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TIMES CHANGE,
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A pandemic and how it pushed us into the digital age

#TECHNOLOGY

If you were to tell your mum or dad, even back in 2019, that they would be shopping for groceries, medicine, or be doing their office from home, they would tell you to lay off the lazy man daydreams. And yet, that is precisely the reality that they, and we, have come to accept as the new normal during the COVID-19 pandemic. Just like the rest of the world, we were also told to go home and stay home to curb the spread of the virus. And with that directive, everything we as Bangladeshis did on a face-to-face basis had to be done online, meaning Bangladesh would stop playing catchup with the rest of the world in terms of participation, and join in as equals.

This was a real challenge for just about anyone not born after Y2K. The younger generation basically grew up with the Internet, smartphones, and tablets and take it all for granted, whereas the '90s and '80s generation, and those earlier than that, basically read about the Internet, smartphones, and tablets in science fiction novels. Plus, we as a nation, are very tradition driven, so any change

takes a while to gain traction. Most of us, up until the pandemic, did most, if not all of our shopping physically, especially things like groceries.

Another thing to consider is that we, as a nation, adopted the computer and the Internet much later than the rest of the world. The home computer was already becoming commonplace in most developed countries since the '80s, and connected to the Internet by the very early '90s. By contrast, our story was slightly different, with computers just appearing around 1996-1997 at some work places, and home computer adoptions starting after 2000 in select homes, while the Internet reached our shores around 1996. Since then, the innovations happened online, with various innovative services popping up, and we were always late to the party.

So, how did we close this seemingly huge gap so quickly and become a nation that is more reliant on online services?

Well, in short, we had no choice; we went into this whole thing cold turkey. When the lockdowns were announced, most workplaces and all schools completely shifted to an online based work from home situation. Services like Google Classroom and Microsoft Teams became vital to functioning in this new normal.

And then there's Zoom!
Before the pandemic, only a handful of people knew what it was, but during the 2020 lockdown, this was THE medium to use for just about everything; from office meetings, to full-blown classes, to discussions and seminars held online.

Tania, a teacher at a prestigious school in Bangladesh, had to face just such a change, moving from physical class attendance to online Zoom based classes.

"It took some time for us teachers to adjust, but pretty soon, this started to feel like home. There are the odd annoyances such as losing a student in class due to poor Internet or a power outage, and taking exams is quite tricky, but we have managed," says Tania.

Another thing we learned was shopping online, especially our groceries. As mentioned before, for the older members of a family, shopping online for groceries is a hard concept to get round, even if the rest of the world already does it. When the lockdown hit and venturing outside was almost outlawed, we had to

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accustom ourselves to online services for doing our weekly home shopping.

Thankfully, a lot of the existing super shops like Agora, Meena Bazar etc. already had online services running way before the pandemic hit, plus dedicated online platforms such as Chaldal was also active previously, albeit used in much smaller capacity by more tech-savvy people. With going to kitchen markets basically impossible, our mums and dads had to learn how to get online and get everything they needed to run a home online.

S M Nurul, a 68-year-old retiree, went through this strange learning process, saying, "Buying groceries is an involved process, your judgement of condition is key, as well as haggling skills. If you didn't choose right, you would end up with bad products. But with the lockdown in place, it wasn't easy to go the kitchen markets, and my kids were also warning me to stay away, and instead use Chaldal to order whatever was needed. While not being able to see what produce you will end up getting is a downside, in this climate, this is the best compromise."

We also started to lean more heavily on shopping online for things like clothing, trinkets, hobby items etc. because people suddenly had a lot of time and very little to do, and retail therapy is a thing. Because of this tremendous spike in demand, many Facebook businesses have cropped up to meet demand, along with ever expanding e-commerce sites.

Along with shopping and doing groceries, we also started to lean on food delivery services harder than we ever have. The scenario is easy to understand; you aren't allowed out, so no dining out, and cooking at home constantly, even when doing it in shifts, gets frustrating and mundane. This is where services like Foodpanda and Hungry Naki really came into their own.

With restaurants taking a tougher stand on sanitisation, and contactless nature of these services, it became possible to break the monotony of eating home cooked meals only. While these food delivery services are by no means new, and neither is their usage amongst us, their services really went on overdrive during the pandemic.

With such a massive spike in online shopping and transactions taking place, there is also cause for concern.

To meet demand, loads of new pages

and services crop up every day, and along with them, increases the number of fraud pages, or fake products. The recent hubbub regarding a certain e-commerce platform should serve as a warning for everyone to never fall for deals that are too good to be true, and to always check the reputation of every outlet online via experience from past users.

As for defective products, many platforms do offer services such replacements or refunds, but it's always wise to check these terms and conditions from them beforehand. The one area where defective products is most prevalent is doing grocery or fruit shopping online, and it's the one area where nearly every online outlet shares the blame and needs to do better.

Sabiha Khan, a 55-year-old homemaker shared similar sentiments when ordering for her weekly groceries online, saying, "When my husband shops from the kitchen market, what we end up with is absolutely fresh produce. But when ordering online, what is delivered to me looks old and damaged. I ordered three cauliflowers, and when they were delivered, they looked discoloured. When asking the delivery person, he asked to call the company and let them know. And when we called, the response was not favourable."

Thankfully, if you do end up with something that is not what you paid for and the seller refuses to take responsibility, you have the tools to fight back. Assuming you have some credentials of the seller, or their company/brand, you can lodge a complaint with Jatio Vokta Odhikar Songrokkhon Odhidoptor and rest assured that your case will be handled with the full might of the authorities.

Up until 2019, Bangladesh was still very much behind in terms of using online services compared to the rest of the world. With the pandemic, and the lockdown that followed, the status changed very quickly, and now, we are at the forefront of what the Internet has to offer. If the news of Amazon planning to enter the Bangladeshi market is anything to go by, it should serve as a testament to how far we have come, and how much farther we will go post-pandemic.

By Intisab Shahriyar
Photo: Sazzad Ibne Sayed