# Implications of COVID-19 on Youth Radicalisation in Bangladesh

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## Synopsis

Radicalisation has emerged as a significant challenge across the South Asian region over the past decade. Nation states have figured out how to discover increasingly viable methods of combating terrorism and countering radicalisation which has proven to be a more uphill struggle. Bangladesh has encountered a number of terrorist attacks in the past half a decade. However, effective and adroit efforts have curbed the threat of terrorism and violent extremism. The nation has progressed significantly since the assault on Holey Artisan Bakery on July 1, 2016 in which numerous lives were lost. By virtue of the skillful and opportune endeavours from the law enforcement agencies, Bangladesh has managed to reduce the number of terrorist attacks in the preceding few years. The outbreak of COVID-19 has become one of the key drivers of youth radicalisation.

## Radicalisation in the Cyberspace

Internet penetration in Bangladesh had been phenomenal as nationwide connectivity drove economic growth. Major changes had taken place throughout the Asian continent when comes to connectivity and access to internet. Asia hosts approximately half of the internet users in the whole world and Bangladesh has already been ranked fifth in terms of most internet users in Asia as of 2017. By the end of July 2020, the number of internet users has reached approximately 10.64 crore (106.4) million while the total number of mobile phone users was equivalent to approximately 16.43 crore (164.3 million). Use of internet among youth is largely linked with access to mobile phones. Approximately, 80% male youths have access to a cell phone while approximately 40% female youths own a cell phone. People from both affluent and impoverished communities aged between 15 and 30 years old are most vulnerable to the process of

radicalisation. It has been discovered by Bangladesh Police that approximately 82% of the detainees went through the radicalistion process in the social media platforms. Approximately 80% of preferred mode of communication for terrorists also relates to the social media channels or encrypted applications. As of February 2020, there were 34 million active Facebook users in Bangladesh. As of September 15, 2020, Bangladesh is positioned number 15 in the rundown of COVID-19 affected nations. It is noteworthy to investigate the Bangladeshi society first so as to comprehend the patterns of radicalisation in Bangladesh related with the episode of COVID-19. On the wake of a greater outbreak of COVD-19, most powerful mediums of communication with the targeted young people would be internet, group contact, individual contact, books, newspaper, mobile phone and others. The diagrams below indicate the active internet connections and the active SIM (Subscriber Identification Module) Cards.
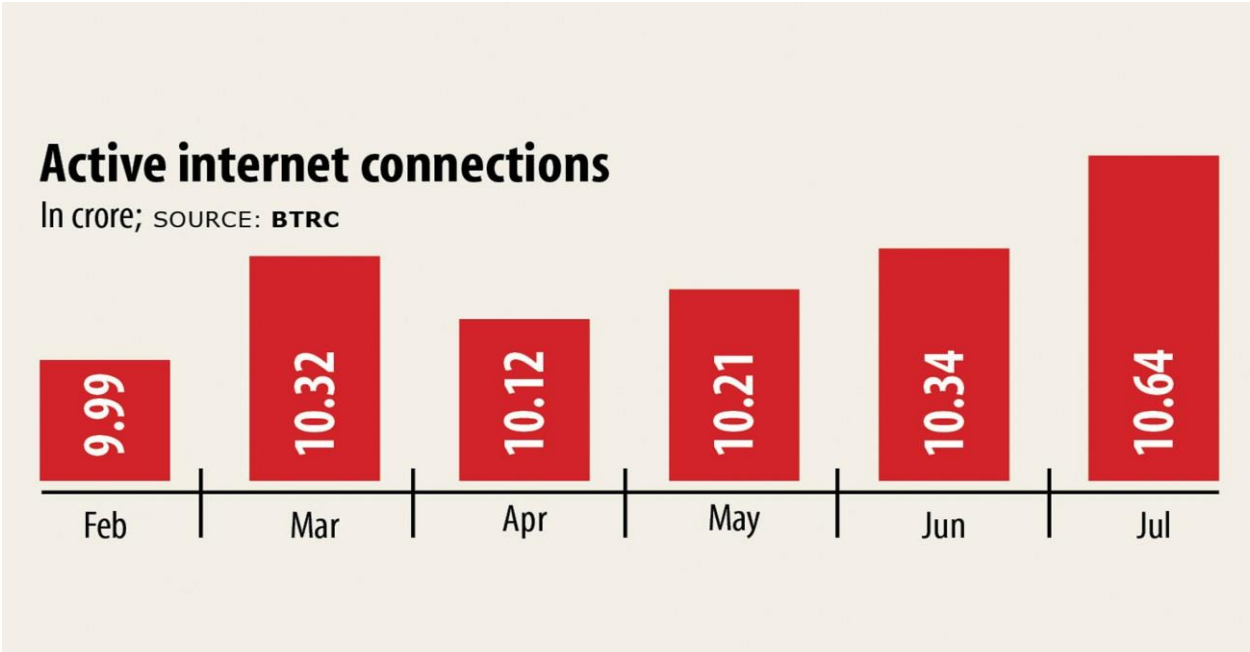


**Active internet connections**

In crore; SOURCE: **BTRC**

| Feb | Mar | Apr | May | Jun | Jul |
|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| 9.99 | 10.32 | 10.12 | 10.21 | 10.34 | 10.64 |

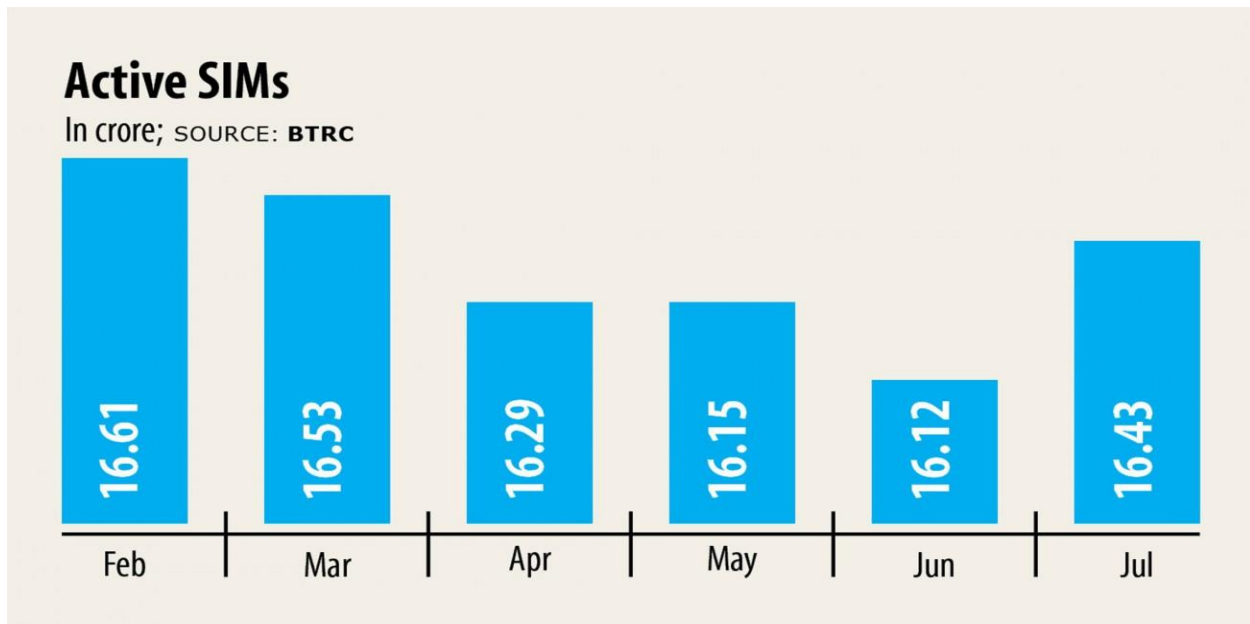**Figure 1: Active Internet Connections (Source: Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission)**

**Figure 2: Active SIM Cards (Source: Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission)**

**Process of Radicalisation during the Outbreak of COVID-19**

Terrorists are using COVID-19 as an excuse to recruit more people in their ranks through the cyberspace. The cyberspace is being exploited for triggering the process of radicalisation. COVID-19 has often been termed as a curse from God to rebuff the world which does not adhere to the Islamic Shariah Law. Bangladesh as is a Muslim majority country, it has witnessed a sudden surge in radical extremism on cyberspace during the COVID-19 pandemic. The outbreak of COVID-19 plays a monumental role in this process of radicalisation. This transformation changes the whole dynamics of thought processes of an individual. Progress of this change is dependent on many stages. A person can never become radical over within a short period of time although oppression of fellow Muslims or relatives can be a catalyst for the process of radicalisation. To begin with, in many communities overviewed, with numerous schools shut and recreational and social exercises suspended, most youngsters were confined to their homes, and are investing significantly more time and energy on the web. Their dissatisfaction, coupled with the trend of constantly online makes them prone to online radicalisation. COVID-19 has brought about devastating ramifications for the mind of several youths as they are on the verge of suffering from neglect, abuse, exploitation and violence in their own homes. As violence against

women and children are on the rise thanks to the outbreak of COVID-19, more young people are falling prey to the driving forces of radicalisation. Many young people even had to confront domestic violence for the first time ever in their lives. Disinformation and fake news regarding the spread of COVID-19 against the youth from minority social groups has created distrust as they have been consistently put to test. Community policing has played a prevalent role to combat the process of radicalisation and its vacuum created by the lockdown process during COVID-19 can contribute to the scope for creation of more radicalised people.

There are ever increasing concerns that the effects of the pandemic can propel the basic drivers of radicalisation. More individuals will become jobless, fewer individuals will have the ability to afford education and there will be a rise in the level of marginalised groups. Also, there are no forms of social gatherings which can help to build social resilience. It is also evident that people's trust concerned with the social institutions is fading away. Frontline personnel are coming forward to help the victims of COVID-19 wherever possible. As the funding for PVE through foreign aid is being shifted to COVID-19, the number of PVE programmes is inadequate.

During this period of global pandemic, youth is sought by terror organisations for several reasons. Initially, youths can be persuaded without any interruption. Also, youngsters perceived as role models can assist to recruit more people. Violence is usually more rampant in young people so they are perfect fits for terror outfits. They can engage with the terror outfits in various ways through ideology, social media, area based communication, coaching center or educational institute and other convenient ways. Prevalent approaches to radicalise youth are extremely unique in nature: misleading ideas, temptation of wellbeing in afterlife, temptation of power and money, using the furor of youth, capitalising on poverty, drug addiction and other related factors. Cyberspace has been one of the most prominent platforms to continue the process of youth radicalisation.

### Recommendations

Combating radicalisation during the period of global pandemic requires a lot of dedicated efforts. Long arms of the law, educational institutes and family can rescue youth from the process of radicalisation. Teachers can monitor the activities, behavior and attitude of students while conducting online classes to find out about their association with any terror outfit. Educational

institutes can also hold awareness raising programmes about the harmful impacts of radicalisation. Vocational education must be a foremost priority of the educational institutes so that the students do not have to be concerned about job and employment prospects. Family should play a key role in creating awareness among youth about the catastrophic militant activities. Children must have a strong bond with their parents during these difficult circumstances in order to be happy which can limit the scope for creation of depression resulting into a radicalised mind. Religious institutes and mass media can contribute to a reduction of youth radicalisation during the pandemic crisis. Sensitivity must be ensured by the media in terms of reporting news about the pandemic. Panic news should never be broadcasted at a soaring rate by the media as it contributes to a high level of stigma concerned with the pandemic. Print media should produce programs and writings for awareness and constructive activities to curb the COVID-19 outbreak. Staying updated about the news regarding COVID-19 deaths must be kept at the minimum level in order to protect the mental health of young citizens. Law enforcement agencies have played a major role to limit the outbreak of COVID-19 and their efficacious role must be portrayed by the media.

Authority can introduce various programmes to retain social nursing for the young people who are mostly engrossed in electronic devices. Educational and rehabilitative programs must be designed for those who are radicalized to re-integrate them to the society. Those who have a good image in the society must also carry out the positive messages for the citizens. To sum up, collective and comprehensive efforts of all the integral stakeholders of the society are essential to prevent the youth from becoming a victim of radicalisation especially during the outbreak of COVID-19. The social media platforms should modify their algorithms to stop spreading of disinformation, misinformation and fake news. Health practitioners must take adequate rest in between their work shifts to look after their mental and physical wellbeing during the pandemic. The experiences of young minds who have recovered from the pandemic can be shared to disseminate positive messages.

## Conclusion

The outbreak of COVID-19 can influence the young idle minds to become victims of radicalisation. Young people must learn how to adapt to the pandemic. Adapting to the pandemic would empower youth not to be enticed into the process of radicalisation.

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