

The Daily Star

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How long will we play the victim card?

Govt must walk the talk on preventing corruption

A predictable chain of reactions follows every year after the Transparency International releases its annual Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI). Bangladesh's invariable placement near the bottom of the index always leads to official denunciations calling it baseless or motivated, sometimes by multiple ministers. This year, the general secretary of the ruling Awami League took it up a notch, terming the global anti-graft watchdog as "BNP's agent." His subsequent comment—"Corruption is the way of life across the world now, and it is not a matter of Bangladesh only"—sounded more like a defence rather than rejection of corruption.

In the CPI 2023, Bangladesh has dropped two notches to rank 10th from the bottom among the 180 countries examined. Its score fell from 25 (out of 100) in 2022 to 24 in 2023. Among all South Asian nations, only Afghanistan has fared worse, with a rating of 20. Over the last 15 years that Awami League has been in power, these statistics with minor variations have come back to haunt us repeatedly as our public sector continued to be adjudged among the most corrupt in the world. And reactions like the above show how, beyond the obvious hurt that it causes, little substantive action has been taken to prevent this yearly dressing down of Bangladesh's performance.

The feeble attempt at political colouring belies a deeply flawed government approach. On the one hand, the official policy boasts "zero tolerance" for corruption. On the other hand, the whole governance structure seems to be designed in a way that promotes and even enables it, causing a huge drain on state resources. The message thus given is this: if you're smart or powerful enough to get away with corruption, it is okay to commit it. While the failure to address corruption seems to have benefited those close to power, it has caused massive sufferings for the public.

We get a picture of this process from how state institutions mandated to control corruption, including the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), have been made toothless over the years. Bribery and misappropriation of public funds have become rampant, with willful defaulters, scammers and money launderers often given a free pass. Nepotism and partisan influence in public-sector appointments and business, including control over lucrative contracts, have been normalised, while vested interest groups have been allowed to capture policymaking.

Against this backdrop, we would like to hope that the prime minister's reiteration of the zero-tolerance vow after the recent election will indeed mean business. The local chapter of Transparency International has made a number of recommendations to improve our position that are worth following. If the government is really sincere about getting Bangladesh out of the bottom rung, rhetoric cannot help it. It must walk the talk on preventing corruption.

Microplastic pollution demands attention

New study reveals harrowing level of such pollution in rivers

That microplastic pollution poses a significant threat to the environment, biodiversity and public health has been conveyed by scientists and environmental experts for several years now. But the scale at which this menace has invaded our lives has become clearer after a recent study that found that tiny plastic particles are being transported across the country through major rivers. For a riverine delta like Bangladesh, this revelation comes as a massive red flag, and warrants immediate action to counter the risks faced by our terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems as well as public health.

Published in the Elsevier's Ecotoxicology and Environmental Safety journal, the study—the first of its kind in the country—reveals how microplastics are transported through the Ganges-Padma river system to the Meghna estuary. Throughout this 330-kilometre journey, microplastics get deposited in shoreline water and deep sediments. Examining 180 water and sediment samples collected from 30 different areas, the research found that the concentrations of microplastics in upstream and downstream river waters were 24-50 particles and 26-64 particles per litre, respectively. And in sediments, the concentrations were 1,670-2,953 particles per kg upstream and 1,717-4,014 particles per kg downstream.

The implications of these findings are severe. It is well known that microplastics, which are extremely pervasive due to their sizes, contain toxic chemicals and take years to decompose. Not only are they harmful for marine life forms, but exposure to microplastics puts humans at severe health risks too, as they can enter our bodies and cause various diseases including cancer. Now that we have a definitive picture of the crisis we are facing, it is imperative that we act promptly and efficiently.

The relevant authorities need to shed their usual lacklustre approach to public health risks, and make microplastics control a priority. Experts have pointed out that urgent monitoring is needed to track microplastic contamination in rivers. In addition, the authorities must focus on curbing the use of plastic materials more vigorously. To this end, the existing rules to regulate plastic use—such as the 2020 High Court ban on single-use plastics, which has yet to be enforced—should be implemented with due diligence, and new rules must be introduced if necessary. We also need a strict plastic waste collection and recycling system so that plastic waste cannot leak into the environment. Of course, awareness on an individual level is also necessary. But the government has to take the lead in this regard. Lastly, we as a nation must rethink our lifestyle in order to reduce our dependence on plastics.

We ought to be wary of disinformation



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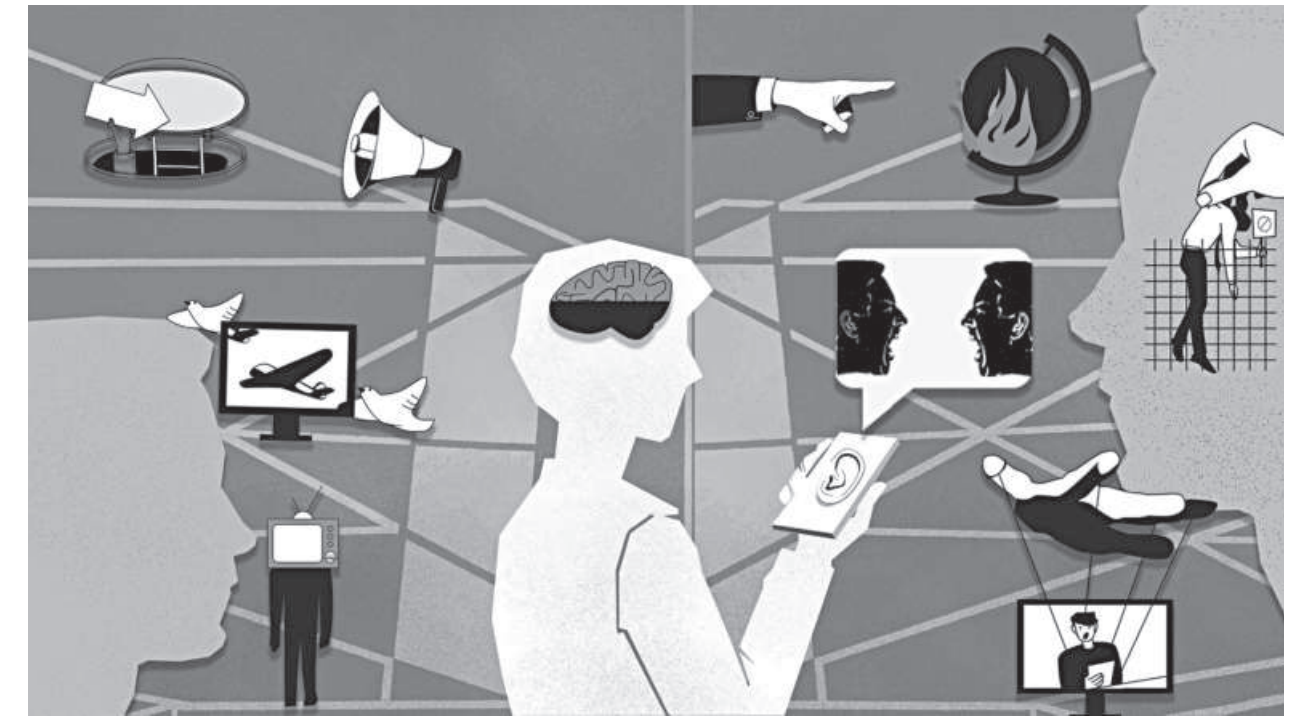
QADARUDDIN SHISHIR

A video recently popped up on my YouTube feed, the headline of which struck me: "Bangladesh's Opposition Launches 'India Out' Campaign." Upon seeing the YouTube channel's name, I realised it was Firstpost, an online news website owned by Mukesh Ambani's Reliance Industries.

The description of the video, which was published on January 18 and has since received more than 850,000 views, clearly mentions: "Bangladesh's opposition party BNP has reportedly launched an 'India Out' campaign inspired by the movement in the Maldives. Social media accounts are urging Bangladeshis to boycott Indian products. Will this campaign impact India-Bangladesh ties?" On the screen appears Palki Sharma, a news presenter and the managing editor of Firstpost, quoting "reports" on how BNP orchestrated a social media campaign against India. In the four-and-a-half-minute video, which discusses the alleged role of BNP's de facto leader Tarique Rahman in initiating the "India Out" movement, Sharma does not refer to the source of the "report."

As a fact checker and digital investigative journalist, it's part of my job to watch over the daily news cycle and discover potential mis- and disinformation around the web. So I was well aware of a "boycott India" campaign brewing among Bangladeshis on online social platforms like Facebook, X, and YouTube. To the best of my knowledge, the movement was initiated by social media influencers—some of whom are known as critics of the Awami League government. But I could not instantly recall any media reports about BNP or any other political parties talking about boycotting Indian products or expressing their support for the developing social media crusade. Hence, I checked on Google and YouTube to redress my ignorance and try to discover news related to the development. The search engines surprised me with a bunch of results including news articles in English and Hindi that claimed Bangladesh's opposition party BNP and its leaders had launched an "India Out" movement. All the reports are from different Indian outlets such as Zee News, India TV, ABP Live, Aaj Tak, News 18 India, Republic Bharat, TV9 Bharatvarsh, Oneindia Hindi, Times Now Navbharat, and many others. But no Bangladeshi media outlet reported on this. I wondered: would it not have been the norm for journalists in Bangladesh to have broken the story first?

Though the majority of Indian news



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channels and websites referred to "unidentified reports" as the origin of the news, News 18 India cited EurAsian Times as its source. In the matter of a few clicks, a report titled "Replicating Maldives, Bangladesh's Biggest Opposition Party, BNP Launches 'India Out' Movement" by EurAsian Times, a Canada-based website run by a few Indian-origin journalists. The report, which was published on January 15, was written by Jennifer Hicks (introduced on the website as "a columnist and political commentator writing on a large range of topics" who "has worked for over 15 years with the now defunct Hong Kong Free Press").

But in my investigation, I found that at least two pieces of information provided in Hicks' two-sentence bio was false. First, Hong Kong Free Press is an operational English-language news website based in Hong Kong and was never shut down after its launch in 2015. Second, searching for the name of Jennifer Hicks on the Hong Kong Free Press website delivers no results, which could indicate that Hicks has never worked with the news outlet.

More interestingly, Hicks' write-up appeared to be a copy of another article published on January 11 by Weekly Blitz, a Dhaka-based website. In the past, the Blitz was exposed by fact-checkers and journalists' rights organisations as a source of political disinformation. At least 12 paragraphs of both articles match exactly, while the rest of Hicks' write-up is also a

paraphrased (and a shorter) version of another Blitz article titled "Bangladesh Nationalist Party launches 'India Out' movement" (penned by the website's editor Salah Uddin Shoaib Choudhury). Turns out, Hicks is a regular writer for Blitz. However, besides the only headshot of her used on the Blitz and EurAsian Times websites (and a couple of other websites), her credentials or photographs could not be found

that "BNP is leading the 'India Out' movement in Bangladesh."

BNP's anger towards India is real. Ruhul Kabir Rizvi, a spokesperson of the party, told *Nikkei Asia* this week that BNP "is vocal on Indian interference on Bangladesh internal issues, politics, and the role New Delhi played during the last general election." But he added, "However...the party high-ups have not yet discussed about

elsewhere on the internet. It's quite curious that Choudhury is the editor of the news website where Hicks is a contributor, and she plagiarised his article from Blitz to publish it on a different website without giving any credit to the original writer, i.e. her supposed editor.

The original Blitz report was based on a source referred to as "it has been learnt"—meaning no source at all! The wording used when introducing the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) says a lot about what the article was trying to portray. In no way can BNP be identified as an "Islamist" party, let alone be called an "ultra-Islamist" one. The loaded language of the Blitz article, lack of any sources and evidence to support its main claim, and the website's record of spreading political disinformation against independent journalists and critics of the government are enough to debunk its new assertion that BNP has launched a so-called India Out movement in Bangladesh.

Obviously, there could be anger among the pro-BNP crowd surrounding the January 7 election, and some groups inside the party may feel the urge to act along the India boycott movement pioneered by social media influencers. But as long as BNP is not officially taking a position on the campaign, or evidence of its top leadership covertly or overtly backing the move does not come out of a reliable public source, it's disinformative to say

[calling] for boycotting Indian products or promoting an 'India Out' campaign."

Disinformation from some Indian media outlets regarding Bangladeshi affairs is nothing new. In recent years, there have been several instances, documented by fact-checkers, wherein a section of Indian media participated in spreading outright false information about its neighbour. In November 2022, a report came out of several Bangladeshi media outlets that a flood-struck Pakistan had rejected relief aid from Bangladesh. Eventually, Dismislab tracked the origin of the news down to a website called Bangladesh Live News, which linked "to a Facebook page, which was opened on January 9, 2013. Page transparency shows that its only admin lives in India. The page produces news items and pushes them through advertisements, the payment for which is made in Indian rupees."

The patterns in such instances of disinformation echo the narratives of those trying to portray all Bangladeshis as being discriminatory against the country's Hindu minority. Given the fact that disinformation mechanisms have evidently been deployed to target opposition forces in Bangladesh, and given some Indian media outlets' record of amplifying such narratives, the days ahead may be more challenging in terms of fighting cross-border disinformation. To combat this, news outlets in both countries must work together.

Contain the spread of fast food before it's too late



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LAILA KHONDKAR

The Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey 2022 mentions that 49 percent of the children aged between 6 and 23 months consumed unhealthy foods during the day before the survey. In the report, "unhealthy foods" are described as "foods that are high in sugar, salt or unhealthy fats." These food items suppress the appetite in children and make up the exact opposite of a balanced diet. The unregulated spread of unhealthy foods is a matter of great concern.

Foods that can be prepared quickly are usually known as fast food. The widespread popularity of fast food is owed to cheaper price, taste and instant availability. And it seems most popular among children.

Fast food has high amounts of calories, saturated fats, sugar, and salt. Hence, its nutritional value is low. Children's taste buds are such that they

tend to like foods that have more fat, sugar, and salt. Since they don't offer a sense of being full, children tend to overeat fast food. This in turn reduces children's consumption of fruits and vegetables. Research shows that eating fast food has a direct correlation with weight gain. Obesity increases the risk of type 2 diabetes, heart disease, hypertension, stroke, and a few types of cancer.

The problems that children specifically face due to fast food consumption include constipation, anaemia, and vitamin D deficiency. A lack of calcium also affects dental health, while weight gain reduces their stamina, meaning they spend less time engaging in sports or other physical activities. Even if they are physically active, children who consume fast food still gain more weight compared to children who do

not consume fast food.

No country has been fully successful in protecting its children against the influence of aggressive marketing done by the fast food companies. However, the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and various European countries have been taking steps to regulate fast food. These include preparing school lunches in a way that ensures adequate nutritional quality, keeping fewer sugary snacks or high-calorie drinks in vending machines, arranging for children to receive a balanced diet while in school, including a detailed list of ingredients on food packaging, and banning the sale of fast food near schools.

Child obesity has become a concern in many Western countries as it raises the risks of various diseases in later in life. But what about Bangladesh?

A few days ago, I asked a fast food outlet owner how his business was going. He answered with a wide grin: "There are a lot of schools and colleges in this area. So sales are good."

In Bangladesh, advertisements for fast food are presented via television, print media, billboards, digital media, and so on. In some cases, toys are offered as gifts with the purchase of fast food in order to attract children. Some fast food restaurants also

have play zones, making children particularly eager to visit those places.

However, toy or gift handouts with meals at fast food joints should be controlled, and the amount of calories in each food item should be clearly mentioned. Permissions should also not be granted to fast food companies wanting to open an outlet near educational institutions. A clear guideline should be formulated regarding the marketing of fast food, while public awareness should be raised regarding its harmful effects.

It is often argued that "children prefer fast food." But do children have purchasing abilities? It is their parents who play the main role in the formation of children's habits, including their eating habits. Children should be guided to consume nutritious, homemade food. Instead of storing soft drinks and processed food in the refrigerator, families should stock up on milk, fruit juice, and fresh fruits. Children should also be persuaded to play outdoor games rather than spending so much time with screens.

It is crucial that Bangladeshi children's dependency on fast food is reduced, if not entirely eliminated, before it's too late. Ultimately, if adults in the family eat healthy and maintains an active lifestyle, children will follow suit.