

# Lawlessness is the law of the rivers

## Take action against those responsible for launch capsizes in Shitalakkhya

WE are shocked at the recent incident of launch capsizes that happened in the Shitalakkhya River—in Char Syedpur area of Narayanganj Sadar upazila—in the afternoon of March 20, 2022. At least eight passengers have died in the incident, while 19 others remain missing at the time of writing this column. Reportedly, a small launch named MV Afsar Uddin, with around 50 passengers on board, was heading towards Munshiganj from Narayanganj when it was hit by MV Rupshi 9, a large cargo vessel. It was heartbreaking to watch the footage of the cargo ship ramming into the launch. The panicked passengers started jumping into the river, but the ship bore the launch down within seconds with many passengers still on it.

This incident is yet another example of how deadly our river routes have become over the years. On April 8 last year, a passenger vessel named SKL-3 sank in the same area after being hit by a cargo vessel, killing 34 people. The capsizing of MV Mayur (on June 29, 2020) is still fresh in our memories, when 34 people died as the launch hit a small water vessel in the Buriganga. And only last December, we witnessed the deadliest incident of launch fire in our history, which took at least 43 lives. All these incidents have revealed the chaos in our river transport system—the inefficiency and negligence of the crew members of the water vessels, their total disregard towards the existing rules and regulations, and the indifference of the Department of Shipping and the Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) towards making them compliant.

According to the survivors of Sunday’s tragedy, the cargo vessel came too close to their launch without so much as honking. Primary investigation has also found that the vessel was running at a relatively high speed. Meanwhile, even though the passengers of the launch warned the driver of the possibility of a clash, he didn’t seem to care. It is clear that the drivers didn’t feel the need to follow any rules and regulations while cruising their vessels through the river routes, which is perhaps emblematic of the lawlessness ruling the rivers.

It is good to know that a murder case has been filed against eight crew members of the cargo vessel, including two of its masters. We now hope that they will be brought to book for the deaths and reckless endangerment of so many passengers. We also think the driver of the launch should be held accountable for ignoring the passengers’ warnings.

We cannot afford to see this incident as a one-off accident. The systematic problems plaguing the river routes, which stem from the authorities’ indifference and inefficiencies, must be addressed without delay if we are to ensure that no more lives are lost in such preventable tragedies.

# A people’s organisation for 50 years

## Brac’s trailblazing contributions to the country’s development

WE congratulate Brac on its 50 years of operations in Bangladesh. Founded on March 21, 1972, by the late Sir Fazle Hasan Abed, Brac’s journey started from the very birth of Bangladesh, with a rehabilitation programme for people trying to recover from the ravages of war. Soon, the organisation expanded its mission to help people in the remotest areas to create livelihood opportunities for themselves.

What truly sets Brac apart is its intense engagement at the grassroots level—not only in Bangladesh but in other countries too. For five decades, Brac has been working to help people in the farthest corners of the nation in building their lives from scratch—be it through employment, providing microfinance to vulnerable families, creating awareness about health issues in rural Bangladesh, or by educating millions of adults and children across Asia and Africa.

Education, in fact, has been at the core of Brac’s mission. At the time when Bangladesh was born, 80 percent of adult Bangladeshis could not read or write, which prompted the organisation to launch its literacy and adult education campaign. Brac’s innovative non-formal primary education (NFPE) programme has equipped over a million children aged 8 to 14 years (most of them girls) with literacy and numeracy skills to prepare them for secondary school. Though discontinued due to a lack of funds from bilateral and multilateral contributors, its proven success is a rationale for its revival as a partnership between Brac, other education NGOs, and the government to meet the SDG4 education target. The establishment of Brac University in 2001 has provided quality higher education and opportunities for research.

Since 1979, Brac has also worked extensively to improve the health of people in the country’s rural areas. From leading the vaccination of children against diseases, which drastically reduced the previously high child mortality rate—with assistance from government and CARE—to providing life-saving oral saline to tens of thousands of households, Brac’s contribution to our healthcare has been unique.

Keeping women and the poor at the centre of all developmental activities, Brac has introduced innumerable innovative strategies to lift people from poverty and ill health, equipping them with the tools to help them lead better lives. We hope Brac continues the legacy of its founder Sir Fazle Abed and plays its crucial role in the country’s overall development.

# Our apathy towards the suicide epidemic



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EVERY death is a tragedy, but when a young life is cut short, there is almost always a deeper level of empathy, a shared commiseration at the sadness of a life not lived. However, it’s troubling how this empathy vanishes completely when that life is taken away by suicide—replaced by a wave of judgement, it shows a complete lack of understanding of the mental health issues that could drive one to take their own life.

On Sunday, March 13, 2022, a 16-year-old student from Mymensingh reportedly died of suicide. Before doing so, she wrote a Facebook post about her mental state, detailing how she had been suicidal for three years, had received no support and was now in a place where she was having physical reactions to her trauma and felt that death was the only escape. Her story has already been sensationalised on social media enough, so I will keep the details to a minimum. What I want to focus on are some of her final words, “You have no idea how much mental pressure a person has to feel to want to die willingly... don’t come here to judge me. If someone asks for help, all you can do is bully. But when they do something, it is their fault. Have you learnt anything in life except victim-blaming?” (translated).

She displayed a great deal of foresight in writing this, since her assumption of being judged and bullied even after death turned out to be perfectly accurate. Her social media is flooded with comments, ranging from how selfish she is, how she will go to hell, how “dirty feminists” deserve to die (in her suicide note, she spoke of the restrictions she faced as a female in a patriarchal society), and even jokes about how she’s finally getting the attention she craved. And, of course, comments about her body and her face—page after page of filth written at the expense of a dead teenager, apparently “undeserving of sympathy” because her death was a “choice.”

As I scrolled through these comments, I was appalled to realise that we live in a society where its members have so little empathy for the dead, and disrespect religious beliefs enough to use it as an excuse to publicly condemn—and even celebrate—the death of a minor. But then I came across a comment that stopped me in my tracks. A young woman wrote,



ILLUSTRATION: TEENI AND TUNI

**The fact that suicide is a culmination of depression, mental illness, traumatic stress, hopelessness, social isolation and a number of other factors is completely lost upon us. But where the general public fails, our institutions must show us the way.**

social media. We need to have a much-needed (and much longer) conversation about what we have done wrong as a society that these people exist in the first place—and why they hate women so much that any reference to gender inequality makes them wish death and destruction upon their fellow human beings. But what we need to remember right now is that many people who don’t agree with the trolls, and who often are on the receiving end of their attacks, are suffering in silence.

The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) estimate that around 10,000 suicides occur in the country every year. Last year, a youth-led organisation found that between March 2020 and February 2021, 14,436 people died by suicide in the country. And it’s likely that these numbers are grossly underreported due to the stigma surrounding suicide. How many people are contemplating suicide, right now, as I write this? And what views are they being exposed to, other than the ones shouting at them from their screens, telling them that they deserve to die because they don’t know how to appreciate life? Is anyone talking to them, listening to them and providing them with the support they need?

In all the reports I found on the schoolgirl from Mymensingh, teachers,

of depression, mental illness, traumatic stress, hopelessness, social isolation and a number of other factors is completely lost upon us. But where the general public fails, our institutions must show us the way. So where are the educators, the community leaders and the elected representatives talking about suicide—not as a crime or a shameful act, but the tragic result of severe mental health issues that we have wilfully chosen to ignore? Where are the available resources on suicide prevention, the national suicide helpline, and the honest and inclusive conversations on the pressure that people face in society today?

Research done on mental health in other countries tells us that suicide is not inevitable. If a person living with suicidal thoughts is listened to and their feelings validated, the knowledge that someone cares can make them feel less trapped. In other words, a better societal understanding of mental health and depression, and appropriate support structures can save lives. But before any of that can happen, we need to seriously reflect on the lack of humanity hiding behind the excuse of “personal beliefs” that prevents so many from feeling any empathy for a life ended abruptly by depression and mental illness.

# Morality in the age of social media



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THE evolution of morality and ethics in the 21st century has taken a whole new direction, owing to the mass awareness and participation made possible by the ubiquity of social media. Throughout history, there have been discoveries that have changed society in unimaginable ways. Two important developments that shaped the history of moral evolution can be mentioned here. First, written language has revolutionised the communication of ideas over space and time. Second, new modes of transport radically transformed social norms by bringing people into contact with new cultures. Both these epoch-making events contributed significantly in shaping and reshaping moral thinking across cultures. Yet, these pale in comparison to how the internet and social media is shaping our individual and social identities.

In recent times, starting from the Arab Spring, social media has played an integral role in fomenting public opinion towards matters of morality, ethics and social justice. In Bangladesh, the relatively recent movements demanding safer streets following the deaths of a couple of students was fuelled, to a large degree, by social media participation. While there have been some positive developments in the evolution of public participation in shaping social justice through social media, one must exercise caution, and the role of social media

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Popular social media platform Facebook’s early mission was “to make the world more open and connected”—and in the first days of social media, many people assumed that a huge global increase in connectivity would be an unequivocal good. However, in recent times, that optimism has somewhat dissipated. The American social psychologist Jonathan Haidt noted that the problem may not be connectivity itself, but the way social media turns so much communication into a public performance. What did he mean by this?

The social psychologist Mark Leary coined the term “sociometer” to describe the inner mental gauge that tells us, moment by moment, how we’re doing in the eyes of others. Leary has argued that people don’t actually care about self-esteem; contrarily, the evolutionary imperative is to get *others* to see them as desirable partners for various kinds of relationships. Social media, with its displays of likes, friends, followers, and retweets, has pulled the sociometers out of one’s private thoughts and made them public. In 1790, the Anglo-Irish philosopher and statesman Edmund Burke wrote, “We are afraid to put men to live and trade each on his own private stock of reason; because we suspect that this stock in each man is small, and that the individuals would do better to avail themselves of the general bank and capital of nations and of ages.”

Social media has put Burke’s words to test. It pushes people of all ages towards a focus on the scandal, joke, or conflict of the day, but the effect may be particularly profound for younger generations, who have had less opportunity to acquire older ideas and information before plugging themselves into the social media stream. Since

social media is an open platform, young people are being exposed to a barrage of “philosophies” and “guidelines,” providing moral justification to almost every little thing, without proper critical analysis and creating moral rules almost “on the fly.” An example of this is the fact that social media has channelled the susceptibility to divisions based on “group identity” into the creation of a “callout culture”: anyone can be publicly shamed for saying something well-intentioned that someone else interprets uncharitably. As Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt put it, “New media platforms and outlets allow citizens to retreat into self-confirmatory bubbles, where their worst fears about the evils of the other side can be confirmed and amplified by extremists and cyber trolls’ intent on sowing discord and division.”

In conclusion, it has to be acknowledged that human civilisation is arguably living in the most peaceful (and possibly most moral) era in our species’ existence. Technological innovation and social media have transformed our lives, in many positive ways. However, the frictions that remain deserves to be discussed. As cognitive psychologist, linguist and author Steven Pinker points out, much of our recent social history, including the culture wars between liberals and conservatives, consists of the moralisation or amoralisation of particular kinds of behaviour. Pinker aptly captures this by arguing that there seems to be a Law of Conservation of Moralisation, so that as old behaviours are taken out of the moralised column, new ones are added to it. As the tectonic plates of moral evolution shift, we must therefore scrutinise the role of social media in our lives, and be mindful of how we utilise it for positive changes.