, it is foul. Who will do such a thing? Think for a second: can you pray in your religious house with the holy book of the other being present there? Does it make sense that a book is placed to desecrate it at a holy time, for which the whole community has been waiting for a year?

The action is questionable. The reactions are equally so. It takes a spark of fire to turn a tower into an inferno. That's what we saw last week. I cringed in shame when my Hindu colleague posted on Facebook that for the first time in his life, he was outside guarding the temple at night, fearing a mob attack in an area where he grew up as a child and where his family was well-respected. I cringed again in shame when another colleague quoted hadith at a public meeting. We have heard of such defensive actions during the Liberation War. Why tell such regressive stories at a time when we want to leapfrog into the future and become a developed country?

We can go on and on to pinpoint who is to blame. I will begin by blaming myself. I have allowed my world to shrink. I have allowed my mind to shrink. I have allowed my education to shrink. When you are shrunken inside, you fight over trivial things. I learned it at school while reading Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. The humans who were only six inches in size fought over which end of an egg should be broken to make an omelette. Swift used the story of Lilliputs to remind us of the friction between the Catholics and the Protestants and, by extension, between the English and the French. We become small the moment we charter our minds in small grids and start harbouring rage. This rage looks for occasions to come out. It waits for provocations to wreak havoc. It seeks pleasure out of the pain of the "other." The small units merge to form groups. The ones who are setting fire in temples here and mosques there, or holding and releasing water at their will to punish the other, are all small beings. They think that they are big enough to establish control over nature or set things right as the agents of a superior authority. In the final count, they are but masters of and slaves to small things. They are so small that they cannot be called humans.

Shamsad Mortuza is acting vice-chancellor of the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB), and a professor of English at Dhaka University (on leave).



There is no rhyme or reason to what has happened in Bangladesh last week, and over the last few decades, over "hurt" religious sentiments. This photo was taken in Pirganj, Rangpur on October 20, 2021.

PHOTO: STAR

For those of you who are cursing me for the long first sentence, let me assure you that now that I have set the unruly context, I shall return to punctuated thoughts. It is dangerous to pursue wild imagination in a train of thought that associates one thing with another and connects the dots. You end up drawing pictures that may not exist in reality. That is why Greek philosopher Plato did not want poets to be included in his perceived Ideal World. I am not a poet, but I do

I grew up in Old Dhaka. One of my favourite places was the Ram Krishna Mission library. Every day after school, I would spend hours in the library. I would make sure, before setting off for home, that I sat by the pond to watch the silhouetted fish and hear the merry dins of the temple bells, smelling the air filled with fuming fragrant sticks. On Fridays, I would go to the mosque and perform my ablutions in a koi reservoir with running water, and stand in line with fellow devotees, bowing before

beef. We have witnessed historic sites being ravaged by groups who carry fire within. The tears of the victims do not have enough water to douse such fire. Our cries merely show our helplessness; the waters are interpreted as signs of punishment. Is it a crime or a sin to be born in a family whose origin one has no control, except to say that it is the will of the Almighty Creator? If we believe in the one ultimate Creator, then why divide his creation and tarnish it with fire or punish it with water?

## Climate response needs more investment in scientific research



SALEEMUL HUQ

**POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE**

THE fact that greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions—caused by burning fossil fuels like coal, petroleum and natural gas, since the beginning of the industrial revolution—has led to the global climate crisis we face today was discovered by scientists over three decades ago, with the formation of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). The IPCC has been publishing periodic assessment reports on the scientific evidence and knowledge about both the problems and the solutions to human-induced climate change.

Over the last three decades, the IPCC has increased the number of scientists involved in the preparation of each successive report to include more disciplines, particularly social sciences, and also geographical representation, especially from developing countries.

I have been the lead author of three IPCC assessment reports in more than two decades, and I will share some ideas on how to build on and enhance the effectiveness of scientific research at both global and national levels—and even at a local level, particularly in vulnerable developing countries like Bangladesh.

First, I want to recognise that the IPCC is by far the most comprehensive and inclusive scientific collaboration that has been attempted in the world. It has been able to get the evidence of climate change assessed in a scientifically credible manner, and then have that assessment accepted by governments so that there are no disagreements about said evidence. This is its greatest achievement as yet, for which it was recognised with the Nobel Peace Prize in 2007.

However, it is important to recall that the IPCC does not do the research itself; rather, it only assesses the existing scientific research and then provides an assessment of the state of play during each assessment period. It also does not make policy prescriptions, but provides policy-relevant information, on the basis of which policymakers at national as well as global levels can make appropriate, science-based policy decisions.

One of the main clients for each IPCC assessment report is the annual Conference of Parties (COP) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). Thus, the upcoming COP26 will be informed by the recently published sixth assessment report—from Working Group 1—which has, for the first time, shown that the extreme weather events we have been experiencing in recent years can be scientifically attributed to the rise of global mean temperature over one degree Celsius, due to GHG emissions since the industrial revolution began over a hundred years ago. This is an extremely important new finding of the latest IPCC assessment report, which ushers in the era of loss and damage from human-induced

excellent efforts to expand the disciplines from which authors are selected as well as from developing countries, they are still significantly underrepresented in the number of lead authors in different working groups.

Another deficiency is the reliance on only assessing peer-reviewed scientific articles which, while certainly ensuring quality of articles cited, leaves out an extensive body of evidence from local communities or even indigenous communities that has not been written up in scientific articles. This is particularly important for sharing knowledge about how to effectively adapt to the adverse impacts of climate change, where vulnerable communities are generating experiential knowledge that is not yet

the 1.5 degrees Celsius goal for mitigation was agreed upon in the Paris Agreement at COP21 in 2015.

In the coming year, the seventh assessment cycle is going to be discussed, agreed upon and started, so it is important for the vulnerable developing countries to ask the IPCC to prepare another special report on loss and damage from human-induced climate change.

I also want to address the need to invest in supporting good-quality scientific research in every developing country—no matter how poor it may be. Even the poorest countries have numerous universities where the faculty members and students have the potential to carry out research at the local and national levels on how best to tackle climate change for their own countries, and provide such evidence to local and national decision-makers. The poorer developing countries cannot simply rely on international experts to fly in and fly out to provide them with the most relevant evidence to aid their decision-making processes. They need to invest in the capacity of their own researchers to provide them with location-specific evidence.

This is something that Bangladesh has already done through various investments in research on climate change, conducted in several universities and research institutions, all of which has been brought together under a platform named Gobeshona. A similar investment programme in national-level research is being developed for the countries in the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF), under the leadership of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who is the CVF chair.

As Prime Minister Hasina has rightly proposed, it is now time for the vulnerable developing countries to move forward to become prosperous in the face of climate change, and investment in research is an essential element in achieving that transformational objective. Bangladesh will be the first CVF country to launch a climate prosperity plan—Mujib Climate Prosperity Plan (MCPP)—with the aim to transform the country in the coming decade, through mitigation as well as adaptation, for which investment in quality research will be a necessary condition.

Dr Saleemul Huq is director of the International Centre for Climate Change and Development (ICCCAD) at the Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB).



We are already experiencing the effects of climate change and need immediate response to tackle the global crisis, for which we need more funds in climate research.

FILE PHOTO: AFP

collected by the IPCC.

Another aspect is the way the IPCC, being an intergovernmental body, is also subject to the politics of some of the more powerful countries, and that the voices of less powerful countries are not necessarily heard. However, if the vulnerable developing countries are able to stick together and make a strong case for their trouble, they can indeed get their way sometimes. One such example was the special report on the cap of 1.5 degrees Celsius in global temperature rise, which was pushed by the vulnerable developing countries in the face of opposition from some powerful countries. This particular report played a major role in ensuring that

So, while the IPCC remains to be of major significance in supporting decision-makers to deal with climate change, there is certainly room for improvement in its assessment work, which I would like to share.

The first point to make is that, despite