

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

How many years must Jonny's family wait?

Custodial torture must cease to exist

For the past 10 years, we have been remembering Ishtiaque Hossain Jonny, an innocent individual who was tortured to death in police custody, in the hopes of inching towards justice. Every year, we bring up Jonny's ordeal—how he was targeted, picked up and assaulted, all because he spoke up against wrongdoing. Unfortunately, we may have to do the same next year, as the High Court is yet to start hearing the appeals due to the lack of a paper book, which contains all case details necessary to hear and dispose of an appeal. It is this small requirement that is keeping Jonny's family in despair.

On February 8, 2014, around 25 police officers raided a house during a wedding ceremony at Pallabi's Irani camp in Dhaka and picked up Jonny, a 28-year-old garment waste trader, and his brother. What was Jonny's crime? He reportedly slapped a police informant for stalking and harassing women at the programme. This "crime" led to the custodial torture of two brothers, and at one point, Jonny could not bear it anymore.

On September 9, 2020, a Dhaka court sentenced three former officers of Pallabi police station to life imprisonment, and two others to seven years in jail. While this was good news, this verdict remains only on paper until appeals are heard and the ultimate judgment is handed down, which is being delayed as the defence has not prepared the paper book. Meanwhile, Jonny's family is yet to get the Tk 6 lakh compensation from the convicted, as the High Court issued a stay order on this in 2021. Such is the nature of our legal system, in which victims have to wait years and decades to get justice.

While remembering Jonny, let us also recall the countless other victims of this barbarity. Last year, Sultana Jasmine, a land office employee in Naogaon, died in Rab's custody at Rajshahi Medical College Hospital. A year before, Sumon Sheik, a 25-year-old deliveryman, died inside the lockup of Dhaka's Hatirjheel police station. In 2020, the custodial death of Rayhan Ahmed of Sylhet city made headlines. He was tortured at Bandarbaraz police outpost and died on the same day. All these incidents point to the fact that custodial torture is deeply entrenched in our law enforcement agencies.

Although the Torture and Custodial Death (Prevention) Act exists, many refrain from filing cases under it, fearing that antagonising law enforcers would entail harm, say experts. This fear is not unnatural, since time and again, we have seen how hostile officers can get in their efforts to protect their own. Therefore, we urge nothing but reform—of how law enforcers are chosen for the job, of the way civilians are handled, of our custodial practices, and of how officers are held to account—lest we see years of more torture, deaths and injustice.

Dhaka needs its water bodies back

Encroached ponds inside Rajuk must be reclaimed

Water bodies are indispensable for our environment, habitats and society, more so for our monsoon-prone geography. It is completely illegal to fill up any water body, according to the Water Bodies Conservation Act, 2000. Yet, they remain primary targets for illegal occupation and encroachment. A recent Rajuk survey identified 68 ponds within its jurisdiction alone that have been filled up and illegally occupied by individuals and even government organisations.

The Rajuk survey found that 62 ponds in Dhaka and three each in Narayanganj and Savar have been transformed into houses, shops, steel mills, markets, garages, religious institutions, and even government facilities such as the Baunia Land Office, law enforcement office, DSCC-owned playing field, and even government high schools. The sheer range and prevalence of these encroachments reflect the appalling negligence with which policymakers and organisations entrusted with water body conservation have treated these crucial resources.

Bangladesh's water security record is among the poorest globally, with over 60 percent of Dhaka's wetlands lost in just 30 years as of 2016. Once a wetland-rich haven—accommodating excess rainwater, providing a major protein source, fostering ecological diversity, and ensuring access to clean water for households—Dhaka has now become a city dominated by concrete, with its remaining water bodies compromised and dangerously polluted.

While policymakers have expressed their commitment to water body conservation in various policies and development plans, nothing holds any credibility if they fail to significantly act on their promises. Organisations tasked with this responsibility, such as the National River Conservation Commission (NRCC), Water Development Board (WDB), Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority, and city corporations, continue to face challenges related to workforce, executive authority, collaborative efforts, and apparent willingness to consistently monitor and enforce conservation measures.

We cannot overlook the fact that many of the major problems in our city—flood, pollution and ecological and environmental degradation—are impossible to solve without reclaiming water bodies. The government must recognise the gravity of the situation and prioritise water body conservation as an essential element for a sustainable future.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Footbridge in Rampura

Every day, countless people cross the DIT Road near the U-loop in Rampura, an extremely congested and busy juncture in Dhaka. In absence of a footbridge, pedestrians have to halt speeding vehicles, including large buses and trucks, and evade traffic to cross the road. This is extremely dangerous and puts many lives at risk, including that of students of many schools and a large private university. Therefore, I urge the authorities to look into the matter as soon as possible.

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THE MENACE OF MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION

A threat to democracy in Bangladesh



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ZILLUR RAHMAN

Right after the national polls closed in Bangladesh on January 7, the so-called independent election observers whom the government hosted spoke to the media about how the election was totally "free and fair," and there were no issues in how it was conducted. Former US Congressman Jim Bates was among the invited independent observers. Bates has been a controversial character throughout his career, having been accused of sexual harassment and using bad cheques to support his election campaign in 1990. Bates' visit to Bangladesh is reportedly part of his promise to the government "to engage the current congressmen and senators" in its favour, as mentioned in the June 2021 newsletter published by the Bangladesh embassy in Washington, DC. Pro-government news networks saw the chance and immediately titled headlines such as "US observer calls election free and fair."

This kind of reporting is essentially the type of misinformation that is most common in Bangladesh, where headlines are drawn with double meaning in order to confuse readers and muddy political discourse with false narratives. Of course, the US embassy was prompt to state that no official election observation team had been sent to Bangladesh to observe the most recent election. This was in line with foreign missions of the UK, Canada, and others that sought to restate the absence of official election observers from the respective nations.

In today's digital age, the spread of misinformation and disinformation has arisen as a major challenge to global democracy. Nowhere is this more evident than in Bangladesh, where the propagation of false narratives and malevolent propaganda is undermining the democratic process and eroding public trust in institutions. From social media echo chambers to sensationalist news outlets, the spread of misinformation is stifling democracy in Bangladesh and undermining the country's progress towards a more open and inclusive society.

Misinformation and disinformation campaigns in Bangladesh are perpetuated through various mediums, including social media platforms, online news websites and messaging apps. While serving as valuable communication and information dissemination tools, these platforms have also become breeding grounds for the rapid spread of false narratives and propaganda. Political actors, extremist groups and foreign entities often exploit these channels to manipulate public opinion, polarise communities, and advance their own agendas. Now, with the benefit of

cutting-edge AI technology, the spread of misinformation and disinformation has become even more virulent. A recent investigative piece published in the *Financial Times* on December 14 last year clearly indicates how pro-government news outlets and influencers in Bangladesh promote disinformation by using cheap AI tools to produce deep fake videos. The report identified several AI-generated videos to spread disinformation against the opposition BNP as well as the US.

One of the most concerning consequences of these kinds of misinformation and disinformation is their potential to incite violence and unrest. False rumours about religious or ethnic minorities, political opponents

campaign of hundreds of op-eds by fake experts praising the government's policies. AFP said that the "articles overwhelmingly endorse narratives pushed by Dhaka, with some posted on Bangladesh government websites." This kind of blurring of lines between news and propaganda outlets on social media platforms raises severe concerns about the erosion of public faith in reliable sources of information.

Unfortunately, over the last decade, the government has adopted increasingly harsh efforts to censor independent voices and the media, particularly through the blanket application of the Digital Security Act (DSA). By extensively regulating the press, the government has created the ideal breeding ground for the propagation of misinformation, as people increasingly turn to unverified reports to gain insights that are not available in regular media. In such an environment, polarisation deepens and constructive engagement gives way to hostility and division.

Misinformation and disinformation have had a far-reaching impact on Bangladesh's political environment,

to the press that the government wanted "disinformation and rumour-free mass media along with ensuring full freedom of the press." This is a very good sentiment to have. To build on it, the government must enact legislation to hold those who spread false information to account while protecting freedom of expression and the press. Investing in education and media literacy initiatives can help citizens evaluate information and discern between reliable sources and misinformation.

Furthermore, social media platforms and tech companies must be held accountable for preventing the spread of misinformation through efficient content moderation and fact-checking systems. By promoting transparency and accountability in their algorithms and standards, these platforms may assist in preventing the spread of misinformation and create a more informed online environment. A recent study conducted by Digitally Right, titled "Hits and Misses: An Examination of Meta's Political Ad Policy Enforcement in Bangladesh," published on December 25, 2023, highlighted an urgent issue in which instances of incomplete or vague



ILLUSTRATION: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

or contentious issues can quickly escalate tensions and lead to communal clashes or acts of vigilantism. Moreover, in a country such as Bangladesh, where access to reliable information is already very limited, misinformation can significantly distort perceptions of reality, making it difficult for citizens to make informed decisions or hold their leaders accountable.

Furthermore, misinformation and disinformation pose a significant challenge to the integrity of public discourse in Bangladesh. When falsehoods are presented as facts, and when information is spread under false pretences, genuine dialogue and debate become increasingly difficult, hindering the exchange of ideas and the search for common ground. In September 2023, AFP's fact-checking team in Bangladesh unearthed a coordinated

including the loss of democratic norms and institutions as well as societal instability. Malicious actors attempt to delegitimise the democratic process and damage the credibility of elected officials by circulating misleading information about electoral processes, candidates or political parties. This lack of trust in democratic institutions can have drawn-out implications, instilling cynicism in citizens and opening the path for authoritarian tendencies to flourish.

Addressing the scourge of misinformation and disinformation in Bangladesh requires a multifaceted approach involving government intervention, media literacy initiatives, and collaborative efforts from civil society organisations and technology companies. State Minister for Information and Broadcasting Mohammad Ali Arafat recently stated

information in disclaimers provided by advertisers fell short of Facebook's transparency standards and hints at potential gaps in the platform's verification processes, leaving users in the dark about the sources funding political ads. Meta has to address these issues in Bangladesh and other countries, many of which are preparing for their respective national elections.

Countering misinformation and disinformation is about protecting the integrity of Bangladeshi politics, defending democratic norms and cultivating a society based on trust, transparency, and informed citizenry. By facing this challenge head-on and embracing collaborative solutions, Bangladesh can reduce the negative consequences of disinformation while also strengthening its democratic foundations to benefit all Bangladeshis.

How female-friendly are our office restrooms?



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MONIRA SHARMIN

Shayla, a government employee based in Jashore, only drinks half a litre of water throughout her 9am-to-5pm work shift, so that she does not have to urinate frequently, because there isn't a dedicated restroom for female employees in his office. The one it does have is shockingly unusable. "When I went to the restroom on my first day of work, I was on the verge of passing out seeing how filthy and unkempt it was. In order to avoid having to use the restroom, I don't even have tea or coffee," She said in despair.

Given that women are more than 42 percent of Bangladesh's labour force, it is unfortunate that even in 2024, separate restrooms for women are still not the norm in many workplaces in Bangladesh, especially government offices. But it is essential that women have their own restrooms considering

their privacy, not to mention hygiene since their menstrual cycles require different hygiene practices. When menstruating, women who don't have access to private restrooms at work might be compelled to relinquish their wages and hours of work which may result in an adverse impression of the workers as "unreliable" or "irresponsible," which limits opportunities for promotion.

The difficulties that menstruating girls and women face stretch beyond a simple lack of supplies or infrastructure. While menstruation is a normal and healthy part of life, in many societies, menstruating women's experiences remain strained by cultural taboos and discriminatory social norms.

Mithila, who is a government banker based in Sherpur, said it was extremely tough for a woman to work at a bank from 10 am to 6 pm without having

a dedicated female restroom. "It is sometimes awkward to use the shared restroom with our male coworkers, and because there isn't even a covered rubbish bin, it is difficult to dispose of sanitary products when you're menstruating," she said.

Separate toilet facilities at work provide women with a space that prioritises their privacy and dignity. In shared facilities, women's specific hygiene needs may not be adequately addressed. Designing separate facilities allows for the inclusion of amenities like sanitary napkin disposal bins. Recognising and addressing the specific needs of female employees contributes to their overall well-being, job satisfaction, and productivity. It conveys favourably about the organisation's dedication to inclusion and diversity as well.

The United Nations General Assembly formally acknowledged water and sanitation as an essential human right by passing Resolution 64/292. The Bangladesh government has acknowledged it as a basic right in a number of initiatives as well. According to Sustainable Development Goal 5 (Gender Equality), companies that provide staff separate restrooms and changing areas help to achieve SDG 5.1, which calls for the abolition of all forms

of discrimination against women and girls worldwide. SDG 6: Clean Water and Sanitation is achieved by businesses providing staff with separate restrooms and changing areas. It also aims to end open defecation and provide everyone with access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene by 2030, giving special consideration to the needs of women, girls, and those in vulnerable situations.

Female labour force participation rate in Bangladesh has increased significantly over the decades. It has increased to 42.68 percent in 2022, up from 36.3 percent five years ago. Rural participation of women at work is 50.89 percent and 23.6 percent in urban areas, according to the Labour Force Survey 2022, conducted by Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. This change in the workforce demographics necessitates a careful evaluation of the facilities and infrastructure to guarantee inclusivity and comfort for all workers. There are many obstacles ahead for our recently formed government. It would be praiseworthy if the government could devise certain initiatives to address this overlooked issue, making sure that these initiatives comply with labour laws and workplace facility regulations, with a focus on the significance of gender-specific provisions.