

Reflections on Hate Speech & Other Thoughts



About

This document on hate speech is the result of multiple conversations across with multiple assemblies involving indigenous, artist, student, and gender and sexually diverse groups in Bangladesh. The goal of the project was to create generative processes and spaces for discussions on hate speech and freedom of expression which could continue beyond the scope and timeline of the project, with co-learning and co-creation, a major component of its desired impact. It hoped to create openings for critical inquiry into the experiences, public narratives, and ideas around free speech and hate speech and their implications.

Dhaka, Bangladesh
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Preface

The contents in this document are a work in progress. It is designed to be the beginning of a conversation and not the end. The document is a distillation and reflects a series of wide-ranging conversations with indigenous, artist, student, and gender and sexually diverse groups in the summer of 2021 on freedom of expression and hate speech. It captures the main themes raised in those discussions and is not meant to be a transcription of events. As such the conversations themselves were more sprawling, complex, in-depth and one of the goals of the process was to also create such spaces for exchange of ideas and experiences. This document is more condensed, at times still unfinished by design, more a working draft, and is meant for public dissemination and as a teaching tool to facilitate more conversations on these topics. It is a declaration of a set of desires, demands, flights of fancy, preferences, and aspirations regarding what to do, can be done, should be done about hate speech, free speech, and surrounding issues.

Grounding thoughts

Freedom of expression, free speech, hate speech are not neutral terms or ideas nor do they operate in a vacuum.

Discussion on freedom of expression, free speech, hate speech without concurrent discussion on and understanding of power is insufficient.

If freedom of expression, free speech is constrained and restricted, barred and criminalized, what conditions allow for the proliferation of hate speech which is not constrained or restrained, but sanctioned? Returning to the role of power, what do institutions (e.g., state, family), actors, ideas (e.g., patriarchy, majoritarianism, xenophobia), platforms (e.g., social media) condone and allow?

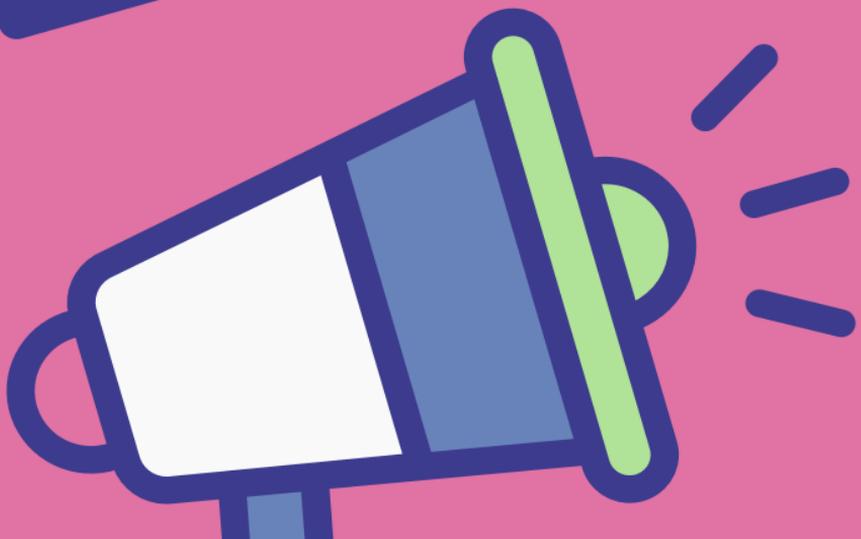
The ability to decide what's offense and offensive and where it should rest constitutes an important entry point for these discussions.

At stake is who, what, how those decisions should be made or not made. Which ideas, institutions, actors, platforms need to be displaced, discounted, discontinued and which prioritized.

**In any society,
freedom of expression,
free speech, hate speech are
not value neutral.**



**Rather they are imbued
with and are embedded
within value systems of
specific times and places.
Whether covert, overt, or
extreme there are regulating
apparatuses mediating
speech. Greater scrutiny of
those mediating mechanisms
should not be confused with
no mediation.**



Operations of speech

Speech has capacity – the capacity to ameliorate, to harm, to produce and induce action, to remain incapacitated.

Hate speech emanates from systems of oppression and domination, whether patriarchy, homophobia, ultranationalism, ethnic-religious-linguistic-racial dominance. The problems of hate speech cannot be addressed without addressing these underlying and facilitating conditions.

The proliferation of hate speech is a structural problem and not an individual or isolated one.

Speech can generate tension since one's speech has the capacity to impede or interfere with another's speech.

Social media both amplifies circulations of hate speech and reflects entrenched and systemic social conditions. Given its scale and reach, social media can magnify, spread, be an incubator of hate speech. At the same time, it also reflects existing social conditions which birth and promote hate speech.



Tensions

To repeat, freedom of expression, free speech, and hate speech are interconnected.

In the absence of freedom of expression, free speech, and presence of active efforts to ban, criminalize, persecute these freedoms, “regulation” of hate speech can become a cover, a blunt instrument to further repression.

While hate speech continues apace and those most affected by it remain unassisted.

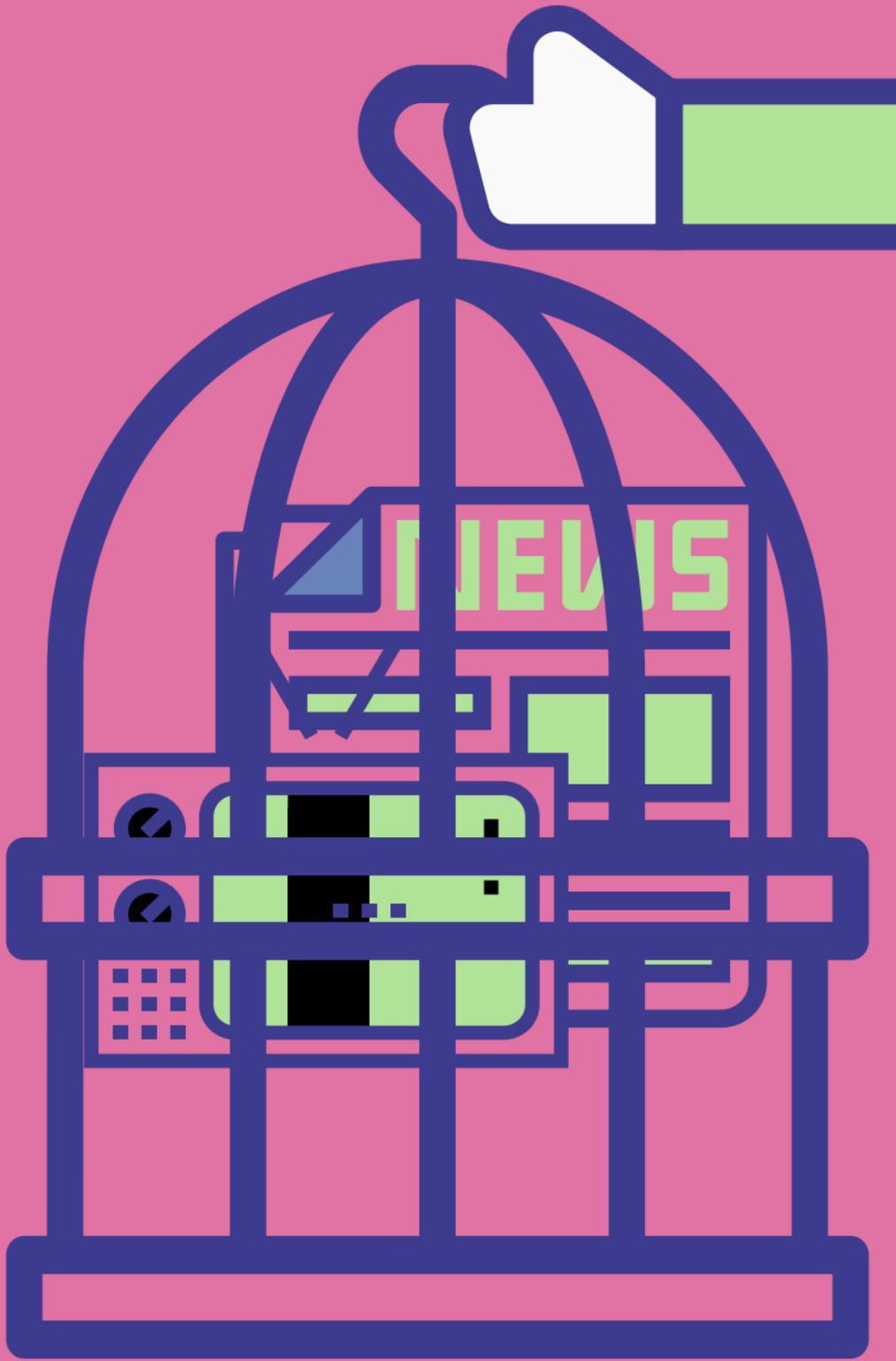
In the absence of freedom of expression and free speech, a singular focus on ensuring those freedoms must still accompany concurrent weight on responsibility and capacity of speech.

Harm reduction and responsibility are embedded in dreams of freedom.

But harm reduction and responsibility are always at risk of being hijacked, are easy excuses for those who wield unfreedoms at ease, without consequences.

The circulation, propagation, traction, evolution, elision of speech depends on many factors,

one of which is a conducive negotiating space, tangible or intangible, physical or online. A lack of or disappearance of these negotiating spaces create deleterious effects on free speech and expression. Take for example the disappearing public spaces for congregation in Dhaka – the roadsides, bookstores, parks, and others – which are daily bulldozed, rezoned, developed to make way for newer structures. Instead of spaces for people to gather freely, the city is left with privatized spaces like shopping malls and restaurants, surveilled grounds like parks, closed off roads and checkpoints, fenced off public spaces, cleaved public squares to build flyovers or other development projects. These disappearing public spaces are symptomatic of disappearing public discursive places/ spaces which impedes speech and expression by closing off means to congregate, gather, organize.



Reflections

“If taking part in a feminist rally and promoting or speaking at an anti-feminist gathering are both freedom of expression, then there are already inconsistencies.

Which opinions hold value, who gets to exercise the rights of free speech, how and under what conditions are those expressions are propagated depend on different alignments of power and privilege in society.

**So, we can see
freedom of
expression is
already or always
conditional.”**



Abuse of power

Hate speech stems from abuse of power.

The deployment, distribution, impact, and implication of that power is manifold and multifaceted.

To tackle hate speech is to understand the role and abuses of power and to put a break on hate speech is to confront those abuses.

It is not a coincidence, for example, that in case of criticisms of the government, there is usually swift action or posts are removed from social media. On the other hand, abuse of minorities and hate speech against them, like indigenous or queer people, of women, are so common and normalized, there is hardly any let up barring a few well-publicized ones. Powerful institutions can weaponize 'hate speech' for their survival or exertion of control but that does little to reduce hate speech.

The available legal instruments such as laws on defamation and blasphemy and the Digital Security Act have had effects incompatible with public interest.

Unabated circulation of harmful, abusive posts on social media, organized trolling and mob attacks against minorities and the marginalized means it is them who must be vigilant, take precautions, remain cautious about safety when those responsible for such attacks and vitriol – often from the comforts of a dominant position – do so without consequences. The equation is lopsided and that is abuse of power.

The problems of social media as recent or different as they maybe are also a reflection of what is socially and politically condoned as a whole. And what social media platforms also promote with their prioritization of incendiary posts.



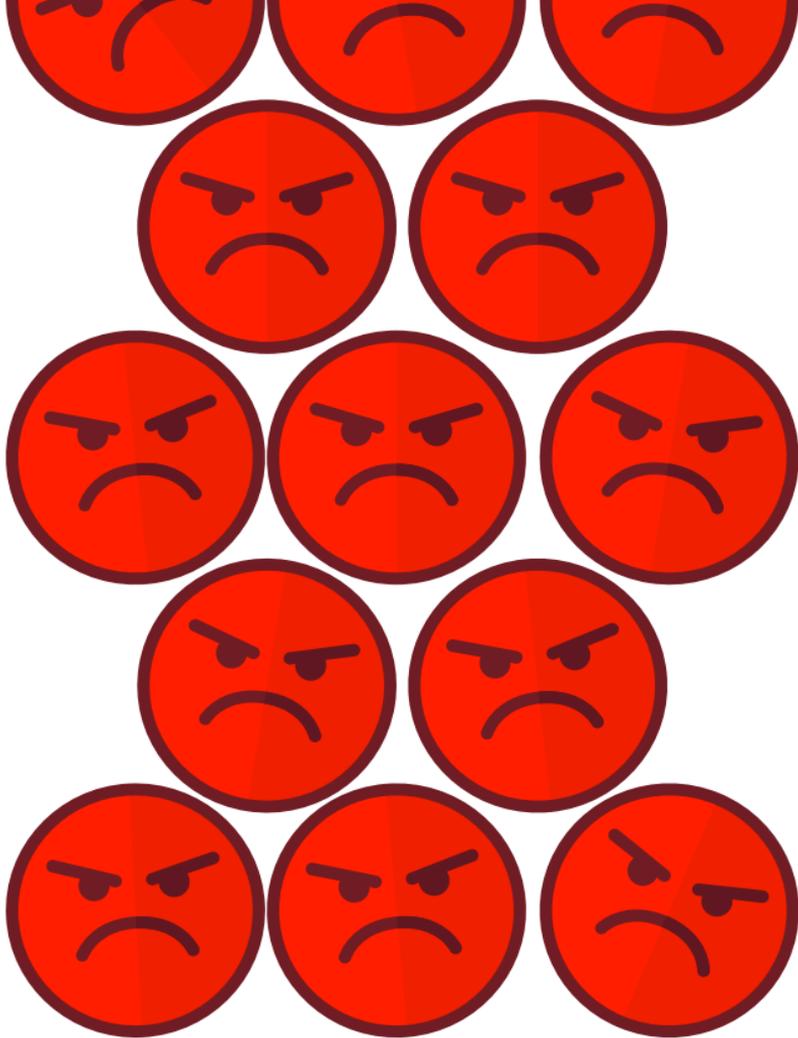
Experience

“A faculty at our university scheduled a makeup class on one of our religious holidays (I am from religious and ethnic minority background).

I was upset and expressed my displeasure on Facebook. Soon there was a deluge of comments and threats against me on the platform.

The focus became my apparent anger and angry post and not the lack of sensitivity of the faculty. The abuse I had to withstand was unremitting.

Very few people supported me and since then I am just more careful of what I say.”



On censorship

The prevailing instruments of censorship cause a climate of self-censorship and fear.

But the nature of self-censorship is hard to define or delineate when it becomes almost second-nature in a repressive climate.

On the other hand, self-censorship does little to halt hate speech, highlighting who and what kind of speech can operate without check.



**QUIET
PLEASE!**

Speech and responsibility

How are speech, responsibility, censorship, repression arrayed and overlap?

If speech has capacity, it can have consequence.

The tendency to see speech only as ineffectual (e.g., it's just speech) or forceful (e.g., a pen is mightier than the sword) muddles effective discernment of its function. At times, it can be both or either, but the function aligns with capacity and power without which it is hard to understand what speech does or doesn't do.

“Who are the people?”

A tendency to romanticize people as the masses elide the contrast and disparities in relative power and positionalities of different groups.

In matters of artistic expression, a repressive climate necessitates a push towards more freedom, but not without concurrent discussions on artistic responsibility.

“Artistic responsibility” is also subject to state capture.

Still, an artist’s responsibility cannot be separated from the consideration of artistic output. Abjection, poverty, gratuitous violence, degrading and involuntary exposure of the marginalized, breaches of privacy, the ethics of news gathering which risks more surveillance – “normal” practices – merit more scrutiny.

If provocation is a special preserve enjoyed by artists, then it follows, there will be provoked reactions. If an artist desires to provoke with their work, should they be surprised by strong rejoinders, even a backlash to that work?

Changing course

There is no magic bullet to solve the problem of hate speech.

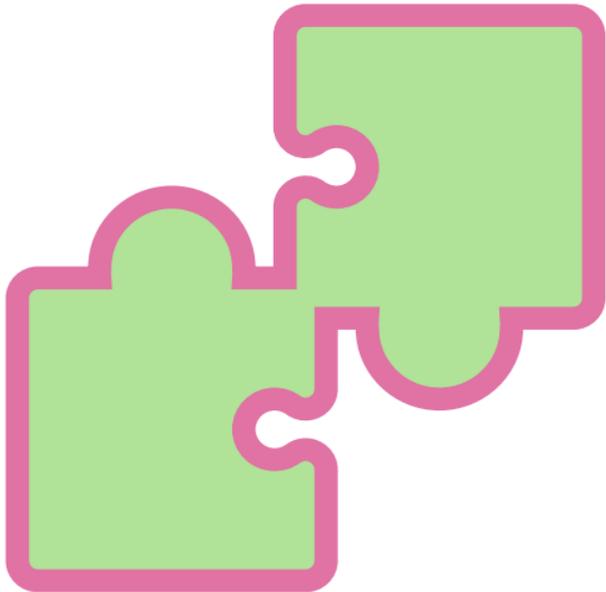
A change or rethinking or redefinition of our existing ideas about nationalism, identity, gender, religion, state, law, and more are needed. Counter narratives and counter spaces are crucial.

As is the need to spread them through grassroots, intimate organizing.

We need large scale revisions to our educational system. The ways and processes through which we are socialized through different media and modes of education – from family to cultural institutions to the media – must undergo reexamination.

We are aware that certain speech spreads faster than others and we need to imagine and create new pressure points to tackle them.

A different kind of social contract outside of the existing one which primarily depends on coercion and fear is essential. Reclaiming public spaces, negotiating an idea of commons not reliant on repression and violence, new platforms that are not so profit oriented, a reordering of public and private spaces are key to that social contract.



Reflections

“When often we don’t even have rights to our own land, freedom of expression can feel down the line of priorities.”

“There’s no proper documentation of the kinds of development-related violence indigenous communities in the hill tracts face – from Ramu, bagda shrimp farming, to Sajek – and because of that we can’t discuss these issues openly or properly. The obstacles to freedom of speech and expression run deep.”

“We can easily observe the disparities in economic freedom, freedom of speech, freedom of religion between Bengali settlers and indigenous people. These disparities are also present within and across indigenous communities because of the divisions and competitions our institutions create.”

“There is a lack of medium to represent and reflect the interests of the subaltern.”

“We need to be specific about the kinds of conditions each of us, our communities face. For example, the problems and situations of plainland indigenous communities can be different from the hill tracts.”

“There are similarities too, for example, land and economic disparities affect all indigenous communities. The other issue is language. There’s a crisis from not being able to use your own languages as easily. Many of us forget our mother tongues in pursuit of learning and perfecting Bangla; others can’t express themselves to the fullest because they lack proficiency in Bangla and command over Bangla also creates hierarchies of privilege.

Many of us don't feel comfortable speaking or expressing ourselves in our respective languages because of fear of bullying, mocking, teasing."

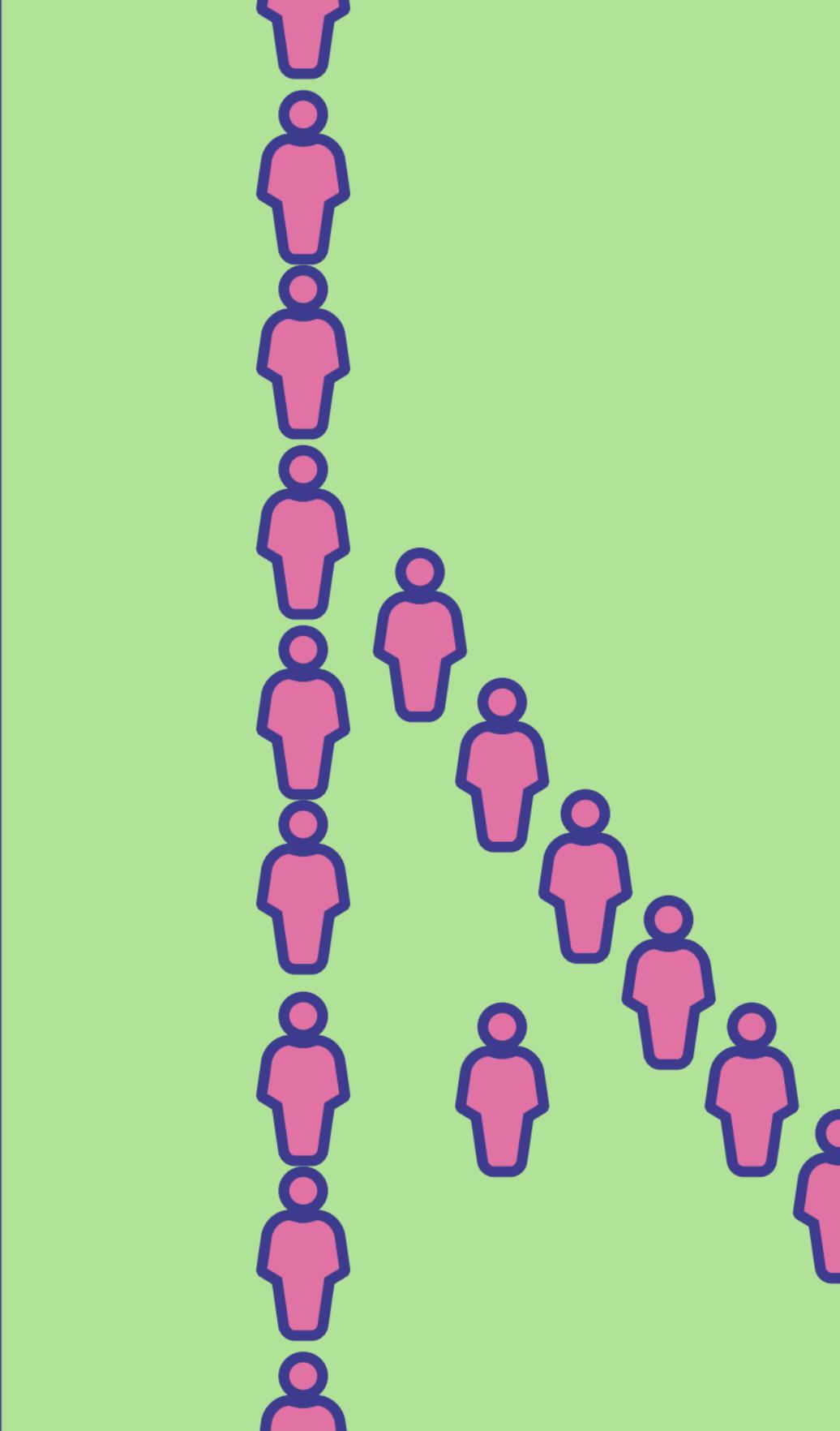
"Promoting multiculturalism within the state framework is beset with problems too because that inevitably creates other sets of stereotypes. With such top-down, state directed framing, certain social, cultural, religious symbols, rituals, traditions are deployed in a way which produces newer boundaries – these delineations are also impositions – on national or ethnic or religious belonging."

Experience

“I was the moderator of a student discussion forum on Facebook. The forum was open to all our university students, but we had moderation guidelines, and everyone was expected to follow them. From the beginning, these terms of engagement included - no personal attacks, diversity of opinions, content that had to be respectful.

But in reality, these terms are often difficult to enforce.

Soon we were accused of bias and having a progressive leaning and ‘censoring’ opposing views. Some members left or stopped posting, some of them wanted to start their own forum to express themselves.”



Participants

(In first name alphabetical order)

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Khoirom Kameshwar (Rudhir)
Lamea Tanjin Tanha
Md. Ariful Hasan
Murshed Jahangir
Mustafa Zaman
Niser Hossain
Nisharggo Niloy
Prashanto Marak
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Shishir Bhattacharjee
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Suve Sadique Shandhi
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Wakilur Rahman
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+ 4 anonymous participants

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