

Media in the Time of Covid-19 Outbreaks in 2020 and 2021: A Comparative Analysis of News Coverage on Stigma and Discrimination

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"All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us."

J.R.R. Tolkien

The Fellowship of the Ring (1954)

Abstract

The article provides a sequential account of the newspaper coverage that looks at how two Bangladeshi national dailies reported stigma and discrimination related incidents when the pandemic upsurged; and also presents a comparative analysis of the news coverage. In order to examine the key issues and focuses, news items which mostly contain the elements attached to social stigma and discrimination were taken. In addition, the patterns of coverage are substantiated with the findings of thematic content analysis of the stories that appeared in the online versions of the two newspapers in the selected periods. The news coverage reveals varying pattern of stigmatization in the first outbreak in 2020 that reflects how the community treated the foreign returnees and people suspected of having Covid-19 infection. The newspapers also reported the issues concerning denial of burial to those who died of Covid 19, and violation of health rights at different levels. But in the second outbreak in 2021, news stories did not report elements of stigmatization as the key focus. It also appears that the newspapers' focus on Covid 19 shifted over time, and coverage of each period was identified with new issues and priorities.

Key words: News Coverage, Covid-19 Pandemic, Discrimination, Social Stigma, Bangladesh Newspaper

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Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a powerful influence over media coverage across the globe since the first infections were reported in December 2019. Compared to the coverage of the previous health crises, news coverage in Bangladeshi news media was different for the coronavirus pandemic. Again, news coverage of the incidents related to the outbreak of the pandemic in 2021 looked different from what it was for the outbreak in 2020. In the 'first wave' which lasted for about a year (March 2020-February 2021)¹, the overall Covid-19 related media coverage was "challenged by the evolving public health issues, crisis management strategies of the government, and political economy of the country's media sector" (Reza, 2021, p.161). In this period, issues related to discrimination and social stigma constituted considerable part of news coverage.

As Bangladesh experienced a surge of Coronavirus cases in 2020, stigmatization, harassment related incidents associated with Covid-19 emerged in different areas of the country. The cases were somewhat associated with imposing false identity on individual and groups who were either infected or Covid-19 suspects. Zaman and Rahman's study (2020) explores how fear and stigma associated with the Coronavirus outbreak in Bangladesh developed and spread over different phases (January – early May 2020) in the first wave of the pandemic. Stigma and discrimination related stories that Reza (2021) identified during April – May 2020 include different elements of harassment and denial of right. Coronavirus infection rate was on the rise again in April 2021, which eventually hit hard in the end of June and continued throughout July 2021. In this period, news headlines were dominated by the broader issues of economic and livelihood challenges, deteriorating conditions of the lower and middle-income people, and misery of the newly emerged urban poor². Newspapers also published key stories on the challenges and success of 'lockdown' and the issues related to securing covid vaccines to reach the national goal of mass vaccination.

In this article, I have presented a comparative analysis of the news coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic in two national dailies – Prothom Alo and The Daily Star. The stories were taken from the two selected periods of the outbreaks in 2020 and 2021. For an analysis of the key issues and focuses in the coverages, I took the news items that primarily contains elements attached to stigma and discrimination. In addition, this was substantiated with content analysis of the stories that appeared during the selected period in the online versions of the two newspapers. In a later section of the article, key focuses and issues of the coverage are discussed comparatively.

Stigmatization, Discrimination and Spread of Fear

Goffman terms stigma “Bodily signs designed to expose something unusual and bad about the moral status of the signifier” (1963, p.1), and the bearer of the sign is avoided, especially in public places. He also notes stigma:

As an attribute that is deeply discrediting, but it should be seen that a language of relationships, not attributes, is really needed. An attribute that stigmatizes one type of possessor can confirm the usualness of another, and therefore is neither creditable nor discreditable as a thing in itself (1963, p. 3).

Goffman’s theory suggests that stigma takes place when individuals are identified as deviant and with a “spoiled identity”. On another view, Link and Phelan (2001) finds power to be a key element of stigma. They think:

Stigmatization is entirely contingent on access to social, economic, and political power that allows to the identification of differences, the construction of stereotypes, the separation of labeled persons into distinct categories and the full execution of disapproval, rejection, exclusion, and discrimination (2001, p. 367).

Therefore, discriminations are both directly or indirectly related to the elements of stigma, and at the same time, associated with race, ethnicity, class, gender, religion or beliefs. Discrimination can occur in sociocultural context, and even in interpersonal levels. According to Major et al. (2018, p. 107), “discrimination at all levels may contribute to the development of negative schemas through cultural communications, institutional policies and practices, and interpersonal interactions.” As discriminatory conduct enforces some kind of disadvantage to the persons at whom it is directed, discrimination consists of:

Actions, practices, or policies that are—in some appropriate sense based on the (perceived) social group to which those discriminated against belong and that the relevant groups must be socially salient in that they structure interaction in important social contexts (Lippert-Rasmussen, 2006, p.169, and Holroyd, 2018, p. 384 as cited in the Stanford encyclopedia of Philosophy (2020, para. 4)

Spread of Fear and Stigma

“Rapid assessment of fear and stigma associated with Covid-19 pandemic in Bangladesh”, conducted by Zaman and Rahman (2020)³ suggests that fear and stigma associated with the first coronavirus outbreak in Bangladesh in 2020 spread over six phases (January – early May, 2020). They were: 1) phase of

false sense of identity (January – February, 2020); 2) emergence of fear and formal stigmatization (early – mid March, 2020); 3) community gaining informal “Stigma Power” (2nd week of March, 2020 onwards); 4) intensification of fear (3rd week of March, 2020); 5) multiplicity of fear (3rd week of March – 2nd week of April, 2020); and 6) period of panic, suspicion and heightened stigmatization (2nd week of April – 1st week of May, 2020).

Zaman and Rahman’s study is analysed on the basis of Bauman’s Theory of Fear (2006) and Goffman’s Theory of Stigma (1963). According to Zygmunt Bauman (2006), there are three types of fear – primary fear, derivative fear, and liquid fear, while Goffman’s theory suggests that stigma takes place in a situation when individuals are identified with a “spoiled identity” (1963). As found by Zaman and Rahman (2020), ‘First phase’ started with misperceptions about the disease and false sense of safety among the community people. In ‘sixth phase’, stigma related incidents along with panic and suspicion were strengthened. In his study, Reza (2021), observes that such stigmatized identity associated with Covid-19, “occurred when communities or some people in the society got informal power to declare some others or groups (foreign returnees, for instance) unacceptable or unwanted”.

Newspaper Coverage of Stigma and Discrimination

Stigma and Discrimination Related Incident Mapping

The Covid-19 incident mapping carried out by the Centre for Genocide Studies (CGS), a repository that records the news of Covid-19 related incidents, such as verbal abuse/social stigma, fear, protest and violence found a total of 245 incidents concerning verbal abuse/social stigma that appeared in the Bangladeshi local and national dailies during 1 March 2020 – 22 February 2021², of which 217 cases were reported during 1 March – 27 June 2020. According to the CGS infographics for 1 March 2020 – 22 February 2021, social stigma related incidents included incidents of ignorance of medical professionals (70 cases); denial to burial (63 cases); forced eviction (12 cases); abandonment (47) harassment originated from social stigma (13 cases); social stigma related to medical professionals (19); and 2 cases of suicide (Bangladesh Peace Observatory, CGS, 2020).

As recorded by CGS, newspapers almost stopped reporting stigma and discrimination related incidents in late August 2020. It finds that except for one story published on 29 November 2020 (reported how a woman was barred from obtaining her husband’s dead body for burial), no story related to stigma or discrimination appeared in Bangladeshi newspapers during August 2020 – February 2021. It should also be noted that the CGS repository had not published

any Infographics on verbal abuse/stigma since 22 Feb 2021. However, as Covid-19 cases surged again and the situation was thought to be reaching a peak, in July 2021 newspapers began to report issues related to right to health, medical treatment etc.

Coverage of Stigma and Discrimination Related Incidents

In the first Covid-19 outbreak, the number of stigma and discrimination related stories in the Bangladeshi newspapers began to rise in May 2020. The news items were “somewhat connected to imposing false identity on individuals and groups, as well as stigmatizing the ‘other’, the Covid-19 infected or the covid suspect” (Reza, 2021). In the context of the first outbreak, based on the news coverage in national dailies, Reza puts the stigma and discrimination related issues into a number of broader categories, namely labeling and stereotyping, social harassment and denial of burial, forced eviction, abandonment, and ignorance and denial of rights (Reza, 2021, pp.166-167). In the following section, I have summarized his findings:

People perceived Covid-19 as ‘foreign virus’ over the early months of the outbreak in 2020. Covid-19-related news had a rise in number as the first Covid-19 cases in Bangladesh were confirmed in early March 2020. Two of the three infected persons were returnees from Italy. Soon after the return of the expatriates from the European countries including Italy⁵ the community shifted its attention from the ‘foreign virus’ to the foreign returnees who had just returned from the Covid-19 epicentres. They were labelled as ‘importer’ of coronavirus from a foreign country (Reza, 2021, pp.170-171). Newspapers reported instances of harassment of Covid-19 infected people. They also reported how Covid-19 infected people, and health professional who provided the covid patients with treatment faced social harassment (Reza, 2021, pp.172-173).

In addition to the above issues, Bangladeshi newspapers focused on the incidents of forced eviction, such as Covid-19 patients in isolation were compelled to leave their houses, while others were denied entry to their residences (Reza, 2021:173). News coverage included stories of abandonment in fear of Coronavirus. An incident of abandonment of persons with Covid-19 symptoms by family or closed ones was covered with an emphasis on human right. (Reza, 2021, pp.174-175).

Methods of Studying the Coverage

The study of the coverage of stigma and discrimination associated with Covid-19 in the Bangladeshi newspapers is based on thematic content analysis of the news in the online versions of the two national dailies – Prothom Alo

and The Daily Star. The period of coverage that I have looked into is divided into two parts – first outbreak in 2020 and second outbreak in 2021. For the first outbreak, I studied the news that appeared between 1 March 2020 and 30 June 2020, as Bangladesh's first Covid-19 cases were identified in early March 2020, and the lockdown restrictions were gradually eased in June 2020. For content analysis of stigma and discrimination related stories, the news items published in the two newspapers during 14 April – 15 May 2020 were looked into. With regard to the second outbreak, I studied the news that appeared in the two dailies during 1 March – 30 June 2021. For thematic content analysis of stigma and discrimination related stories in this period, I took the news published in both the newspapers during 1-30 June 2021.

Key Features of News Reporting in 2020 & 2021

In reporting the realities of the pandemic on the ground, The Daily Star and the Prothom Alo focused on the issues related to effectiveness of the interventions, and preparations of the authorities to face any surge in the Covid-19 cases. Bangladeshi TV channels had begun to report the Covid-19 situation in December 2019 as the early cases were detected in Wuhan City, China. The global situation, particularly the cases in the USA, Italy and UK had dominated the newspaper headlines until the first cases were reported in the country in March 2020.

Key Focus in News Coverage of the Outbreaks

Key focus-areas in news coverage in the first wave (March 2020 - February 2021) of the pandemic were: Covid-19 crisis management; trade and commerce; coordination of emergency operations; access to Covid-19-related information; fear, stigma and discrimination; challenges to new health regulations associated with Covid-19; right of the medical professional; right of the Covid-19 infected; covid treatment and securing Covid-19 vaccines. Compared with the coverage in 2020, coverage of the second wave (March - September 2021) has been characterized by new focus and issue in reporting, as well as shifting agendas as the situation deteriorates. News coverage of the incidents that took place between March-June 2021 is different from the same period in the first surge of the pandemic in the previous year. In the following table (Table 1) I have presented a comparative picture of the key areas in news coverage of the two corona outbreaks:

Table 1: Comparative Picture of the Key Focuses, and Outstanding Issues in Covid-19 Coverage (March-June 2020 & March-June 2021)

Key areas in news coverage of the Covid-19 outbreak in 2020	Key areas in news coverage of the Covid-19 outbreak in 2021
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Preparation for the imminent crisis/pandemic management *Economy, trade & business planning *Health services and coordination of emergency operations *Access to Covid-19 information vs. management of pandemic information *Fear, stigma, discrimination and human suffering *Challenges to executing new health regulations associated with Covid-19 *Rights of the medical professionals; and health rights of people, and the Covid-19 infected in particular *Progress in Covid-19 treatment and finding vaccines *Good practices including voluntary services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Preparation for Covid-19 treatment facilities *National economy and growth, trade and commerce *Health service coordination, and upgrading Covid-19 treatment facilities *Managing the flow and disclosure of Covid-19 information (e.g., treatment, financing and procuring vaccines) *Coronavirus situation at the periphery (outside of the capital, divisional cities, etc.) *Challenges to implementing 'lockdown' and new health regulations *Access to health facilities, critical and Covid-19 treatment, sufferings of the people at local and community level *Securing and administering Covid-19 vaccines, vaccine politics, vaccine uncertainty *Management of the (pandemic) crisis; and dependency on bureaucracy *Examinations, closure and reopening of educational institutions, particularly schools

Thematic Content Analysis of Stories in the Prothom Alo

The number of news items related to stigma and discrimination associated with Covid-19 that appeared in the Prothom Alo in the two periods of coronavirus surges (14 April -15 May 2020 & 1-30 June 2021) are presented in two figures (Figure1 & 2). Following the broader categories identified by Reza (2021) which are associated with stigma and discrimination (2021), I content analysed and grouped the stories bearing the issues of stigma and discrimination as disgrace and labelling; denial of health right, forced eviction, denial of burial; and abandonment.

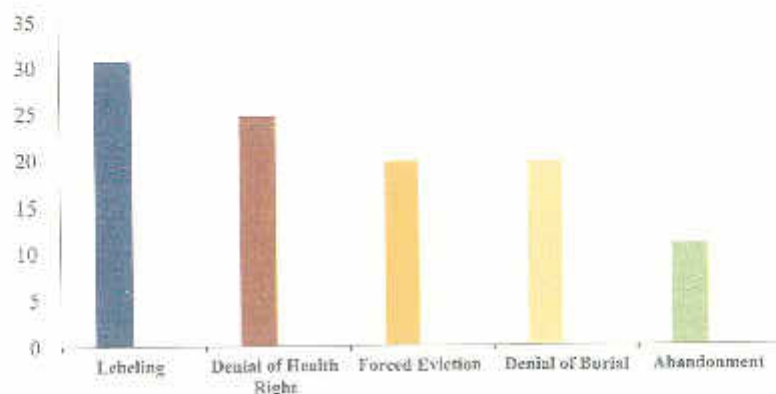


Figure 1: Stigma and Discrimination Related Stories in Prothom Alo between 14 April and 15 May 2020

Content Related to Disgrace and Labelling

Covid-19 infected people, people with covid-like symptoms were mistreated by the community. Content analysis of the stories suggests that some people who had returned to the community become victim of disgrace and labelling. The news stories published in the Prothom Alo reported how the foreign returnees were harassed by the local people for the alleged spread of coronavirus ('Red flag', 2020). As part of the governmental activity to implement quarantine, officers marked the houses of the home-quarantined foreign returnees with red colour. Mobile court Magistrate posted 'Home Quarantine' sticker and hoisted red flag which also caused embarrassment to the foreign returnees. The highest number of incidents (31 news items published during 14 April – 15 May 2020) covered by the daily was connected to mistreatment and disgrace of people (see Figure 1). In the second outbreak, except for stories related to denial of health rights and abandonment, there was no reporting of incidents related to labelling and disgrace during 1-30 June 2021(see Figure 2).

Content Related to Denial of Burial

In the first outbreak, some incidents were associated with denial of burial happened to people who died of Covid-19 or with similar symptoms. Sometimes deaths caused by other reasons were also suspected as death from Covid-19. Cases were reported where the law enforcers faced social resistance from the local people as they were preparing to bury the dead bodies. The Prothom Alo reported how the community took charge and interfered with the burial of the Covid-19 dead ('Death of a young man', 'Death of an old', 2020). The daily

published 20 news items during 14 April -15 May 2020 (see Figure 1), but did not publish any story during 1-30 June 2021 (see Figure 2).

Content Related to Eviction

A story “Man denied home access, staying in hospital isolation” reports an eviction incident of a man who got hospitalized with fever in late April 2020 in Rajshahi division. In a similar story, “Old man barred from entering house on corona suspicion died in school premise” the daily tells how an old man was denied entry to his own house by the locals as they suspected him of Covid-19-infected when he returned to his village in the northern part of Bangladesh from a city near Dhaka with fever and cold (Prothom Alo, 2020). Another story in the Prothom Alo, “Landlord ousts a covid patient in isolation” reports an incident of eviction in Narayanganj, a riverport city next to Dhaka where a Covid-19 patient was forcefully driven out his house in the middle of night (Prothom Alo, 2020). There were 20 news items related to forced eviction published in the daily during 14 April – 15 May (see Figure 1), while the number of news items on the same category was nil during 1-30 June 2021 (see Figure 2).

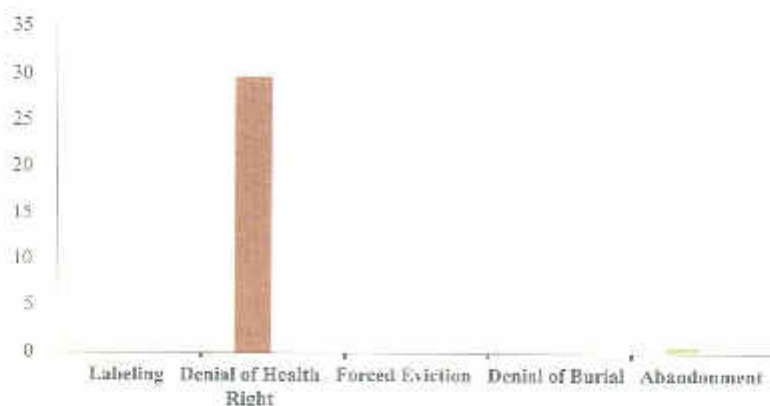


Figure 2: Stigma and Discrimination Related Stories in Prothom Alo in June 2021

Content Related to Abandonment

In an incident, a woman with Covid-19-like symptom was left alone in a forest by the members of her family. The story in the Prothom Alo wrote the sad incident of the woman who was abandoned in a reserve forest sometime in the midnight by her sons and daughters. Later she was rescued by the local administration and was sent to hospital (“Mother with”, 2020). Although

lowest in number compared to other categories, there were 11 news stories related to abandonment in fear of corona infection published during the period 14 April -15 May 2020 (see figure 1). In this category, there was a very sharp decline in number in 2021 outbreak. There was only 1 new item published during 1-30 June 2021 (see Figure 2) with its headline “Lonely Afsar rescued and finally placed in hospital” (Prothom Alo, 25 June 2021).

Content Related to Denial of Right to Health

In relation to peoples’ health right during the first outbreak the Prothom Alo reported extensively on the issues of limitation in testing facility, and high costs of Covid-19 treatment, for example. The daily also reported on the outstanding issues related to right of health workers. It published news on harassment and threats of eviction received by doctors and medical professionals (Asaduzzaman, 2020). A story reported cases from the divisional town of Mymensingh where property-owners allegedly pressurized the doctors who were working at different hospitals of the city to leave their properties. The landlords thought that their tenants might be at risk of being contracted through the doctors who attended the Covid-19 infected (“Landlord pressurise”, 17 April, 2020).

In the second outbreak, as there was a surge in cases, stories focused on the issues, such as shortage of oxygen supply, lack of ICU facilities and hospital beds, shortage of duty doctors, closure of dedicated corona units, and difficulties in securing admission to hospitals. The daily covered 20 incidents related to denial of right to health for both the public and medical professionals that took place during 14 April -15 May 2020 (see, Figure 1). Unlike other categories, there was a rise in number of stories in this category during 1-30 June 2021. In this period, the daily reported 30 incidents associated with breach of health rights (see, Figure 2).

Thematic Content Analysis of Stories in the Daily Star

The Daily Star had an overall focus on human right in the outbreaks in 2020 and 2021. Nature of its coverage resonates the spirit of the public statement issued by Amnesty International (AI). The AI statement says, “Bangladesh must put human rights at the centre of its Covid-19 response strategies” (Amnesty International Public statement, issued on May 14, 2020)⁶. The number of stories related to stigma and discrimination in The Daily Star published in the two periods of Coronavirus surges (14 April-15 May 2020 & 1-30 June 2021) is presented in Figure 3 and 4.

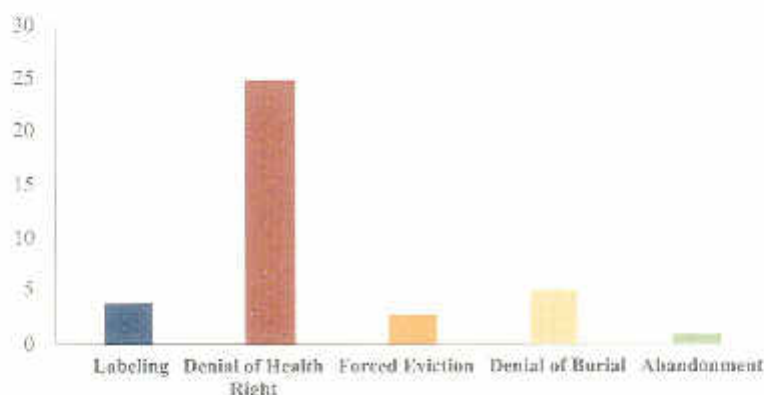


Figure 3: Stigma and Discrimination Related Stories in the Daily Star between 14 April and 15 May 2020

Content Related to Disgrace and Labelling

In early 2020, the Daily Star focused on the conditions of the foreign returnees who were reported to have been harassed by the local people. As already mentioned, the returnees became target of stigmatization, as the community falsely held the returnees responsible for spreading coronavirus. While the daily had a priority of focusing more on the issues related to denial of burial and health right, only 4 news items related to disgrace, harassment were published during 14 April -15 May 2020 (see, Figure 3). And no incident was reported by the daily on this aspect during 1-30 June 2021 (see, Figure 4).

Contents Related to Denial of Burial and Eviction

Like the Prothom Alo, in the first outbreak, The Daily Star published stories associated with denial of burial to people who died of Covid-19 or with similar symptoms. The English daily also reported the incidents of the community's disapproval to burial of the Covid-19 dead. However, the daily published 5 stories during 14 April -15 May 2020 (see Figure 3), and did not publish any news during 1-30 June 2021 (see Figure 4). With regard to contents on forced eviction, The Daily Star had only 3 stories published during 14 April -15 May 2020, and during 1-30 June 2021, it had no news on eviction (see Figure 3 & 4 respectively).

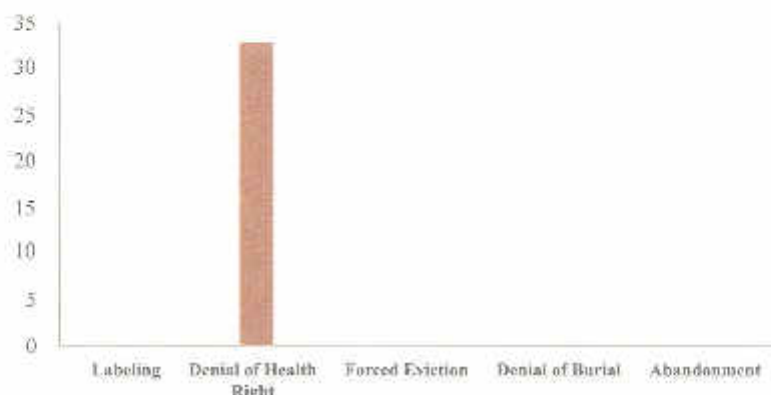


Figure 4: Stigma and Discrimination Related Stories in the Daily Star in June 2021

Content Related to Abandonment

In the first outbreak, The Daily Star did not focus much on the incidents related to abandonment although it showed interest in human right issues associated with the Covid-19 pandemic. However, a story “Woman with coronavirus like symptoms abandoned at DMCH” tells how a woman, named Monowara with Covid-19 infection-like symptoms was left alone by her son at the premise of Dhaka Medical College Hospital (The Daily Star, 2020). In another story, “He was just Abandoned on a Char” (The Daily Star, 2020) gives emotional account of an elderly person with Covid-19 symptoms who was abandoned in a river char, perhaps by his family members. In the second outbreak, no such incident was reported.

Content Related to Denial of Right to Health

Throughout the first outbreak in 2020, and from March to August 2021 in the second outbreak, The Daily Star reported from health rights perspective¹ A report, “Patients with Covid-19 symptoms: Investigate denial of treatment at hospitals” (Staff Correspondent, 2020) refer to a public statement announced by Amnesty International (AI) which expressed concerns as hospitals were not admitting people with Covid-19 symptoms. In the second outbreak, the daily focused on the issues, like high cost of Covid-19 treatment at private hospitals, uncertainty over second dose of vaccine, shortage of hospital beds, lack of preparation as cases spiked, long wait outside hospitals, and lack of dedicated spaces in some hospitals. Earlier, in the first outbreak, it also focused on medical workers’ safety and security, shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE), poor quality medical equipment, absence of proper work environment, and

stigma and discrimination faced by health workers. The daily star published 25 items on rights related issues associated with Covid-19 during 14 April -15 May 2020, which rose to 33 during 1-30 June 2021 as the cases surged in the second wave.

Comparative Analysis of the Coverages

In the early stage of the outbreak in 2020, news stories reported that some communities took power to stigmatize the foreign returnees and labelled them as “importer of a foreign virus”. However, in the first four months (March – June) of the second outbreak in 2021 there was hardly any news items in the dailies on stigma, discrimination, harassment and right related incidents. As already mentioned, CGS stopped publishing Covid-19 Infographics on verbal abuse/stigma since the week beginning on 23 February 2021. According to the CGS repository, most of the national and local dailies had not published stigma and discrimination related stories since the week beginning on 28 August 2020. This study too does not find any such story during March – June 2021. I should however mention that as number of new Covid-19 cases and deaths had begun to increase quite sharply in early July 2021, newspapers again turned to the incidents of discrimination, health right, and access to Covid-19 treatment.

Despite a number of common issues reported in both the outbreaks, newspaper headlines in the second outbreak in 2021 were dominated by the issues that were different from the key agendas in the first outbreak in 2020. In the second outbreak, broader issues that dominated the news headlines included economic and livelihood challenges to the people belonging to the lower-middle income groups, rise in new urban poverty, and misery of the poor section of the population. In addition, stories about the success and challenges to ‘lockdown’, issues related to mass vaccination, and Bangladesh government’s attempt to secure Covid-19 vaccines from overseas sources commanded newspaper headlines almost throughout the second wave. As in contrast with the coverages in 2020, both the dailies had different emphasis in the early phase of second outbreak, this necessitated us to reflect upon whether the patterns of early stigmatization still had an impact on the media coverage of Covid-19 pandemic.

News stories related to discrimination and harassment as covered by the dailies in the 2021 outbreak, among other emerging issues, focused on the challenges to vaccinate the migrant workers, and uncertainty over confirming air ticket and flight for their return. The stories report how the migrant workers faced the risk of losing their jobs. This time, the news coverage particularly focused on scarcity of hospital facilities at the periphery, and sufferings of the ordinary

people as they were failing to manage proper Covid-19 treatment. Both the newspapers also reported on crucial issues, like the shortage of oxygen supply, lack of ICU beds and medical facilities related to covid treatment.

Stigma related incidents reemerged in the Bangladeshi news media in July 2021. But the stories did not contain any similar elements of stigmatization which appeared in the early months of the outbreak in 2020. As 'Delta variant' was detected in India in March 2021, people who returned from India through the land borders between West Bengal, India and Bangladesh were under the newspaper spotlight. News stories reported the incidents of some returnees escaping from hospital isolation, and also how they were captured and sent back to hospitals by the prompt action of the police and with the help of the community.

Conclusion

Newspaper coverage of the pandemic was vital for the newspaper readers to realize the issues related to stigmatization and discrimination associated with Covid-19. The two dailies had some common emphasis in the news coverage of the pandemic. At the same time, coverage of each outbreak can be identified with distinct agendas and priorities. In contrast with the focus on stigma and discrimination related incidents in the first outbreak in 2020, both the Prothom Alo and The Daily Star picked up new issues in their coverage of the second outbreak in 2021.

In the early period of the 'first wave' of the pandemic in 2020, most of the newspapers were inclined to providing popular information about the nature of the virus. This pattern of reporting shifted with the changes in Covid-19 situation in the country in March 2020. In terms of the stories of stigma and discrimination that the Bangladeshi newspapers focused on during the surge in coronavirus cases in 2020, had a shift in the second wave in 2021. As the 'second wave' of the pandemic was predicted in early March 2021, news coverage became heavier again with stories associated with the Covid-19 situation, but the patterns of news coverage looked different.

In the first outbreak in 2020, aspects of labeling, harassment, discrimination, and denial of health right dominated the newspaper headlines. The Prothom Alo particularly reported the issues connected to stigmatization and discrimination, while The Daily Star reported the pandemic related issues from health rights perspective. In the second outbreak in 2021, by and large, both the dailies focused on the aspects of economy, trade and commerce; state of and access to health service; information disclosure; challenges to 'lockdown'; securing and administering Covid-19 vaccine etc. But, neither of the newspapers

consistently reported incidents of stigmatization and discrimination towards setting agendas for the Covid-19 pandemic.

Notes

¹ Although there are debates over the period of the ‘first wave’ as well as the beginning of the ‘second wave’ of the Covid-19 pandemic, my interview with Professor Dr. Abdul Hamid at the Institute of Health Economics, University of Dhaka suggests that March 2020–February 2021 and March 2021–till date can be considered as ‘first’ and ‘second’ wave respectively. I should also mention that both the periods include high and low phases. For example, in the first outbreak, the number of cases began to increase in the middle of April 2020, but the situation improved in late June 2020. Infection rate was below 5% during September – November 2020, but again increased in December 2020.

² In a nationwide survey covering 5,577 households, conducted by South Asian Network on Economic Modeling (SANEM) finds that the Covid-19 pandemic pushed 42% of the population below the poverty line. More information can be found at <https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/news/pandemic-pushes-42pc-poverty-2032689>

³ Shatiduz Zaman presented the finding of their rapid assessment in a live webinar on 1 May 2020, organised by Bangladesh Health Watch (BHW), which can be found at <https://www.facebook.com/Bangladesh-Health-Watch-BHW-109403770656047/videos/3143474829017133/>

⁴ Details of the Bangladesh Peace Observatory (BPO)/Centre for Genocide Studies (CGS) Covid-19 infographics can be found at <http://peaceobservatory-cgs.org/?/peace-highlights-info-gr-viewer>

⁵ Bangladeshis form one of the largest immigrant populations in Italy. As of 2016, there were more than 100,000 Bangladeshis living in Italy (Wikipedia).

⁶ The AI statement also points out “The shortage of necessary medical equipment has not only made the frontline health workers’ job difficult, it in fact puts them at the greatest risk of being exposed to Covid-19” (Amnesty International Public statement, issued on May 14, 2020).

⁷ Under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), to which Bangladesh is a state party, has an obligation to guarantee the right to health which includes “the prevention, treatment and control of epidemic, endemic, occupational and other diseases”. Complete text of the covenant can be found at <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/easer.aspx>

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