Newspaper Coverage on Rumor, social stigma and fear related to coronavirus pandemic in Bangladesh

Overview of Media Monitoring

A media monitoring report during March to April 2020 of six newspapers (print and online, Bangla and English) has disclosed that newspapers have presented diversified issues related to coronavirus related pandemic in Bangladesh. Three such issues are rumour, social stigma and fear. These are interrelated and responsible for making people's life miserable. Sometimes these become take position to loss of people's life. It is fact that the people face many odds during this type of pandemic.

Newspapers said, 'Lack of access to appropriate and need based information is main concern in this regard. Unfortunately both people with institutional education and those who missed opportunity to get institutional education opportunity are active here. Still rumour, social stigma and fear are local issues and actions have been taken place at local level'. No news was available during study period on a comprehensive drive for making people free from those.

Different news items were available during study period along with analytical articles. News Items have disclosed nature of incidents, players, participation of people and actions against stopping those. Full package information dissemination is helpful to understand dynamics related to rumors, social stigma and fear. Analytical article has guided readers to know ways for escaping from traps of those issues. These are causes of nursing information hidden culture related to infection. In this practice, an individual is in danger in both ways – deprivation of required health care in due time and created chances of others infection.

A citizen journalist of Prothom Alo made an appeal in his report as, There will be a fervent appeal to the government to form anti-rumor cells in every district, upazila, union and even ward level. One of the problems of the country will be solved by taking appropriate action against those who are involved in these propagandas. If the government is not strict in preventing rumors, it will have to pay a heavy price in the coming days.'

Present Scenario

'A woman said she, along with her husband, had been suffering from severe flu-like symptoms from March 18 and they went into self-isolation and had gone into home quarantine."We contacted the IEDCR for testing and when they came to test, the building's committee secretary called us up and was very rude to us, accusing us of hiding our situation," she said."We told him that we had nothing to let them know until the IEDCR would give us our test results." "When the results came, we sent a message saying that we are negative, but he sent the caretaker to our house to let us know that he would not believe it until he saw the reports himself. He demanded the reports. As residents of this building we were happy to oblige and share the medical report."

Daily Star, 26 April 2020 (Annex:1)

'A middle-aged man has been admitted to Gangni Upazila Health Complex in Meherpur with fever, cold and respiratory complications . As the news spread, most of the admitted patients left the hospital. Prothom Alo, 1 April 2020 (Annex: 2)

Who or whom left an old woman near the Daratana bridge in Bagerhat sadar. None was going to her due to corona infected suspect.

Prothom Alo, 6 April 2020 (Annex: 3)

Three snapshots have given social stigma scenario in Bangladesh during coronavirus pandemic along with newspapers coverage on those issues. As part of assignment of Bangladesh Health Watch, we have developed a mentoring report of *Prothom Alo, Daily Star, Samakal, Kalerkantho, New Age and Bangla* Tribune. With other issues, here is a report on Rumour, social stigma and fear related to coronavirus pandemic with objectives to know coverage status, dynamics, gaps and recommendations for addressing policy issues.

Newspapers Coverage

Rumour, social stigma and fear are interrelated. All are responsible to mislead the people and to add more sufferings in their life.

'Limited access to proper information, absence of information, less trust or mistrust on disseminated information, uncertainty about future and thrust of getting immediate solutions have created ground for rumour. In other way, lack of appropriate awareness is also another reason for creating scopes of rumours. Mainly two types of rumours are here-deliberate and due to ignorance. A section of people spread rumours for their own interest or mislead people about person or institution associated with that rumour. Rumour contributes in creating social stigma and social stigma creates fear'. Stated by Ms Shahana Huda Ranjana in her article published in the Daily Star on 1 April 2020 (Annex: 4)

Newspapers have published several stories on rumours related to COVID 19 in Bangladesh. They have published three types of news stories; these are incident related to specific rumour, impacts of that rumour and actions of respective authority or authorities against of that rumour. They also published analytical news or article as an awareness building instrument on rumour. Following detail news or articles are available during March and April 2020 in monitored six newspapers.

• Mr. Liton Barua, a Psychologist and working in a NGO, wrote an article in the Prothom Alo on 30 April 2020 titled 'How to survive in the corona panic?' He explained 'What's the rumor', what are ways to escape from rumors and panic and How to reduce panic and fear. He also said, 'There are two types of fears that arise in people's minds related to present danger. One is rational fear and another is irrational fear. Rational fear will prepare our mind and body to deal with the coronavirus. Irrational fears on the other hand will create negative emotions and

behaviors inside us. It will weaken the mind and body'. (Prothom Alo, 22 March 2020, Annex: 5)

The Samakal published a report on 'Beware of rumors after rumors', It is a compiled report of different rumours related incidents in Chottrogram, Feni, Habiganj, Rangpur, Panchagar, Pirojpur, Narayanganj, Cox'sbazar and Laxmipur situation on rumours. There have been rumors of azan (call for prayer for Muslims) and processions in different parts of the country. Apart from this, there have been reports of drinking tea without milk, eating blackberries, and giving uludhbani (sound from mouth of hindu women) in the house. Many people are spreading these rumors again on social media without checking justifications. The situation is getting worse. Not only people are getting confused in these incidents, but all efforts to deal with Coronavirus are also being hampered. (Samakal, 28 March 2020, Annex: 6)

No news was available on comprehensive initiative for stopping rumour. News items were available on after rumour broken out and people of that specific locality has been participated. Local administration has taken actions to stop spread of rumour in that locality by anti-rumour propaganda and legal actions.

- Police arrested six persons from different areas in Dhaka on charges of spreading rumours and misleading information on the coronavirus outbreak (Daily Star, 29 March 2020, Annex: 7)
- 24 arrested in 13 districts in a month for spreading rumors related to Coronavirus (Prothom Alo, 30 April 2020, Annex: 8)

Available Issues of rumours can be mainly subdivided into four: i) Remedies of coronavirus by different food practices or self invented medicines where are not supported by scientific justifications, ii) Misinterpretation of religion, again which are not supported by religion, iii) for humiliating individual or institution and iv) creating panic by disseminating misinformation.

i) Remedies of coronavirus by different food practices or self invented medicines

- People in the country will get rid of coronavirus if they cook rice with milk and feed 200 people (Prothom Alo, Chapanawabganj, 17 April 2020, Annex: 9)
- Police arrested a youth on charges of spreading misinformation through social media, claiming to have discovered the theory of coronavirus eradication from the country. (Prothom Alo, 28 march 2020, Annex: 10)
- Bashir Mia, a teacher at Mobarakpur Bangabandhu High School in Osmaninagar, Sylhet, posted on his Facebook that drinking tea without milk can prevent coronavirus. It went viral on Facebook. (Prothom Alo, 28 March 2020, Annex: 11)
- A woman had been telling people in the area for several days that a man from Saudi Arabia had come home sick in her village. That person may be infected with coronavirus. This information

- then spread to different areas in that locality. But fact is that none came in this village from Saudi Arab. (Prothom Alo, 27 March 2020, Annex: 12)
- In Madaripur, according to locals, rumors of eating thankunipata (Centella Leaves) by using mike from mosques in different parts of the district. Such rumors spread in almost every place of the district. (Prothom Alo, 18 March 2020, Annex: 13)
- Rumors spread in Barisal's Gournadi, Agailjhara and Uzirpur upazilas on 17 March night that coronavirus could be cured by eating three thankunipatas (Centella Leaves). However, this leaf should be eaten before Fajar (early morning parayer time for muslims) prayers. As soon as this rumor spread, there was a rush to eat the leaves from two o'clock in the morning till the time of Fajr prayers. Somewhere along the mike is called to eat thankuni leaves(Centella Leaves). (Prothom Alo, 18 March 2020, Annex:14)

ii) Misinterpretation of religion, which are not supported by religion

- Rumors spread in the mouths of people on social media mentioning the earthquake in different areas of Habiganj. At the same time, rumors of spreading various ingredients as an antidote to coronavirus also spread. (Prothom Alo, 27 March 2020, Annex: 15)
- Corona virus is not a cause of panic for Muslims but extreme punishment for the disbelievers, Coronavirus is a serious rage for Islam and anti-Muslims, Coronavirus is not an infectious disease but It is forbidden (haraa) to believe in infectious diseases. Rumors of deadly coronavirus continue despite strict ban by law enforcement agencies. At the same time, the organized group has been continuing to spread anti-government propaganda. Police has arrested 28 people across the country till Monday on this charge. The Dhaka Metropolitan Police's Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime (CTTC) and Cyber Unit have also blocked 25 Facebook IDs and pages. In addition, more than a hundred Facebook IDs, pages and YouTube channels involved in these activities have been identified, sources said. (Kalerkantho, 31 March 2020, Annex: 16)

iii) For humiliating individual or institution

- Rumour spread through social media, physician of Chuadanga Sadar Hospital Waliur Rahman died of coronavirus. But he is alive and to prove himself alive, he compelled to publish statements with photos in a local newspapers and social media (Prothom Alo, 8 April 2020, Annex:17)
- Recently, a 1 minute 22 seconds video spread on Facebook. In this video, false information about coronavirus infection of foreigners working in the under construction nuclear power plant at Rooppur, Pabna. He was later arrested on charges of involvement in the incident. (Prothom Alo, 31 March 2020, Annex: 18)
- In Feni, rumors and misleading news were spread from two Facebook IDs that an Assistant Superintendent of Police (ASP) had infected by coronavirus. This is an attempt to destabilize the

law and ordersituation by creating panic in the minds of the people. (Prothom Alo, 24 March 2020, Annex: 19)

iv) Creating panic by disseminating misinformation.

- In Dhaka, a youth spread rumors on Facebook about the deaths of 26 people due to coronavirus. Very quickly it became viral. At one point, the post came to the notice of the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) of the police. He also hacked the account of his friend to spread the rumor and posted from there. Later police arrested that youth. (Prothom Alo, 1 April 2020, Annex: 20)
- Sohail Sheikh made a video based on false information to spread rumors about him as a patient infected with coronavirus. Sohail Sheikh and his friend Ahad Sheikh shared the video on their Facebook ID on 15 March afternoon. A team of district DB arrested them from Krishnachura junction area of Pirojpur town this afternoon. (Prothom Alo, 22 March 2020, Annex: 21)
- Locals have blocked the construction of a dedicated hospital for patients of COVID 19 in Tejgaon industrial area, Dhaka an initiative of Akij Group. Because Rumour was that this hospital will spread coronavirus. The Akij Group has stopped construction of the temporary hospital in the face of resistance. (Bangla Tribune, 28 March 2020, Annex: 22). But later with help law and enforcement agency, Akij group managed to start that work.

Outlets for spreading rumour

According to information in different newspapers, Social Media specially facebook and You Tube are main outlets for spreading rumours by text and video messages. Additionally mikes of mosques have been used for same reason.

Causes of people's sufferings

Findings of this study have helped to tell that Rumour, social stigma and fear acted together to create suffering of the people. Cases are available on losing life of innocents and non-infected because of not to receive required care from other neighbours or health professionals. In some cases, life became more miserable. A section of people has hide information related to infection because of social stigma and fear, which became danger for his/her life for missing to get proper cares and danger for others life mainly health service providers.

- One person died of fever and respiratory complications. Locals suspect the man was coronavirus infected. Locals prevented the burial of the body in Shibganj, Bagura. (Prothom Alo, 31 March 2020, Annex: 23)
- The Islamic Foundation urges the Khatib, Imam and members of the mosque committee not to spread rumors about the corona virus or 'fully free you from rumours'.(Prothom Alo, 31 March 2020, Annex: 24)

• The woman health worker worked at Impulse Hospital in Dhaka. He came home on leave due to coronavirus. When the news of her arrival spread in the area, on the instruction of Prashant Barai, organizing secretary of Sadullapur Union Awami League, the locals built a hut with palm leaves in a pond in a secluded place about 400 meters away from her house and kept her in quarantine.



The victim said, "I have been living an inhuman life in the sun and rain for almost a week now. As a health worker I have provided healthcare to many people. And my health is under threat from here today. I didn't know before that people could be so cruel (Bangla Tribune, 27 April 2020, Annex: 25)

Five family members were attacked on their way home by trawler. A rumour was spread using mike of mosque that the trawler has the body of the corona victim. Five passengers of the trawler were injured when bricks were thrown at them by overreacted people mob on one side of the river, after receiving the news, the police and political leaders reached the spot and brought the situation under control. The incident took place at 9pm on March 26 in the area adjacent to the Torki port in Gournadi upazila of Barisal. (Bangla Tribune, 27 March 2020, Annex: 25)

Consequences

The Daily Star has published a report tiled,' Coronavirus outbreak: Stigma making it worse'. In this report, Benazir Ahmed, former director (disease control) of the DGHS said 'People are hiding their disease due to [fear of] stigma. Our approach to coronavirus patients is supposed to be informed by empathy, but instead we stigmatise them. It is very dangerous as a single person is putting the whole community and subsequently the country at risk. (Annex:1) He also said from sample collection to burial the whole communication strategy should be reviewed as the existing system is faulty." If people are confident that they would not be stigmatised, the situation will improve and risk will less'.

Remedies

A report published in the Prothom Alo written by a citizen journalist from Noakhali Science and Technology University made an appeal to the Government said, 'There will be a fervent appeal to the government to form anti-rumor cells in every district, upazila, union and even ward level. One of the problems of the country will be solved by taking appropriate action against those who are involved in these propaganda. If the government is not strict in preventing rumors, it will have to pay a heavy price in the coming days'. (Prothom Alo, 29 march 2020, Annex: 26)

<u>Draft Synthesis Report : only for comments</u>

ANNEXURE

1. Coronavirus outbreak: Stigma making it worse

Experts say many hide Covid-19 symptoms putting others at risk of infection

https://www.thedailystar.net/backpage/news/stigma-making-it-worse-1896856

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5. করোনার আতম্ক থেকে বাঁচব কীভাবে?

https://www.prothomalo.com/life-

style/article/1646228/%E0%A6%95%E0%A6%B0%E0%A7%8B%E0%A6%A8%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6 %B0-%E0%A6%86%E0%A6%A4%E0%A6%99%E0%A7%8D%E0%A6%95-

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6. গুজবের পর গুজব সতর্ক থাকন

https://samakal.com/bangladesh/article/200316796/%E0%A6%97%E0%A7%81%E0%A6%9C%E0

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7. 6 arrested in Dhaka for spreading coronavirus rumours

https://www.thedailystar.net/spreading-coronavirus-rumours-6-people-arrested-in-dhaka-1887274

8. করোনা নিয়ে গুজবে এক মাসে ১৩ জেলায় গ্রেপ্তার ২৪

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9. 'স্বপ্নে নির্দেশ' পেয়েছেন...

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10. করোনাভাইরাস নির্মূলের 'থিওরি' আবিষ্কারের দাবি করে কারাগারে

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11. 'লাল চা'–এর গুজব, শিক্ষকের মুচলেকা

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12. মিথ্যা তথ্য ছড়ানোয় এক নারীর অর্থদণ্ড

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<u>Draft Synthesis Report</u>: only for comments

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