

Shahbag Square: Role of Social Media in Recent Uprising in Bangladesh

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Abstract—Social uprising has become very popular around the world in recent times. This phenomena have been maximized by the wide spread use of social media applications. Also, in most of the cases, non-political entities are seen being part of such social phenomena as much as political figures and activists. This paper studies the role of social media and technology in the recent social uprising in Dhaka, Bangladesh that turned into a movement - popularly known as Shahbag Movement. This mobilization that took place in early 2013 in Dhaka, has often been compared to other global mobilizations like Tehrir Square, Occupying Wall Street and the like. Various positive and negative use of social media have been discussed in this paper to understand the mobilization of participants in the movement. Use and abuse of modern age social media platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter along with traditional newspaper and TV media and the effect of these in an urban mobilization like Shahbag will be understood better in the paper. Interestingly, similar trend in the use of social media has been noticed in the subsequent uprising in Bangladesh for various social issues since the 2013 Shahbag movement. This paper would seek deeper analysis of social media's role in public reaction to media and social media posts. The Shahbag movement has created a confused debate in social media and other media platforms. However, sociological inquiry into the movement with firm understanding of the role of technology can help explain a widely misunderstood and pivotal moment for Bangladeshi society. Shahbag Square and its historical background vis-à-vis the changes in the political trend in Bangladesh will also be briefly looked into in the paper.

1. INTRODUCTION.

In 2013, Bangladesh experienced a massive protest when thousands of people gathered in Shahbag Square, a busy junction in Dhaka. They took their protest to the street as soon as the War Crimes Tribunal of Bangladesh sentenced war criminal Abdul Quader Mollah to a lifetime imprisonment, which was viewed as too lenient given he was convicted with murder, rape and torture of people during the 1971 War of Independence. The Bloggers and Online Activists Network, popularly known as BOAN, was the first organization who felt the urgency of notifying this issue and arrange a protest demonstration (Arefin, 2014). As soon as the news of the verdict was published in the media, the calls for protest started pouring in. While many expressed their frustration on different

social media platforms, groups of students started gathering in Shahbag Square; Shahbag is surrounded by a number of university campuses- Dhaka University, Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology, Dhaka Medical College and other schools and colleges. Thus, student groups from many universities started gathering in Shahbag Square in large numbers, marking the inception of a new kind of social movement. The young students in Shahbag Square were soon joined by people from all ages, classes and faiths who participated in candle light vigils, slogan chanting and the creation of colourful festoons. Apart from the physical gathering of thousands of people, there was an outburst of anger and frustration in the virtual world: people connected to the physical protest demonstration on social media websites like Facebook and blogging websites (Arefin, 2014). All of them had only one slogan: lifetime imprisonment is too lenient for the brutal crime committed by the 'Butcher Quader'. The entire Shahbag Square chanted the demand of death penalty for the 65-year-old war criminal.

The movement was a peaceful one; it mainly involved sit-in protest demonstrations. Apart from students, large numbers of the population belonging from non-political parties, cultural organizations and even school children participated in the demonstration. The entire Shahbag Square junction was filled with people with slogans against the 'Razakars', the name for Bengalis that collaborated with Pakistani Army during 1971 Liberation War. The protesters demand was for the death penalty for all war criminals and punishment for Rajakars of all kinds. The protesters burned effigies of Mollah, and a symbolic trial of Mollah's hanging was displayed. In the evening, the candle light vigil in Shahbag Square – along with the singing of patriotic songs – created an ambience that attracted even greater participation (Arefin, 2014).

2. USE OF TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIAL MEDIA.

Any movement needs resources for mobilization, and proper mobilization happens through systematic communication and social networking. Media and technology are the key devices in the modern world for a successful movement. The prime

reason behind the rapid assembly of population in Shahbag Square is because of prompt and advanced use of technology among the youth in Bangladesh. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in Bangladesh has come a long way and it has been used in both positive and negative ways. Shahbag has gained fame through different social network sites like Facebook, Twitter and others, and it has been criticised by its opponents through the same. The movement started with blogposts from Blogger and Online Activist Network (BOAN), as soon as news of the verdict of war criminal Abdul Quader Molla was announced. It was spread across the nation and the globe mainly through Facebook and Twitter. Bangladesh media played a major role and there was live viewing of Shahbag Movement in various news channels. While on one hand many television channels glorified the idea of Shahbag, few politicised channel went one step further and tried to defame Shahbag activities. Another noticeable fact is the ignorance of the Western media, or international media, towards the Shahbag Movement and its meaning. A massive uprising of this intensity seems to have had no effect on the Western media as well as media in countries like India. However, it has been observed in the following social uprisings in Bangladesh that Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter are broadly used to mobilize people and distribute information. The positive and negative effects of this will be discussed further.

3. ICT AND YOUTH OF BANGLADESH.

In this section, the role of ICT among the youth in building political ideology and its effect on Shahbag will be discussed. Use of internet and social media have led to a new platform for expressing opinion among the youth of Bangladesh. The new generation of Bangladesh are aware of their rights and are aware of the fact that the welfare of the nation can also be achieved in a non-violent way. Blog-posts and discussions in social media thus become popular among a large number of urban youth. To understand the behaviour of today's youth and their relationship to ICT and political involvement, Emmanuel C Lallana and Weiyi Zhang took out a survey on the students of Bangladesh and a few other South East Asian countries. In their article, '*Youth, ICTs, and Civic Engagement in Asia*' they tried to figure out in young states or semi-democracies how the political system functions, and whether its democratic features are adequate or not, and how this impacts communication and political engagement (Lallana and Zhang, 2013: 249). This research included interviews and discussions among the young people (18-30 years old) of Bangladesh, India, Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines, who have access to internet, mobile phone and also who were urban dwellers and educated (Lallana and Zhang, 2013: 250). The research shows that ICT has opened up a substantial arena for the youth of Bangladesh.

The young activists in Bangladesh are seen going against mainstream though, and they are keen on their own identity and activity other than the ideology-based party politics

(Lallana and Zhang, 2013: 250). The Shahbag Movement also represents youth who are not inclined to any party politics, but are vibrant individuals standing together for a united cause. This research also observes how the party politics and its malice is not being able to corrupt young activism, and it's significant in case of Bangladesh having the history of violent and conflicting party politics (Lallana and Zhang, 2013: 251). Nevertheless, even during the Shahbag protest, Bangladesh has gone through political violence that claimed many lives. But the youth groups who were connected and exposed to the boon of ICT made a remarkable contribution to the Shahbag Movement. Lallana and Weiyu correctly quote MacKinnon here who stated that "youth are reinventing civic and political engagement and they are turned off by the game of partisan politics." (Lallana and Zhang, 2013: 249). This can be seen throughout the Shahbag Movement, as activists created new messages and spread them through new mediums across the whole of the Shahbag Movement, and the country. Mohammad Sahid Ullah and his work particularly concentrate on the behaviour of Bangladeshi youth towards politics and the role of ICT. Sahid Ullah points out that in Bangladesh, the new generation has the power of mobilizing public sentiment without even physically bringing out any procession or resorting to violence. In this way he thinks this generation is very different and more optimistic in comparison to the older generations of Bangladesh (Sahid Ullah, 282). Here, we see the changes that generations of youth have gone through in Bangladesh as the introduction of new age media took place. This technology also updates itself with time and adds to the changes in the way it is being used for social mobilization purpose. This phenomena however is true to almost all the countries in South Asia.

4. POSITIVE OR NEGATIVE?

Internet and its contribution to modern life is undeniable, however, currently, the abuse of internet is also being studied heavily. It is no news that unchecked and unsupervised contents are making its space in the web through social media and is creating chaos and confusion around the world. It is no different in Bangladesh. While the paper discusses the use of social media in urban youth, the question that remains unanswered would be – does the entire youth have access to the facilities of ICT? The sad truth is in Bangladesh only the urban youth are online and are able to publish their opinion online, whereas the majority of the youth are not exposed to online facility. According to Sahid Ullah, because of this unbalanced use of technology there is a 'Digital Gap' between the 'internet using youth' and the 'offline youth' as well as the older generation (Sahid Ullah, 282). ICT in Bangladesh has given the youth a new power to express themselves and it has essentially made established authorities pay heed to its citizens. The Bangladesh government's "Digital Bangladesh" policy is a landmark in correcting this flaw, and it is a networking bridge among the policy makers and the citizens of the country. The Shahbag Movement and its participants

made the best use of the ICT facilities offered by the state and it was the virtual participation along with the physical mobilization that helped Shahbag achieve massive global solidarity. The spill-over effect of Shahbag was observed in online discussion forums, news blogs, talk shows on television, special features in newspapers, public meetings. Sahid Ullah also discusses various reasons of youth involvement in politics in Bangladesh. His research shows the political ideologies is divided among the youth, mostly due to family or sometimes university politics: some of them are involved in politics passively or because of oppression from the political parties in the educational institutes (Sahid Ullah, 278). At the same time, there are young people who are aware of the political arena, but follow their chosen way of being an activist, for environmental or gender related issues for example. Gender discrimination is the reason why there are less women in youth politics, but that is also slowly changing (Sahid Ullah, 279). Shahbag is the perfect example of the participation of women, participation of both political and apolitical youth – social media technology has helped open doors for many. The platform Shahbag initiated in 2013, eventually became the milestone for many other similar uprising. The subsequent social mobilization in Bangladesh addressing various social issues have been majorly formed through Facebook events, WhatsApp group messaging, the use of hashtags and so and so forth. The recent “Road-Safety Protests” in Dhaka was popularized around the country through Facebook. The protest, largely formed by school-going children demanding safe roads and traffic regulations in the roads of Bangladesh became popular among other students and general population very quickly. However, some political parties did find it as a convenient opportunity to campaign against the government and the government accused the opposition party for creating this chaos in Dhaka using school children alleging ‘conspiracy’. Significant number of violent and ‘fake’ messages were posted on Facebook to create agitation and confusion. This also led to the arrest of various public figures by the government for posting, commenting on protest related issues. Similar but more violent form of the abuse of internet was seen in 2013 when the anti-Shahbag force posted doctored and edited pictures of the movement and accused the participants of being atheists. They also circulated these images to rural population who are not well-versed with the use of internet or social media to create division in the society in the name of religion. Due to the same reason, recently, India has come up with restricted numbers of forwarded messages on WhatsApp group chat. Social media applications provide the opportunity to spread a message to multiple recipients within minimum time. The sender and the recipient both parties should be aware of responsible use of social media, but in south Asian context this seems to be a far-fetched idea.

5. SHAHBAG AND INTERNATIONAL MEDIA.

As discussed earlier, along with the use of social media, the mobilization in Shahbag Square gained maximum momentum with the help of national media houses of Bangladesh. Live telecast of the programs of Shahbag Square was going on. Live talk shows where political party members, freedom fighters, political analysts were invited to discuss various matters regarding the War Crimes Tribunal and Shahbag Square became very popular. These talk shows also featured organizer and activists from the Shahbag Movement and thus the movement reached out to people of the entire country and abroad. Print media was equally helpful and were covering the daily activities from Shahbag Square. Turning to the role of international media covering the Shahbag Movement, a more troubling scenario emerges. The Western media as well as Indian media chose to turn a blind eye on the core issues raised by the Shahbag Movement. Being one of the most important neighbours of Bangladesh, the late reaction of Indian media on the same was also criticised by many, including Indian bloggers and activists. Both Ashok Malik and Richa Jha in their respective write-ups on Shahbag mentioned the laid-back attitude of Indian media on Bangladesh news. Interestingly, they both also agree to the fact that Indian media is obsessed with news about Pakistan, and they make it even more prominent that they are indifferent towards another major neighbour of India (Jha, 2013). On this note, Ashok Malik writes, “Bangladesh, a country that has made dramatic socio-economic progress in recent years, is more or less ignored. Indian reporters had travelled to Benghazi and Tahrir Square, to Karachi and Kabul, but Shahbag Square, Dhaka, was a no-go area” (Malik, 2013). He also mentions the similar attitude of Western media towards the issue. The concept of death penalty is globally debated, hence, for western media, the story of Shahbag was nothing but a ghastly demand. The Western media, along with the human rights fraternity, were convinced that Shahbag crowd was illiberal for demanding death penalty (Malik, 2013). They could not explain the complex history of issues around the Shahbag Movement to their audiences. Part of this reason might be explained by Nick Cohen, who boldly voiced how Bangladesh genocide is not talked about since it is a ‘politically inconvenient genocide’ (Cohen, 2013). In the case of the US media, this can be seen. There has been consistent pressure from the US government to re-consider the tribunal and its procedure as discussed earlier. Through various agencies, the US government has shown disapproval with the trial process against the Jamaat-e-Islami leaders and suggested that the government try to reach a compromise. Anushay Hossain criticises the Western media for stereotyping Bangladesh in news headlines. She writes, “it is shocking to see the major global networks overlook Bangladesh’s Cultural Revolution. Is it because the world is confused by a Muslim country rejecting outright the mullahs and war criminals who have eaten away at our society? Can the Western press only make sense of our movements when we are storming the streets demanding higher wages, or when

we're running around paid political stooges?" (Hossain, 2013). Lallana and Weiyu point out that even if a movement is local, youth activists in the present era will always seek out for global exposure and add a global dimension through media (Lallana and Zhang, 2013: 251). Unfortunately, the Shahbag Movement got no such exposure from the global frontline media. The movement grew bigger through social media like Facebook, Twitter and others: Bangladeshis living across the world joined and supported the movement virtually. The emergence of the Shahbag movement has widely been compared to other social movements that happened in 2011-2013, such as the Arab Spring uprisings, the anti-austerity protests in Europe, and the Occupy protests in the US. All of these were defined by young people using social networks to organize the occupation of public space. These protests were almost all designed to raise public awareness and improve social conditions – and are considered as important components of New Social Movement theory. Interestingly, this was also the time when the famous anti-corruption movement took place in the center of New Delhi. Like Shahbag Square, Jantar Mantar of New Delhi had also observed the gathering of students, academics, journalists, activists, and most importantly general population. A mobilization who were not politically motivated or charged but were standing together for the welfare of the homeland.

6. CONCLUSION

As the world was observing and still experiencing the effects of Arab Spring uprisings, the anti-austerity protests in Europe, and the Occupy protests in the US, who knew that a community in South Asia would come up with a movement of their own? The Shahbag Movement added to the on-going global events, but it had uniqueness in the action program and ideals that it followed – it was distinctly for the people of Bangladesh and based on the spirit of the Liberation War. It was popularized by the new age weapon of mobilization, which is technology. It spread the essence of the movement everywhere. Near and far, positive or negative- everyone knew something was happening in the epicenter of Dhaka and that voices were being raised against war criminals and religious extremists. Social media has become a key part of everyday life in Bangladesh, like any other country in the world. Use of social media for uprisings to address social issues can be viewed as a development for a country like Bangladesh since it represents the awareness among people of their rights in the state. This is an important feature of a democracy. However, the same technology can be used to create conflict and give rise to agitation and imbalance in the society.

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