WHILE communication is the only route to progress, inappropriate communication could harm. And fake communication could even be fatal...as the country has been discovering much to its discomfort in recent times. Fake and provocative messages on social media channels have led to the killing of several persons, even creating communal disturbances and riots at times. The government of India has even called on WhatsApp to put a system in place to stop divisive and dangerous messages from being circulated in large numbers.

Fake news has now become a worldwide phenomenon that has found greater traction with the swamping of traditional media outlets by social media channels. A global survey on the consumption of news published last year in a report by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism showed that half of people use social media as a weekly news source, and for one in ten it is their main source of news. Fake news has not left the world of science untouched too with areas like health and nutrition being the most targeted ones.

The gravity with which the problem is being viewed around the world can be gauged from the slew of parliamentary measures being adopted by countries. While the German parliament adopted in June 2017 a law against the posting on social media of hate speech, child pornography, terror-related items and false information, 14 draft laws related to fake news are being examined in the Brazilian parliament. Two draft laws are also under discussion in the French parliament while the Malaysian parliament in April 2018 approved a law punishing the propagation of partially or totally false information with prison sentences and fines.

Of course, tackling false or fake news through legislation is a red herring for rights activists and critics who argue such measures could stifle press freedom. Educating the consumers of fake news then is a measure that needs to be strengthened. Brazil has already moved ahead in this direction by making media analysis studies compulsory for school children.

Brazilian education specialists say ways and methods of identifying fake news have now been incorporated into the national curriculum. Students are being educated on the need and methodology of critically examining and analysing news they receive through various Internet channels. They are being taught not to consume news without questioning the information.

In India too we need to realise that media and technology literacy are today of paramount importance. School children in India too need to be taught skills of analysis and critical examination, in general, but also specific to information streaming in through social media channels where the absence of gatekeepers or reviewers or editors could easily let incorrect or inappropriate information slip through.

Educationists and teachers would do well to inculcate media and information analysing skills in school children through structured teaching programmes. An army of young foot soldiers in the war against fake news could be a welcome dividend in the days to come.