



# Post Card from Shahabag

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## Abstract

The Shahabag movement left multiple traces in all of us, activists, academics, and photographers – ordinary individuals. It is difficult to produce a convincing inventory of events while we are still embedded within the movement, partly because of its contingent nature and fast pace. However, it is possible to provide snapshots from Shahabag – fragments those contribute to rearticulate ‘Bengali nationalism’. My primary effort here is to document my own sentient experience of these events over the last month with the help of powerful images created by eminent photographer Munem Wasif.

## Prelude

On the surface, Shahabag was in a carnivalesque<sup>2</sup> mode for over a month. Hundreds of thousands of people transformed the square into a living/breathing spectacle with their songs, slogans, recitation, drama, and art.<sup>3</sup> The major intersection of central Dhaka was closed, blocking major arteries of the metropolitan: three major medical college-hospitals, Dhaka University, Engineering University, High Court, a five-star hotel, and Dhaka Club are all situated within a three kilometer radius of Shahabag. And yet, nobody seemed to be bothered. Children, parents, students, professionals, intellectuals, activists joined the protest and eventually got devoured by the spirit of Shahabag.

It became a morning-after office ritual for many. I overheard caregivers and pathologists discussing their Shahabag rosters and possible substitutions for that period. I heard my students discussing the pros and cons of the movement. But for most of the activists, it had become a 24/7 job. There were free supplies of drinking water and food for and from participants. Everyone ensured that the person next to him/her was getting his/her share. Reports of verbal or physical abuses were minimal during this period as volunteers were committed to ensuring a peaceful demonstration. Everyone felt safe in Shahabag and felt they were being taken care of by fellow protestors. One could be physically absent from the protest site for a day but Shahabag was never far away. There had been no formal stage; hence, there was no visible and firm epicenter in the protest site. The centre was located wherever the lead sloganeer was chanting, with her fist up in the air as the rest of the crowd roared with her. Amplified chants of slogans created an ambience where everybody seemed to be in trance. With their innovative language, all they demanded was justice: to bring all the war criminals of 1971 under trial and sentence them, along with Abdul Quader Mollah, to death; to ban Jamat-e-Islami (JI) from Bangladeshi politics; and to boycott all JI institutions (bank, hospital, transports). For over a month, Shahabag remained an ideal space for the unfurling of an organic movement.



Gono jagoron Moncho, Shahabag.  
Foto © Munem Wasif

Thousands of words and images have been dedicated to Shahabag. For months, individuals have taken photos and written about their excitement of experiencing such an extraordinary event. The unprecedented nature of the movement, alongside the sheer number of people gathering at the heart of a metropolitan city, elicited fervour for any change. They expressed themselves because they believed in the uprising, because they wanted to ‘right the wrong’<sup>4</sup> of History, or at the very least, they wanted to be optimistic that justice would be served. At the same time, articles and entries defaming the Shahabag movement littered the pages of newspaper dailies and blogs. A group of intellectuals announced their ‘critical solidarity’<sup>5</sup> and raised very important questions about the stance of the movement from within. Engaging with their axioms, each created an enabling space for dialogue within smaller groups, but failed to persuade the larger audience. This piece explores the narratives embedded within such an emergent meta-narrative.

### Trajectories of the Movement

It all started with the verdict of the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT)<sup>6</sup>, which sentenced Abdul Kalam Azad (in absentia) to death in January for his involvement in genocide of 1971.<sup>7</sup> He was an Islamic cleric who had been expelled from JI. On February 5, Abdul Quader Mollah, assistant general secretary of JI, was found guilty and sentenced to life imprisonment.<sup>8</sup> He was accused of raping an under-aged girl, slaughtering a poet, and killing 344 people during the liberation war. This verdict caused discontentment amidst many, resulting in the bloggers’ and activists’ networks calling for an immediate protest in Shahabag. They were suspicious of ICT itself, along with being skeptical of the government’s<sup>9</sup> intention. A handful of activists and bloggers assembled for a candlelight vigil on that very day. This gathered momentum overnight: messages broke out like wildfire via Facebook and other social media platforms. People against the verdict gathered for justice.<sup>10</sup> Activists at

Shahabag opted for a non-violent demonstration. They demanded that all war criminals be hanged and their parties be banned. These war criminals are leaders of JI who collaborated with Pakistani Army in genocide. Cadres of JI also protested violently against the verdict in attempt to save their leaders<sup>11</sup>. This movement posed questions to JI's very existence in Bangladesh. As a result, JI took a violent position, threatening to cause a civil war in the country. There were attacks and counter-attacks in both virtual and real worlds.

In the first few days of the movement, many tried to brand it after Tahrir Square, calling it the 'Bangla Spring' at Shahabag Square. Bloggers and activists immediately distanced themselves from this claim.<sup>12</sup> They established 'Gono Jagoron Moncho' (Stage for People's Uprising) and named the Square as 'Projonmo Chottor' (Generation Square), rekindling the spirit of 1990s 'Gono Adalat' (peoples' court) initiated by Jahanara Imam, mother of martyr of war of liberation Rumi. She became the icon of this move-

ment, which was not about toppling the government. It was about a deep-seated discomfort amongst the people about the prevailing political culture where denying justice seemed plausible. The movement rejected such mainstream politics. In solidarity protesters felt that they could hold their guard and prevent all political leaders from making speeches. Given its stance, the movement spread across the country but was able to transcend the geo-political boundaries of Bangladesh, garnering support even from non-residential Bangladeshis (NRB) across the globe. Both the Awami League (AL) (the ruling party) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) (the opposition) took time to react to the movement. However, the government provided protection for the activists. Hence, we saw police guarding the entrance to the site and 'scanning' individuals. City Corporation efforts provided drinking water, installed mobile toilets, managed the waste, and later, helped with the installing of closed circuit cameras. The government could not afford to lose the support of this collective,



Peoples verdict, Shahabag.

Foto © Munem Wasif

even though the protest was far from welcome. Eventually, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina publicly demonstrated her support for the movement. Consequently, the BNP could come out of its dubious position of supporting the movement in the morning only to withdraw it by the evening.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, interestingly the leader of the opposition, Khaleda Zia labeled the protest a fascist movement.<sup>14</sup>

Despite a somewhat peaceful start matters, however, worsened after the murder of blogger and activist Ahmed Rajib Haider during the second week of the protest.<sup>15</sup> This happened right when activists announced that they would wind up their round-the-clock sit-ins and replace them with seven hour (3-10 pm) blocks. The murder was the mastermind of the JI student wing, Islami Chhatro Shibir, to weaken the movement. Rajib's murder was nothing but a ploy to divide the population into 'atheist' (*Nastik*) and 'believer' (*astik*) camps and to deploy this divided sentiment against the movement.<sup>16</sup> It was however an unsuccessful attempt that failed to convince the urban

educated middle or affluent class as we witnessed hundreds of thousands of people pouring into Shahabag to mourn Rajib's death. Nevertheless, this also appealed to the rest of the majority who were unable to access the Internet, let alone read the blogs. It definitely agitated the Islamic clerics/activists/madrassa students. Unfortunately, dailies like 'Amar Desh', 'Inqilab', 'NoyaDigonto', 'Shongram' fanned the fire of hatred. Their faith did not allow them to question the motive behind the murder. Rajib was a self-proclaimed non-conformist and did write blogs that could offend many; however, creating a fake Facebook account, uploading anti-Islamic blogs and circulating them under his name 'Thaba baba' just within hours of his murder were all questionable efforts. JI deliberately planted the seeds of doubt, cashing in on the vulnerability of individuals and hoped to eventually create major divides all over the country. Not even the faithful ones dared to ask whether a human being had the right to take the life of another.



State Protection-surveillance @ Projonmo Chottor, Shahabag  
Foto © Munem Wasif



Rajib's Namaz-e-Janaza-oath @ Shahabag,  
Foto © Munem Wasif

This 'atheist-believer' dichotomy was all JI needed to re-organise its supporters before another verdict was issued. The JI Chief, Delwar Hossain Sayeedi, was found guilty of charges including murder, torture and rape during 1971 and sentenced to death on 28 February.<sup>17</sup> JI members were enraged by the verdict demonstrated violently and called for a strike. They vandalised public property, set fire to automobiles and police stations, and looted and burned Hindu settlements. Government deployed police to control the situation. The rumour of Sayeedi's face on the moon brought thousands of supporters on the street. They heard the divine calling. Hundreds of men, women, and children died in the clash. The BNP, together with JI, called for a strike, paralysing the country. With the upcoming elections ahead, clashes were expected, but none of this magnitude. On the other hand, activists from Shahabag gave the Government an ultimatum to ban JI by 26 March.

Despite the violence and political unrest, this

movement saw its first victory on the thirteenth day of the protest. The political energy of the movement channeled the Government to formulate and amend the International Crimes Tribunal Act of 1973 in Cabinet. This act would enable the Government to have equal right to appeal against the defendants' verdict. Under the new act, the Government could press charges against the institutions and parties involved in genocide.<sup>18</sup> The Supreme Court's Appellate Division was given a sixty day limit to dispose of appeals. The Government also assured that the draft bill to ban JI was underway.

If Shahabag strengthened AL's cause, then JI members' activity provided the necessary impulse for BNP's anti-government movement, which was otherwise dying. 'Gono jagoron moncho' may have evolved as a spontaneous organic movement, but it had to engage with the events, which were fast approaching. These engagements generated innumerable discourses around the question of 'nationalism'. Old documents

were re-excavated to validate the agency of individuals in articulating their position. For good or for worse, activists/intellectuals were being forced to chart the trajectories of the old war to pave the way for emerging state of affairs.

### War: Old and New

The war of independence in 1971 was the defining moment for 'Bengali nationalism'. Within nine months, millions of people<sup>19</sup> were killed and hundreds of thousands<sup>20</sup> of women were raped by Pakistani officers/soldiers and their local collaborators: Razakars, Al-Badar, Al-Shams. They cold bloodedly murdered Bengali intellectuals at the end of the war. Leaders of JI and their young cadres wholeheartedly supported and collaborated with the Pakistani Army in these mass killings, using religious nationalism as their shield. The USA and China had no problems supporting these Islamists, or the genocide. Neither Pakistan nor JI has ever apologised for their heinous crime. Cold War politics played a major part in choosing sides: it was a strategic move for India and Soviet Russia to back up the Bengali freedom fighters and eventually help them in winning the war. War wrecked Bangladesh, as it had to go through a series of internal political turmoil. As Naeem Mohaiemen (2011) describes, '... Bangladeshis saw not only the heights of 1971, but also the crushing setbacks afterwards. The manhunts against Maoists in 1973, the man-made famine of 1974, the massacre of Mujib in 1975, the counter-coups until 1977, the second assassination in 1981, and all that came in between and afterward acted as a reality check. Faced with our own brutal self-rule, it became difficult to believe in a fully sanitized history of 1971. As Lawrence Lifschultz said, it was and remains an "unfinished revolution"<sup>21</sup>.

The Bangladesh constitution was haphazardly drawn up in 1972, indicating the slippery slope of imagining a new nation state. Nationalism, secularism, socialism, and democracy were the four core components of our constitution in newfound Bangladesh. Under the new constitution, all Islamic parties were banned and members of those parties who collaborated with the Pakistan army as Razakar,

Al-Badar, and Al-Shams were arrested and tried under a Collaborators Act in 1973.<sup>22</sup> Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (1971-75) had however given general amnesty to individuals who were not directly involved in murder or rape. After his assassination in a military coup, the Collaborators Act was repealed and the war criminals, freed.<sup>23</sup> General Ziaur Rahman<sup>24</sup> (1977-1981) allowed Golam Azam the key conspirator to not only enter Bangladesh, but to also stay. He amended the constitution by adding 'absolute trust and faith in the almighty Allah as the basis of all actions' in 1977.<sup>25</sup> In 1988, H. M. Ershad (1982-1990) changed the constitution again and made Islam the state religion. Under the patronage of military dictators, JI flourished. To legitimise their dictatorship, Islam/religion was used again. It is needless to say that Ershad was a boon to Islamic parties. JI was not only reinstated in national politics through mock elections, but was considered as a major force in the equation.

However, in 1990, a mass uprising toppled Ershad, ending his nine years of dictatorship, restoring democracy. Like any movement, this generated new hope amongst citizens and activists. However, to everyone's surprise, the BNP came into power, allying with none other than the JI. Within two years of elections, Bangladesh witnessed another civil society movement under the leadership of Jahanara Imam with the banner 'Ekattorer Ghatak Dalal Nirmul Committee' (Committee for Eradicating the Killers and Collaborators of '71).<sup>26</sup> They established 'Gono Adalat' (people's court) to hold mock trial of these razakars. Though this movement gained enormous popular support across the country, it unfortunately died a natural death along with the death of Jahanara Imam. Meanwhile, Golam Azam who lost his citizenship rights and was given a Bangladeshi passport in 1994 (he was living in Bangladesh with a Pakistani Passport). This enraged large segments of civil society collective. Later, the AL came to power, forming a coalition with JI in 1996. Intellectuals who supported the AL for their pro-liberation stance were equally perplexed. Jalal Alamgir (2010) rightly points out that 'the biggest sin in our post-1971 politics was not the dictatorial decisions made by the earlier leaders, but the choice by all major parties to politically

collaborate with alleged genocide collaborators, when convenient. These partnership after the country had become a democracy, gave war criminals the kind of political legitimacy that no military dictator could ever offer.<sup>27</sup>

At Shahabag, Gono jagoron Moncho picked up the issues, which predecessors had left unresolved. Populist movements like Shahabag may seem novel because of its scale but clearly there have been others. The birth of Bangladesh is founded upon several populist movements, which in any case cannot be reduced to only issues of secular contestations. Bloggers in ‘Muktomona’, ‘Amar Blog’<sup>28</sup>, ‘Somewhere in’<sup>29</sup>, ‘Shachalayatan’<sup>30</sup> have been skirmishing against JI-supported bloggers in ‘Sonar Bangla’ or ‘Basher Kella’<sup>31</sup> in the same manner that freedom fighters did. The difference is that the former set occurred in virtual space, with new tools and tactics. Every populist movement creates new spaces of alliances as well as alienation; battles in blogs are no different from fights on the ground.

## Youth, New Media, and Politics

Media, both old and new, tried to characterise this movement as techno savvy, youth led, spontaneous and apolitical. And they are somewhat correct. It was also compared with recent movements like ‘Arab Spring’, Anna Hazare’s anti-corruption movement in India, as well as the youth uprising over the rape of a 23-year-old student in Delhi. All of them had three elements in common: youth, new media, and mass appeal. All of these movements may appear to want to achieve short-term tangible goals in an apparent political vacuum, but they are certainly not devoid of politics. These movements may not appear to be led ideologically, or fail to resemble well-defined revolutions, but they certainly offer inspiration and motivation for creating new political spaces and processes. I am interested in understanding the underlying and unspoken politics of the movements— its rules of association and disassociation.

Since the ‘Green revolution in Iran’ in 2009-10,



Gono Jagoron Moncho at night, Shahabag. .

Foto © Munem Wasif



College Students protesting @ Projonmo Chottor, Shahabag.

Foto © Munem Wasif

we have witnessed the power of new media (email, Facebook, twitter, Youtube, blogs).<sup>32</sup> Activists have used them to organize rallies, share information, and locate their compatriots. In a similar fashion, the movement in Tahrir Square was aided by new media.<sup>33</sup> We witnessed social media intersecting the already complex nature of politics, over and underground; revolution finds its own language and methods in a repressive state. In both cases, social media provided activists with platforms that transcended boundaries, escaping surveillance in real and virtual life. But social media can neither substitute nor shrink the political space on the ground.

Speaking comparatively, I submit that the Anna Hazare's anti-corruption movement in India is very different in mood and content from the Arab spring or for that matter, the events at Shahabag. His mass popularity came from re-appropriating conservative values of 'Indian-ness' and the use of the moral compass of the citizen to make a call for reclaiming the state. To fight corruption, he proposed the establish-

ment of new surveillance mechanisms within the existing bureaucracy. As Arjun Appadurai (2011) puts it, '... in places like India where the middle-classes, fed on the apparent successes of democratic politics, think they can have their cake (and be modern, abstract and impersonal) and eat it too (be self-interested, family-oriented and totally localistic) ... this war is what has erupted in the Anna Hazare movement. Yes, it is to some extent an effort to take politics out of the polity, a classic mass fascist fantasy, in which *our* parades, wars and speeches are moral, and the enemy's similar efforts are political and demonic.'<sup>34</sup>

As mentioned previously, 'Gono jagoron moncho' neither wanted to bring the government down nor did it plead for moral cleansing. But it did call for a different sort of cleansing – to be rid of anti-liberation forces. Protagonists of Shahabag have taken up the baton of Jahanara Imam to lead the movement. They belong to a post-71 generation, who did not even witness the liberation war. Their anger and frustration did not come from their biographical experience of

war; it was bipartisan jingoism<sup>35</sup> that led to a violent outburst amongst this youth. They replaced the familiar icons of Mujib/Zia with Jahanara Imam. This was indeed a strategic move indicative of asserting distance from existing partisan politics. These collectives of bloggers/activists are in their twenties and thirties, demanding a different political culture. Blogger Arif-Jebtik<sup>36</sup> in his short interview<sup>37</sup> explained that they do not want to claim that they could orchestrate this event. He humbly expressed that they stood for 'Insaaf' (justice), and that every individual stood for himself or herself, as they are accountable to the nation, to the people of the nation, and to the freedom fighters who lost their lives. People gathered in the same manner as they lived in society with family and friends. This non-partisan stance resonated amongst the masses and united them against the war criminals. It is necessary to mention that many of these protesters have been involved in student politics and belong to various study circles. They have been actively and regularly protesting against various issues like open pit mining, sexual harassments, garments' factory fire,

etc. Additionally, an overwhelming majority of young women have been leading the Shahabag movement with their slogans from the outset of the protest. They have been physically present in the square round the clock. Lucky Akhter, along with Shaon, Samia, Tuba, Alice, Nowroze, Mieu, Fatema-tuj-johora, Nurjahan, Mukta, and Tania have become the voice of Shahabag. Students from various schools, colleges, and universities joined the sit-ins, showing their solidarity. Individuals, young and old, believing in the spirit of 1971 came forward to join the sit-ins. 'Gono jagoron moncho' protest could not be limited and spread across the country: every major town organised their own 'Gono Jagoron Moncho' and participated in sit-ins.

Young activists used new media very efficiently in spreading the message of the movement: for both coordinating and gathering people. There was a temporary control room filled with laptops where bloggers were constantly updating their blog sites, Facebook, and Twitter about the movement. They created and opened pages dedicated to the movement called 'Shahabag cyber juddho' (Cyber war at Shahabag)<sup>38</sup>,



Bloggers-activists updating news @ Projonmo Chottor, Shahabag.

Foto © Munem Wasif

Projonmo Chottor (Generation Square)<sup>39</sup>. Activists made appearances on TV, relentlessly writing in dailies as well on Facebook (notes, status). Ordinary individuals updated their Facebook statuses; their concerns in notes, tweets, photos, and videos contoured the course of the movement. On the one hand, they showed relentless support, but on the other, they also brutally criticised the movement from within, while engaging in debates with bloggers from opposite camps. They collectively complained against JI-supported blogs, Facebook pages, and forced authorities to take them down. They also hacked JI sites and leaked phone conversation of key leaders. As revenge, JI bloggers infiltrated many of the above mentioned blogs, created fake IDs of activists and posted their own messages: they also hacked two major dailies' web pages. In the wake of Shahabag, clashes became a full-blown war in cyber space. This warfare did not stop with attacking opposite camps, but anyone who had differences of opinion or asked questions about existing grand narratives was attacked. Personal attacks and defamation of activists became commonplace online.

A few private channels broadcasted this movement live on TV. It is worth mentioning here that despite the hundreds of thousands of peaceful protesters in the 'Gono Jagoron Moncho' at Shahabag movement, the event failed to make headlines in the international media. Only Aljazeera covered this movement in 'Stream' on 19th February.<sup>40</sup> Bangladeshis took advantage of the platform and flooded the stream with #Shahabag. At one point, the stream received 69 tweets a second. Western media entered the scene only after the 21st February grand rally at Shahabag, especially after the crackdown of law enforcing agencies on JI and opposition party's violent protests against Shahabag movement, which they termed as fascist/atheist. BBC, CNN, and Aljazeera's representation of Shahabag's situation was typical of western media – violent Islamists/cleric, brutal police, and hysterical mob setting fire to the vehicles. This is exactly what Edward Said (1997) decodes in 'Covering Islam'<sup>41</sup> – distortion of facts to promote the hidden agenda of most 'objective' media in the west. They completely bypassed the non-violent quality of the

movement, which remained largely secular in spirit. In other words, the Shahabag movement would not receive Western media patronage as with Iran's green revolution or Tahrir Square did simply because it did not match their agenda. Furthermore, the Bangladeshi movement was dismissed as geo-politically unimportant.

The contemporary construction of the movement as 'youth-new media-apolitical' by the media is also problematic. It does not allow one to see the context of the movement, nor does it allow one to see how intersectionality<sup>42</sup> (age-gender-class-religion-ethnicity) is played out in the movement. Vast generalisations by this biased categorisation hide the nuances and multiplicity of the movement. In the illusion of false unity, one can easily fall into the trap of rejecting the 'Others' biographical experience.

## Reclaiming the Nation

The Bangladeshi Nation was in a trance for the whole month of February and March in 2013, chanting 'Fashi Chai' (noose now), 'amike? Tumike? Bangali, Bangali' (Who am I? Who are you? Bangali, Bangali); 'Pokkho Nile rokhkha nai, razakarer fashi chai' (You won't be saved by taking sides, we demand noose of 'Razakars'); 'k tekader Mollah; tuirazakar' (Q for Quader Mollah; you are a 'Razakar'); 'N te Nizami; tui razakar' (N for Nizami; You are a 'Razakar'); 'ekta ekta jamat dhor, dhoira dhoira jobai kor' (Get hold of Jamat one by one; slaughter them one by one); 'jalore jalo, agun jalo' (Burn Burn; let the fire Burn). Or the more inclusive ones 'amike? Tumike? Jumma Jumma' (who am I? who are you? Jumma Jumma); 'Tumi ke? Ami ke? Hindu, Muslim, Boudho, Khrishtan, Bangali, Bangali' (Who am I? Who are you? Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, Christian, Bengali, Bengali). Dhaka was covered by huge red billboards of skinny fists demanding the noose, or with slogans like 'One nation one roar; hang the bloody Razakar'. 1971 posters were brought back titling 'Banglar mayera, meyera, Shokoli Muktijodhdha' (mothers and daughters of Bengal all are freedom fighters).<sup>43</sup> There were photos of children cutting their birthday cakes inscribed with 'Noose Now'. While blogger Rajib Haider was killed, another

activist Tariqul Islam Shanto had a heart attack and died on the ground of Shahabag whilst leading the crowd with slogans. There were hundreds of thousands of believers at Shahabag perplexed with their branding as 'fascist-atheist.' Some were even frustrated with innovative and very successful but soft protests like the '3 min Silence in Solidarity', 'Candle Light Vigil', 'Writing Letters and Tying it to the Balloon to Fly Away' while their compatriots were dying; while hundreds of temples and pagodas were under fire; and while thousands of trees were cut down for road blocks during the conflict. A whirlpool of convoluted emotion surged the nation. In a mass trance, a new language of nationalism is rearticulated – imagined.<sup>44</sup>

There are deeper meanings embedded within these signs and symbols. As Naeem Mohaiemen points out, this sheer size may provide the required impulse for the continuity of movements like these, but this also takes away the space to think, question, and evolve.<sup>45</sup> He was right in pointing out that this movement's demands are 'trapped inside a circular set of symbolism's

and its 'own semiotics, blending the symbols (death, noose, blood, teeth, vampires) into an unprocessed call to action'. I want to argue that this semiotics of vengeance factored in the unity of the heterogeneous groups channeling unidentified feelings towards injustice and war crime. It may seem mindless when parents go overboard in using noose motifs for birthday cakes, but it certainly indicates the embodiment of a heightened sense of 'nation'. It is a convoluted emotion that demands 'an eye for an eye' or better 'death for a death' without critically thinking through the consequences. Talal Asad once asked whether 'secular provocation – "fighting words" – lead to violent conflict?' in a very different context.<sup>46</sup> After witnessing a series of events in the past one month, I am convinced it does. All the chanting in Shahabag (secular space) may seem like a metaphoric call for justice for the activists. But this evoked outrage amongst JI members, leading to the rampage and killing of people, especially the plundering of Hindu settlements. JI's identity as an Islamic party further complicated



Caricatures of war criminals @ Projonmo Chottor, Shahabag

Foto © Munem Wasif

the matter. They managed to convince a section of the community that 'Gono Jagoron moncho' was a congregation of atheists. The imagined conflict between 'atheist-believer' hijacked the issue of justice temporarily. But it also consolidated two points. First, that the use of language of vengeance - even metaphorically to unite individuals - divides them even more, and second, that invoking violent language to demand justice (even in the most non-violent manner) generates a new chauvinism in imagining a nation which otherwise would have been unacceptable. Shahabag activist Faruk Wasif outlined a critical nationalistic project for Shahabag. He articulates, 'People have begun to learn and understand the deep politics. People have begun to think collectively, we must keep the pace, keep the unity and earn confidence of both the Islam and freedom loving people of Bangladesh. We must uphold that essentially there is no clash between them and the idea of Bangladesh.'<sup>47</sup>

In the new image of the nation, male icons were consciously being replaced by female icons. A large mural of Jahanara Imam at projonmo chottor was a constant reminder of a more inclusive nation state. 'Gono Jagoron Moncho' paid its homage to female freedom fighters on International Women's Day. A large number of women gathered - some of them fought the war, others survived, the rest, living legacies of their predecessors. The latter women embodied nation as participants or survivors of war rape.<sup>48</sup> Dominant narratives of liberation reiterate that Liberation was earned at the cost of Birangonas (War heroine) - mother/sister's 'izzat' (chastity). Never once was it claimed as a wife's 'izzat', as if acknowledging the fact would take away the virility of nation. Its narratives clearly sanction a patriarchal, hence patronising image of nation. The impulse to create a singular-seamless narrative does not allow one to bring in combatant female figures who valiantly fought the war. Or for that matter, neither does it include the cultural activists who have been singing to unite Bengalis for war, risking their lives, or even women who helped organise the liberation force. It is simply because they do not provoke same level of anger among the citizens. The inclusion of female bodies in public would

taint the meta-narrative of masculine war where men were out in public space fighting while women remained at home taking care of the family, wounded soldiers, and waiting to be being raped. These omissions facilitate to create a nationalistic history, which reduces women as passive recipients/citizens deprived of their capacity and denied the pride to be considered equal members in creating the nation. Firdous Azim argues that 'even while narratives and documents from the war of liberation emblematised women as the nation, honouring them as the mother of the nation, the ability of the nation to incorporate woman as mother or otherwise is completely unsatisfactory for the real life women concerned.' The same argument will hold true for the activist on the ground.

Umme Raihana (2013) explains why women would be allied with such constructs for claiming justice against war criminals: 'To a certain degree these desexualized constructs have been helpful in creating the female friendly atmosphere at Shahabag'.<sup>49</sup> Women were at the forefront of 'Gono jagoron Moncho.' Their roles were adequately acknowledged by calling them 'Ogni Konya' (Firebrand woman) or 'Sisters'. As argued earlier, mother, daughters, and sisters are asexual categories. Hence, to be the repository of nation, women's bodies and sexuality have to be downplayed. One can argue that Lucky Akhter, along with other female activists who were stationed at Shahabag for months, defied the 'public-private' dichotomy and translated their inner (desire) into outer (resistance).<sup>50</sup> I will argue that this change can only take place in a particular historical moment of uprising/revolution planting a seed for future resistance. Otherwise, these classifications of women, dividing them into sexual-aseual entities are not only internalised by individuals, but rather, are incorporated in narratives of the nation. However, Lucky can become the voice and the poster girl of the movement for her sheer power to move people. But even in the most democratic of movements, hierarchy rears its ugly head forcefully, and gender roles are carefully preserved. It may be incidental, but it is evident that despite having an overwhelming number of female activists, male activists (Imran Sarker, also the con- venger of Blogger and Activist Network) won the prize



Rain or shine Lucky Akhter is always there@ Projonmo Chottor, Shahabag.  
Foto © Munem Wasif

of noticeability, becoming the spokesperson of the movement, not Lucky Akhter. It is worth mentioning here that gender hierarchy is also a prevalent feature of blogs. One can use pseudonyms in blogs and hide identities. But personal attacks/assaults and chauvinisms made blogs a very masculine space.<sup>51</sup> There are a handful of popular vocal female bloggers who had to accommodate to the masculine code of conduct on the blogs. They fell prey to attacks on blogs and public shaming even from their own camp. I will hence argue that real life politics is mimed in virtual world, and therefore chauvinism in the virtual world is nothing but a representation of the same in the real. Even in the most inclusive state, patriarchal biases and chauvinisms contour the imagination of 'nation'.

Ethnicity remains another contentious issue within the Shahabag movement. Rahnuma Ahmed<sup>52</sup>, Naem Mohaiemen<sup>53</sup>, Arup Rahee<sup>54</sup>, and Hana Shams Ahmed<sup>55</sup> were concerned about the slogans like "amike? Tumike? Bangali, Bangali" (Who am I? Who are you? Bangali, Bangali)' and the messages it

conveyed. Many of these slogans were resurrected from 1971 to demonstrate the resistance against Pakistani nationalism. Activists callously used them to resurrect the spirit of 1971. However, this callousness created the space for hegemonic Bengali nationalism to thrive, nullifying 'others' in the process. Such chauvinist exclusivity makes the army occupation of Chittagong Hill Tracts or the religious conversion of Adibashis (ethnic groups) legitimate. More importantly, it makes transplanting Bengalis in hills, grabbing Adibashi land for corporate cultivation, raping Adibashi girls, killing Adibashi activists, and burning Adibashi settlements by Bengalis legitimate. This is alarming but one must acknowledge that Bengali nationalism is capable of turning itself into a tool of oppression. Despite the overwhelming presence of Adibashis in Shahabag, it could never become their call for justice. There was a stark division of 'our-their' cause for resistance. Later, this slogan was changed into "Ami ke? Tumike? Chakma, Marma, Bangali" (Who am I? Who are you? Chakma, Marma,



Torch procession @ Projonmo Chottor, Shahabag.  
Foto © Munem Wasif

Bangali). This gesture indicates the desire for change and the aspiration for a more inclusive nation-state.

Finally, I will argue that this movement was celebrated by the middle-class and cultural elite. It may seem that people from all walks of life came and gathered but if one scrutinizes the demography, a different story emerges. It is true that there were different categories and constituencies present - from teachers, to pathologists, owners of advertisement agencies to petty traders, doctors, home makers and lawyers, but the majority of them fall under the category of the broad ranging middle class and a small section of elite sector of Bangladeshi society. I remember seeing a Facebook status which stated that one rickshaw puller was asking the passenger 'what is blog?'. This reveals a great deal about the movement. There are a large number of women, elderly, and working class individuals out there who do not have the means to access the Internet. This large population is unable to participate/contribute to any opinion formation, hence,

lacking the power to influence social and political outcomes. It is not only their given class position, but their inability to use the Internet which creates a new form of marginality. This automatically created a space of dissociation for many. Educated women and the elderly could compensate the gap with their consumption of news in various forms, but for the working class, it remained a distant dream. Even though the media tried to hype up the situation by interviewing vendors and rickshaw pullers to show the presence of the masses, the efforts remained largely unsuccessful. Though this movement spread across the nation, it remained very urbane. Scrutinizing the organisers of Gono jagoron moncho across the country, we see that the local (organic) intellectuals and cultural activists were leading this movement. This movement created a space for alliance among the various factions of the middle class. Once again, they remained at the forefront of defining/imaging what an inclusive nation should look like. A call for justice and imagina-

tion of a more inclusive state unified Bengali middle class of small urban town, metropolitan Dhaka, and those overseas, who transcend their boundaries, contouring their cosmopolitan desire. 'Joy bangla' (Victory to Bangla) embodied the spirit of that imagination.

## Conclusion

'Gono jagoron moncho' at Shahabag will die a natural death like all other forms of resistance. But it will remain a historical movement where after many years, people stood up against the state and political parties, religious or secular alike. It aspired to chart the course of an inclusive nationalism. It demonstrated the strength of youths and how skillfully they could organise and sustain such a movement for months. The movement abandoned the mutually exclusive categories of 'religious' and 'secular,' and showed us the epic failure of political leaders. This movement

brought citizens to question the state and the intentions of political parties, while redefining icons/ideologies. Finally, this movement rearticulated the constellations of gender, class, and ethnicity within a nation. As Talal Asad says, 'the modern state is at once one of the most brutal sources of oppression and a necessary means for providing common benefits to citizens.' It is impossible to bypass the nation under conditions of modernity; therefore, it is necessary for citizens to negotiate their rights. This movement has charted the routes through which citizens can reclaim the state.

Having said all this, this movement also reminds me of Jean Rouch's 'Mad Masters'.<sup>56</sup> In this film, we see Accra in 1954, an outpost of the British Empire – where people come to the city and work. These migrant workers go to distant places, congregate, enact their colonial masters, fall into trance, and sacrifice animals. After the ritual, they return to Accra and life resumes as per normal. Rouch represented these



Iconic martyr intellectual's mass grave @ Projonmo Chottor goes to Mirpur.  
Foto © Munem Wasif

rituals as instances of defiance/resistance to empire. This film was highly controversial and Rouch was later criticised for misrepresenting the rituals as they were trying to attract the masters to gain certain benefits from them. I will never know what this trance originally meant, just as I will never know the tangible impact of the movement. One thing I know though: it is ending, and life will resume a normalcy. But, as in a trance, there are multiple identities and faces, and for Shahabag, those have been articulated. My role is to keep notes – someday they will make sense.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For photographers biography please see : <http://www.agencevu.com/photographers/photographer.php?id=232>

<sup>2</sup> “...Carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators.... Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because it’s very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world’s revival and renewal, in which all take part. Such is the essence of carnival, vividly felt by all its participants.” (Bakhtin, 1984:7) See Bakhtin, Mikhail (1984). *Rabelais and His World*. Trans. by Helene Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

<sup>3</sup> For details, please see: <http://Shahabagmovement.com/>

<sup>4</sup> For details please see: <http://www.newagebd.com/detail.php?date=2013-02-15&nid=40086#.UUqPsTdvCTN>

<sup>5</sup> First coined by prominent intellectual professor Azfar Hussein and later used by Naeem Mohaiemen in his article. <http://alalodulal.org/2013/02/22/Shahabagh-symbols/>

<sup>6</sup> ICT was established in 2010 to bring all the war criminals under trial.

<sup>7</sup> For details please see: <http://www.thefinancialexpress-bd.com/index.php?ref=MjBfMDFFmJjJfMT-NfMV8xXzE1NzY3Nw>

<sup>8</sup> For details, please see: <http://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2013/02/05/moll-a-sentenced-to-life-in-jail>

<sup>9</sup> For details, please see: <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/01/opinion/bang>

[ladesh-40-year-quest-for-justice.html?\\_r=0](ladesh-40-year-quest-for-justice.html?_r=0)

<sup>10</sup> For details, please see:

<http://ns.bdnews24.com/details.php?id=240424&cid=2>

<sup>11</sup> For details please see:

<http://ns.bdnews24.com/details.php?id=240366&cid=2>

<sup>12</sup> For details please see: <http://www.dailyprime-news.com/print.php?id=7515>

<sup>13</sup> For details, please see: <http://bdnews24.com/politics/2013/02/12/bnp-cautiously-welcomes-Shahabag-protests>

<sup>14</sup> For details, please see: <http://bdnews24.com/politics/2013/03/01/khaleda-backs-jamaat-s-resistance>

<sup>15</sup> For details, please see:

<http://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2013/02/15/blogger-murdered-in-dhaka>

<sup>16</sup> For details, please see:

<http://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2013/03/02/rajib-murder-cracked>

<sup>17</sup> For details, please see:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-21611769>

<sup>18</sup> For details, please see:

<http://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2013/02/17/parliament-changes-ict-law-to-try-jamaat>

<sup>19</sup> For details, please see: <http://www.genocide-bangladesh.org/>

<sup>20</sup> For details, please see: [http://www.genocide-bangladesh.org/?page\\_id=14](http://www.genocide-bangladesh.org/?page_id=14)

<sup>21</sup> For details, please see: [http://www.bricklanecircle.org/uploads/Flying\\_Blind.pdf](http://www.bricklanecircle.org/uploads/Flying_Blind.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> For details, please see: [http://icsforum.org/library/files/257\\_2010.pdf](http://icsforum.org/library/files/257_2010.pdf)

<sup>23</sup> For details, please see: <http://www.secularvoiceof-bangladesh.org/Fotoes/Report%20on%20the%20war%20criminals..%A8%A8/Report%20on%20the%20war%20criminals.htm>

<sup>24</sup> Founder of Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)

<sup>25</sup> For details, please see:

[http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/01/opinion/bangladesh-40-year-quest-for-justice.html?\\_r=1&](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/01/opinion/bangladesh-40-year-quest-for-justice.html?_r=1&)

<sup>26</sup> For details, please see:

<http://mygoldenbengal.wordpress.com/2013/02/15/return-of-that-famous-letter/>

<sup>27</sup> For details, please see:

<http://www.thedailystar.net/newDesign/news-details.php?nid=141576>

<sup>28</sup> For details, please see: <http://www.amarblog.com/>

<sup>29</sup> For details, please see: <http://www.somewherein-blog.net/>

<sup>30</sup> For details, please see:

<http://www.sachalayatan.com/>

<sup>31</sup> For details, please see:

<http://basherella.blogspot.com/>

<sup>32</sup> For details, please see: <http://www.washington-times.com/news/2009/jun/16/irans-twitter-revolution/>

<sup>33</sup> For details, please see: <http://www.ejumpcut.org/currentissue/LDaviesReview/index.html>

<sup>34</sup> For details, please see: <http://kafila.org/2011/08/30/our-corruption-ourselves-arjun-appadurai/>

<sup>35</sup> For details, please see: <http://www.himalmag.com/component/content/article/146/1811-In-Search-of-Shonar-Bangla.html>

<sup>36</sup> He is a blogger and an activist who has been writing against JI politics and for liberation movement for years. He has been one of the organisers of the movement.

<sup>37</sup> For details, please see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I0gQdcihvdw>

<sup>38</sup> For details, please see: <https://www.facebook.com/Shahabagecyberjuddho>

<sup>39</sup> For details, please see: <https://www.facebook.com/projonm0chottor>

<sup>40</sup> For details please see: <http://stream.aljazeera.com/story/201302190008-0022555>

<sup>41</sup> For details, please see Said, Edward (1997). *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts determine how we see the Rest of the World*, New York: Random House.

<sup>42</sup> For details, please see: [http://ganymedes.lib.unideb.hu:8080/udpeer/bitstream/2437.2/11132/1/PEER\\_stage2\\_10.1177%2F1350506806065752.pdf](http://ganymedes.lib.unideb.hu:8080/udpeer/bitstream/2437.2/11132/1/PEER_stage2_10.1177%2F1350506806065752.pdf)

<sup>43</sup> For details, please see: <http://www.machizo.com/unnayannews/issue/conflictNpeace/image/muktijuda.jpg>

<sup>44</sup> Remembering Benedict Anderson's 'Imagined Community' very fondly, he defines nation as 'an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.' He adds, 'It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.' (1983: 7). Please see Benedict Anderson (1983) *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso.

<sup>45</sup> For details, please see: <http://alalodulal.org/2013/03/04/history/#more-3958>

<sup>46</sup> For details, please see: <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2011/08/03/the-suspicious-revolution-interview-with-talal-asad/>

<sup>47</sup> For details, please see:

<http://alalodulal.org/2013/02/22/Shahabagh-islam-muktijuddho/#more-3647>

<sup>48</sup> Categories were presented by Professor Firdous Azim as a keynote paper in a workshop held for Gender Masters in BRAC University in 14-17 January 2013.

<sup>49</sup> For details, please see: <http://alalodulal.org/2013/02/25/shahabagh-fiery-sisters/#more-3749>

<sup>50</sup> ParthaChatterjee (1989) argues that '(t)he discourse of nationalism shows that the material/spiritual distinction was condensed into an analogous, but ideologically far more powerful, dichotomy: that between the outer and the inner. The material domain, argued nationalist writers, lies outside us—a mere external, which influences us, conditions us, and to which we are forced to adjust. But ultimately it is unimportant. It is the spiritual, which lies within, that is, our true self; it is that which is genuinely essential.' Please see <http://www.jstor.org/stable/645113?seq=3&Search=yes&searchText=%22Partha+Chatterjee%22&list=hide&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoBasicSearch%3FQuery%3Dau%253A%2522Partha%2BChatterjee%2522%26wc%3Don%26fc%3Don&prevSearch=&item=2&ttl=82&returnArticleService=showFullText&resultsServiceName=null>

<sup>51</sup> One of the best examples would be discourses around film 'Meherjaan' by Rubayat Hossain. The narrative of her film revolves around the liberation war where a Bengali girl falls in love with a Pakistani soldier who eventually escaped from his unit because of violence. The pro-liberation blog space was flooded with criticism and personal attacks in its ugliest form accusing her as a Paki lover, anti-Bangladesh, promiscuous, so on and so forth. Even prominent female writers used masculine language while attacking her.

<sup>52</sup> For details, please see: <http://www.newagebd.com/detail.php?date=2013-02-15&nid=40086#.UVK-OzdVCTM>

<sup>53</sup> For details, please see: <http://alalodulal.org/2013/03/04/history/#more-3958>

<sup>54</sup> For details, please see: <http://newagebd.com/detail.php?date=2013-03-08&nid=42214#.UVK5dDdvCTN>

<sup>55</sup> For details, please see: <http://www.thedailystar.net/beta2/news/the-trees-and-forests-of-projonmno-chottor/>

<sup>56</sup> For details, please see: <http://www.newwavefilm.com/french-new-wave-encyclopedia/les-maitres-fous.shtml>

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