

Religious Communication in Digital Public Sphere

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Abstract:

The interrelationship among religious communities in a particular society is complex. On many occasions, one community becomes dominant owing to several societal factors, and other communities remain on the edge. Religion in Bangladesh has a complex history. Besides, digital media as a new phenomenon has met religion recently, although this issue is often overlooked. As a result, no formal academic endeavor is seen in Bangladesh to date which focuses on the emerging digital Islamic public sphere and online religious communication. The present study tries to bridge this gap. Through careful observation of the digital public, their used contents, and produced cases of contestation, this article finds some exclusive communication patterns. First, communication among religious communities is unequal where Muslims dominate the discourse. Second, Islamic contents are more frequent in cyberspace than the contents of other religions. Third, Muslims produce digital media-based disinformation to marginalize religious minorities in both online and offline spheres.

Key Words: *Islam; Domination; Bangladesh; Confrontation; Public Sphere; Religious Minority.*

INTRODUCTION

Ethics is wonderful between the pages of books as it is yet to function perfectly in society. People through ages have dreamt of living in a society where no disparity would exist, no individuals and group would be deceived and deprived, and no one would have to endure the agony. However, the world has already experienced 3708 wars in the past 600 years that cost millions of human lives (Roser, 2016). One of the reasons to wage a war is the will to dominate others. In contrast, the will to freedom has been playing an important role in shaping the contemporary world map. In Europe after the Catalonian declaration of independence, at least 22 similar pro-independence zones were identified based on unique cultural identities (Henley et al., 2017). Pro-liberation movements are getting stronger worldwide so do the domination and confrontation. The present Bangladesh as a sovereign country is also a product of political contestations for decades.

Historically, Bangladesh is a melting pot of various religious and cultural communities. However, the long-standing conformity and communal congruence among religious co-cultures of Bangladesh is under threat due to the proliferation of communal hatred started under the British rule. The first horrific communal incident was the Direct Action Day in 1946, a riot between the Hindu and Muslim communities. More than 4000 people died in that conflict. Passing all the hectic years of British colonial and Pakistani

quasi-colonial rule, Bangladesh was about to thrive since 1971. Despite ceaseless political failures since the independence, the economy has been surging at a convenient pace from the last six years (World Bank, 2019). However, the ghost of colonial regimes is still hunting Bangladesh society sidelining its economic merit. The politics of piety did not end through the formation of Bangladesh as a *secular* state. Meanwhile, digital media seems to reinforce political Islam and feed the communal appetite of religious fanatics.

It is essential to shed light on the interrelationships between media and religion, and the metamorphosis of religion due to the changes in the communication system. The worldwide media revolution after the 1950s hit the religious settings of South Asia at the end of the last century (Babb, 1995). The advent of television, audio, video recording and other forms of media altered the circulation of religious symbols and contents. Transmitting and storing information became relatively easier. People found it convenient to use new communication technologies for religious purpose: recording Islamic songs like *Qawwali* and *Ghazal*, printing *hadith* and the Quranic text, and so on (Babb, 1995; Udupa, 2017). This reciprocity between religion and media faced a new crisis when the internet came into play. People found the internet even more useful for religious purposes. It also increases the chances of religious communalism as well (Hanif, 2019; Udupa & McDowell, 2017).

The following discussion on Bangladesh's digital public sphere and communication among religious communities reveals how the dominant Muslim community interacts with other religious minorities in the online public sphere. This article also tries to observe the impacts of online interreligious communication inside and outside cyberspace. It is to note that except Islam, three major religions in Bangladesh are Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity. Islam has few sects as well, such as Shia and Ahmadiyya. Along with these groups, atheist and secular are also considered as the religious minorities or co-cultures in Bangladesh (BBS, 2014; Orbe, 1998).

DISCUSSION

(Re)conceptualizing Digital Public Sphere

The concept of the digital public sphere constitutes with two ideas: the digital, and the public sphere. Digital refers to the electronic system that generates, stores, and processes data. The analog technology functions based on electronic signals whereas data in digital technology is transmitted through satellite or fiber optic. Data processing has two types: positive and non-positive, those are represented by 1 and 0, respectively. The digital communication system includes video conferences, mobile, virtual reality, fax, online platforms, etc. On the other hand, the term *public* has at least four different meanings: (a) physical space used by commoners, e.g. park, city squares, etc.; (b) idea of public and private in terms of interest, concern, decision and legitimacy, e.g. individuals have a private life and public life; (c) public is they who participate in social events or forms of expression, e.g. reading public; and (d) aggregate views and actions of individuals, e.g. public opinion (Gripsrud et al., 2010). To conceptualize *public sphere*, Jürgen Habermas comes up with an idea of open public spaces and communication sphere where "public discourse on matters of common concern can take place" that eventually "lead to the formation of an opinion on part of the public of citizens that in turn may influence political decision making" (Gripsrud et al., 2010).

The internet is now working as a newly-emerged modern-day public sphere where people come together, participate in discourse, and form opinions. Habermas (1991), to

characterize the political public sphere, mentions it as an apolitical venue where everyone can participate in discourse irrespective of their social, cultural, and economic class. However, in practice, everyone cannot participate in online discourse equally due to real-life restraints, such as social status, education and knowledge, enthusiasm, outlook, and so on. On the contrary, cyberspace may provide more scopes to people who cannot partake in real-life public discourses. Having some control by the authority, the internet offers better interactive opportunities to the users (Valtysson, 2012).

Virtual communication has often been misunderstood as *faceless* communication though the *face* is an integral and space neutral part of human communication that “requires and is vulnerable in social interaction” (West & Trester, 2013). Different types of communication content on the internet make it an effective and largest public sphere as well. The public sphere allows the production of opinion and circulation of information, ideas, and debates (Dahlgren, 2005; Valtysson, 2012). Researchers attempt to define the digital public sphere as:

...[a] communicative sphere provided or supported by online or social media— from websites to social network sites, weblogs and micro-blogs—where participation is open and freely available to everybody who is interested, where matters of common concern can be discussed, and where proceedings are visible to all. (Schäfer, 2016: 322)

Discourse on a range of issues connects the public and often brings them to a common discursive ground. Public discourses are going virtual gradually. The prior line between the public and private sphere has also become blurry in the digital age (Warner, 2002a). Publics now become netizens who dwell in cyberspace. Cybersociety has lessened the importance of physical space. Such computer-mediated communication (CMC) is intense, diverse, and inclusive (Jones, 1998). The netizens are represented by avatars, discourses are mostly based on written text, and personal identities are deliberately constructed. There has been much debate among intellectuals whether virtuality is sidelining or enhancing real life. However, the emergence of this unique *dualistic* cyber-community has added a new dimension in social mobility (Bell, 2006).

Digital Public Sphere of Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, a significant paradigm shift has been taking place roughly from the 2000s when the internet started reaching the individual sphere. The number of netizens has been surging from 1% of the total population in 2006 to 18.25% in 2016, eighteenfold of the previous total (World Bank, 2016). The crowded online has changed the prior nature of social discourse dramatically in present Bangladesh. Unlike the physical public sphere, the internet offers a more democratic space where the public, irrespective of their economic and social class and status, gather and participate in discourses. Rising income, increased literacy rate, changes in consumption patterns, social modernization, etc. might be positive contributors to surging internet users in Bangladesh. There could be few negative contributors in this process as well, including incompetency of traditional media and the public sphere, political surveillance and control over the earlier public sphere, etc. In the discussion of the digital public sphere, some concepts, such as (counter)public, politics, power, and control are important.

Digital Public And Counterpublic

Public is the accumulation of individuals who assemble in a visible space, participate in discourse, and circulate ideas. In contrast, counterpublic is the sum of individuals who stand against the public and identify themselves as a separate entity. According to Warner (2002b), counterpublic is “not merely a subset of the public, but constituted through a conflictual relation to the dominant public”. He further deduces that these counterpublics are “structured by different dispositions or protocols from those that obtain elsewhere in the culture, making different assumptions about what can be said or what goes without saying.” (p. 413). Online platform constitutes both unique publics and counterpublics. They confront and contest based on their self-interests. Every discourse in the digital public sphere usually produces a large volume of content generated by two or more contesting groups. Digital publics articulate discourses on issues to express their views and to initiate public opinion to influence policymaking. Individuals hardly know each other in this larger discursive ground and relations among strangers are frequent.

Politics, Ideology, And Contestation

Digital publics often participate in politics, such as criticizing government by trolling. It is to note that the physical public sphere in contemporary Bangladesh is somewhat affected by the political dogma of the ruling party and party-men. Since Bangladesh is allegedly heading towards a one-party state (Mahmud, 2018), the power of discourse has also started becoming centralized. In such a political environment, the digital public sphere provides a more democratic, common, and effective ground to the digital public to express their views and opinions. A series of social (media) movements in Bangladesh: Shahbag Movement in 2013, No-vat on Education Protest in 2015, Quota Reform Movement in 2018, Road Safety Protest in 2018, is the outcome of this newer but more democratic public sphere.

Of course, there always has been the question of politicization and polarization in digital media too. This polarization might be considered from two perspectives. One, political polarization, mainly between the ruling party, Awami League (AL), and its main opposition, Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). Two, religious polarization, between Muslims and other religious communities, such as Hindus, Buddhists, and seculars. Apart from political contestation, a real threat for Bangladesh, in my opinion, would be the emergence of the digital Islamic public sphere. The clandestine Islamists are using cyberspace to harness their political agendas and facilitate communal disharmony along the religious line.

Control and Domination

The interplay between two or more contending ideas and publics takes place in the public sphere (A. M. Khan & Makbul, 2014). However, gagging the ideological oppositions may not be a good practice what Bangladesh digital public sphere is experiencing. The government is trying to regulate and surveil the digital public sphere from time to time. Controlled discourse is the indication of a moribund public sphere. The internet offers a way to freedom of speech, and netizens tend to practice it through the SNSs, blogospheres, and video sites. Often, freedom of speech is a threat to the government. Therefore, the government tries to impose regulations like Section 57, Digital Security Act 2018 to control the collective public voice (“Bangladesh,” 2018; Saha, 2017).

Unequal participation and powerplay in online discourses among religious groups can be observed too. Muslims play a dominant role in communication. It seems that digital

publics are becoming more interested in and susceptible to religious issues following a new Islamic revivalism in Bangladesh (A. A. Hossain, 2012). For example, Islamists as digital public address women's rights as unlawful that is prohibited in Islam. This paper, with a brief history of religion in Bangladesh, attempts to explain the nature of the digital public sphere from the religiopolitical aspect.

A Brief History of Religion in Bangladesh

Hinduism and Islam are the two major religions in South Asia. They are historical rivals as well. Although Hinduism is the first formal religion, Islam has also a thousand years' legacy in the subcontinent. Two colonial regimes: the British era and the Pakistan era, contributed to shaping the contemporary religious landscape of Bangladesh. In practice, both regimes were colonial in their designs: while the British Raj was a direct and explicit colonial power, the Pakistan regime was quasi-colonial. Islam and Hinduism were used for political purposes in both regimes. Besides, after the independence, the essence and course of Islam in Bangladesh changed remarkably.

Religion in The Colonial Regimes

The outset of a 190-year long British rule in the Indian subcontinent began after the defeat of Nawab Siraj ud-Daulah in 1757. To sustain their stronghold in the subcontinent, the British masters took the "Divide and Rule" policy to facilitate the divide between the two major religious communities, Hindu and Muslim (Xypolia, 2016). After the Sepoy Mutiny in 1857, the estrangement and contestation of two religious sects became more explicit. Thus, a series of violence and protests unleashed, all the peace accords became futile. The British rule finally came to an end in 1947 through a decisive partition. Based on the Two-Nation Theory that gained popularity among Muslims, two separate countries emerged from the partition. India was for Hindus, and Pakistan combining the East and West parts was for Muslims. However, the fervor of East Pakistanis soon evaporated thanks to the oppressive rule of the West Pakistani leaders. Leaving behind the religious bonding between the two distant parts of Pakistan, economic disparity came forward and played a decisive role in politics. After a blood-stained battle in 1971 between East and West Pakistan, Bangladesh came into being as an independent country.

Religion after The Independence

Bangladesh should be a secular state by its constitution. Nevertheless, religious extremism is still dominating many events in the country. Is Bangladesh secular in real sense? The idea of secularism was rooted in the grave of unified Pakistan. Many thought that Islam was the main string that bound Pakistan together: when the bond is lost, Islam is also no longer a crucial issue. It is true that while Islam helped to integrate Pakistan, economic affairs helped to disintegrate it. Therefore, the driving force behind the Liberation War. For example, the Six-point Program is considered as the manifesto of Bangladesh. Among the six demands, three were based on economic affairs (A. Hossain, 2014). Religious affairs were not discussed in other influential political manifestos as well, including the Twenty-One Point Program of Joint front in 1954 and the Eleven Points Program in 1969 by The All-Party Student Action Committee (M. H. Khan, 2014).

The idea of secularism in independent Bangladesh has two major grounds. First, after repatriation, Tajuddin Ahmed declared democracy, socialism, and secularism will be the base of the new country (M. Hasan, 1986). Afterward, four fundamental principles:

democracy, socialism, secularism, and nationalism were included in the first constitution in 1972. Second, the populace of Bengal was mainly the impoverished people who had no real business with religious affairs. A bulk of them supported the secular Krishak Proja Party (KKP) led by A. K. Fazlul Huq. These people participated in the Liberation War irrespective of race, ethnicity, and religion. However, these two instances do not indicate a completely convenient environment for secularism in Bangladesh (Chatterji, 2002). Also, no socioreligious investigation on Bangladesh faith-community was conducted after the independence: what they want and what they deny in terms of religion. Therefore, it seems religious sentimentalism has been there always. According to Hossain:

Since the 1940s nationalist leaders have used both Islam and Bengali ethnicity for the purposes of political mobilization—the former to mobilize Bengali Muslims during the Pakistan movement in the 1940s, the latter during the autonomy movement of the 1950s and 1960s to mobilize Hindus and Muslims alike. When Bangladesh gained independence from Pakistan on 16 December 1971, Jinnah’s ‘two-nation theory’, the basis for the creation of Pakistan, was pronounced ‘dead’ [...] However, Bengali ethnicity soon lost influence as a marker of identity for the country’s majority population, their Muslim identity regaining prominence and differentiating them from the Hindus of West Bengal. (A. A. Hossain, 2012: 165)

Often, the government plays a role to incite religious sentimentalism among masses. In 1977, for instance, Ziaur Rahman amended the constitution. He introduced *Bismillah-Ar-Rahman-Ar-Rabim* (“in the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful”) at the beginning of the constitution, added “absolute trust and faith in the Almighty Allah” that should be the basis of all actions, and removed ideal of secularism from the constitution (Majumdar, 2016). A few years later, Hussain Muhammad Ershad endorsed Islam in Article 2A as the state religion through the Eighth Amendment of the constitution in 1988. It curbed the rights of other religious sects (CLCBD, 2011). The politics of appeasement is continuing in the democratic regimes. The governments often fear to take steps against the popular Islamic doctrines that could be harmful to society.

Religion in Contemporary Bangladesh

Muslims are the 90.39% of the total population in contemporary Bangladesh. On the other hand, Hindus constitute the second-largest religion and the largest religious minority with 8.54% population in 2011: this percentage is decreasing with time (BBS, 2014). The falling percentage of Hindus may have two reasons: their expulsion from Bangladesh, and their lower fertility rate than the Muslims (Barkat, 2018; Huntington, 2007). While the second reason is admissible, the first propensity is harmful for the harmony among religious communities. Riaz (2014) thinks that premeditated and state-funded religious violence and a growing culture of fear is encouraging Hindus to leave the country. From 1964 to 2013, 11.3 million Hindus left Bangladesh due to religious persecution and discrimination. During 1971-1981, the daily migration rate of Hindus was 512 while the rate reached at 774 between 2001 to 2011. Experts even draw an assumption that if the exodus continues, there would be *no* Hindus in Bangladesh after 30 years (K. Hasan, 2016).

The number of Buddhists (0.60%) and Christians (0.37%) are relatively lower than Muslims and Hindus. Buddhist community in Bangladesh has a long historical legacy dated back to more than two millennia. However, currently, most Buddhists in Bangladesh are

the member of indigenous communities, such as Chakma, Marma, Garo, etc. concentrated in Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). They are mostly Theravada-Hinayana Buddhists (Chakma, 2007). Besides, Christians are mainly Roman Catholic and dwelling sporadically in different parts of the country (BDHRL, 2016). Buddhist population rose from 0.774 million in 2001 to 0.890 million in 2011 whereas Christians from 0.389 million in 2001 to 0.447 million in 2011 (BBS, 2011). Two other persecuted minorities in Bangladesh are the seculars and the atheists. Many of them are active counterpublics in the digital sphere. Two more minority groups are animist and agnostic whose members are between a few thousand to 0.1 million (BDHRL, 2016). Islam has some fractions such as Shia, Bahais, Ahmadi, who are considered as minorities as well. They altogether constitute only 0.14 percent of the population (BBS, 2014).

Religious Communication in Digital Public Sphere

Online piety in Bangladesh is on the rise after the Ramu violence in 2012. It was a vicious and premeditated attack perpetrated by Muslim fanatics on the Buddhist community. Religious practices in digital media might provide spiritual relaxation to the true pious persons. On the contrary, it might be a breeding ground of communalism. The digital public sphere in Bangladesh has already become a heaven for the separatists and religious extremists to ignite religious communalism. The nature of communication among religious groups in the digital public sphere is depended on the nature of contents they use in discourse.

Contents of Religious Discourse

A variety of digital contents, such as photos, writings, audio, audio-visual, digital documents, links, etc. play their distinctive roles in the digital public sphere. All contents in digital media, except few static sites, are user-generated contents (UGC). Three mother categories of religious contents are: (a) texts, includes hadith, Islamic blog, Quranic text, Islamic sermon, story, novel, Islamic book; (b) photos, includes Islamic places, shrines, holy material, illustrated Islamic advice, *ayat* (a statement of the verse of the Quran varies in length); and (c) audio and audio-visual contents, includes *waaq* (a type of traditional Islamic scriptural commentaries which is delivered by a Pir or Huzur, Islamic clergy in a public assembly), *boyan* (narration or talking on certain issues, often religious ones), *kebutbah* (sermon delivered from an elevated pulpit (minbar) by a khatib, or Muslim preacher, at Friday prayers and special celebrations), *dua* (an act of supplicating to Allah, according to Islam), Urdu, Arabic and Bangla Islamic music, such as *hamd o naat* (a branch of Islamic song developed by National Poet Kazi Nazrul Islam), *Ghazal* (Islamic songs in three different languages: Urdu, Arabic, and Bangla), and *tilawat* (reciting Quranic texts). Each of them has its usability and semantic and pragmatic significance. Written text, for example, is suitable to comment on something, to start a discussion, or to describe something. On the other hand, photos are for self-representation and virtual showoff, to corroborate a discourse, or to troll to disparage or humiliate. Video represents visual action and motion, and most of them are used for infotainment purposes. SNSs are becoming overwhelming with Islamic content. On the contrary, contents generated by minority groups are relatively lower compared to the Islamic contents. Thus, cyber-Islamism is becoming more prominent in the digital public sphere.

Of the three categories, written contents, such as blogpost and Facebook status are the most popular and widely used forms of digital content produced by digital publics. It

generates debates among the digital publics regarding the religious issue. Enthusiasts participate in such discourse and uphold Islamic ideals, often mixing up with their personal views in the name of Islam. We call it popular Islam (Gaffney, 1992). Islamic literature and myth shared online often activate their inner religiosity. The individuals who are superior in religious knowledge or social status usually work as opinion leaders: they preach spirituality and ideas often fabricating those. Online devotees admire and share photos of the holy places and things, such as footprints of the Prophet (PBUH), miracles of Allah or the Quran or Islam, and so on. These images are usually engineered by the interest groups to espouse either religious sensationalism or social disharmony. Images illustrating various *ayats* are also popular among the Muslim followers.

Communication and Language of Discourse

To understand how the religious minorities interact with the dominant Muslims in the digital public sphere, analysis of their used contents and language is imperative. To some extent, these indicators might be misleading due to the *metacommunication* (metacommunication is all the nonverbal cues (intonation, body language, gestures, facial expression, etc.) that carry meaning that either enhance or disallow what one says in words) as it allows the minorities to conceal their real behavior (Jensen et al., 2016). Besides, religious minorities tend to modify their language and communication patterns to maintain congruence with the dominant culture. They, therefore, seek suitable and safe topics to discuss. Such self-censoring and self-suppression often come out in forms of disgust and avoidance.

Language pattern in communication bears the indication of how one maintains relationships with others. Since Islamic sentiments manufacture fear and threat among minority members so that they tend to search for the most probable way of sustaining cohesion with the majority group. To preserve healthy relationships with Muslims, minorities tend to follow three distinctive ways: assimilation, accommodation, and separation (Orbe, 1998).

Minorities usually do not give up their cultural identities to assimilate. Besides, separation from the dominant group would only bring misfortune to the minorities. That is why they try to preserve healthy relations with the dominant group. Although cyberspace seems democratic, religious minorities here enjoy unequal rights to speak out. Those who somehow manage to stand against Muslim domination are castigated and subdued. As a result, they rearrange their behavior and language patterns. A few factors including power, position, and possession also determine the trend. In this regard, dominant Muslims occupy more power and superior positions than the other religious groups. For that reason, minorities often try to adjust their way of communication even in cyberspace. In this process, the Muslim-domination shapes the thought and interaction of the minorities (Griffin, 2011). Therefore, different societal factors mediate and determine the digital discourse and communication between the majority and minority in Bangladesh society.

Habermas & McCarthy (1977) referring to Hannah Ardent state that “power is not the instrumentalization of another’s will, but the formation of a common will in a communication directed to reaching an agreement” (p. 3). This statement initially ignores the form of coercive power through communication (e.g. ordering), which is a common phenomenon in religious communication in cyberspace (Russell, 1996). The power over digital communication might let Muslims to bolster their prior domination upon other religious minorities.

Religious Confrontation and Domination

Religious minorities are pushed to the margin in digital discourses by dominant Muslims. Digital contents from other communities are too scant. Even photos, videos, and writings in SNSs promoting and/or featuring yearly cultural and religious occasions, such as *Mangal Shobhajatra* (a cultural heritage as well as a mass procession that takes place in the early morning of the first day of Bengali New Year), *Puja* (a ritual of prayer or devotional worship of deities by Hindus) are often criticized by the *neo*-Islamists emerged recently in the digital sphere. The strategies of online confrontation and domination are unique. Also, the confrontation often shift from online to offline and cause real-life chaos.

Recently, digital disinformation is trying to expel the serenity and congruence among religious communities. It is empowering religious fanatics, to some extent. Numerous incidents of digital disinformation were plotted meticulously by the Muslim perpetrators since 2012. Six incidents are remarkable considering their impacts.

One. Ramu Violence in 2012 was conducted by some Muslim fanatics and the victim was the local Buddhist community. Uttam Barua, a Buddhist man, posted a photo stepping foot on the Quran and it initiated the mob. However, the allegation was false as the photo was doctored by two Muslim men. The goal was to incite religious sentimentalism to vandalize Buddhist temples and households (“25,000 Muslim,” 2012).

Two. Pabna attack on Hindu minorities in 2013 has almost the same pattern to criminalize the local Hindus. Few fervent Muslims spread that Hindu man Rajib Saha maligned Prophet (PBUH) in a Facebook post that germinates public discontents. Interestingly, the Hindu-boy was framed scrupulously, and some culprits circulated false photocopies with rumors to incite mass hysteria before the attack (Topu, 2013).

Three. Based on the allegation that two Hindu youths insulted Prophet (PBUH) in a Facebook post, people launched another attack on Hindu minorities of Comilla in 2013. This one was also a plotted incident. Fake rumors were carried by and ignited Islamic sentiment to unleash a 20-minute damage of the Hindu localities (PTI, 2014).

Four. The biggest communal incident ever caused by digital disinformation in regards to impacts was the Nasirnagar violence in 2016. It was caused by Muslim fanatics who claimed that an illiterate Hindu fisherman, Rasraj Das, belittled Islam in Facebook with a humiliating photo. The following investigation shows that someone else than Rasraj did the job to arise communal hatred among local Muslims against Hindus (Manik & Barry, 2016).

Five. Hindus were again ravaged in Thakurpara in 2017. The accusation was similar that an illiterate Hindu man Titu Roy insulted Prophet (PBUH) in a Facebook post. However, no such post was found in his Facebook profile. Local *Imam* along with other extremists led the mayhem over surrounding Hindu villages (Badal, 2017).

Six. On 04 April 2019, thousands of Muslims protested in Narail demanding exemplary punishment for a Hindu man, Rajkumar Sen, who allegedly defamed Prophet (PBUH) on Facebook (“People demand,” 2020). It has been revealed thereupon that Ariful Islam, a Muslim *mullah*, in support of other fanatics Robiul Ahmid, Maulana Mufti Mahbub Hathazari, set the trap. First, he created a new Facebook profile using the name of the victim, and afterward, spread hate speech against Islam.

We now got three strategies of digital disinformation: creating a fake profile; doctoring digital contents; and spreading rumors. Digital disinformation often goes beyond online and cause offline mayhem. The reason for this could be to make minorities more vulnerable. These premeditated acts may let the minorities feel that they do not belong to

this society. It could make them psychological-refugees. It may also force them to leave the country: growing expatriation of Hindus could be an indicator. Further, humiliation, suppression, and silencing the minority voices in the digital public sphere might alienate them socially and psychologically. Their opinion and expression are often remained either unexpressed or denied by the dominant voice. A fear of isolation can also be responsible for this (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). Thus, in the formation of public opinion, minority voice is frequently undermined. They also filter their behavior, language, tone, and expression that make them more inferior, suppressed, and conquered (Noelle-Neumann, 1991).

CONCLUSION

To harbor zealot against neighbors may not bring peace for a society. Digital media in Bangladesh showed some promises to bridge the social gaps between individuals and communities. However, those are now becoming mirage due to the widespread negative use of cyberspace by various interest groups. Digital contents having many effectiveness are also persistently producing social unrest inciting online mobs. Discourse initiated and controlled by the dominant group in the digital public sphere is marginalizing minorities, othering the minority beliefs, and expelling the alternative voices. Religious fanaticism that governs the online religious climate is breeding the seeds of hatred against religious minorities. It eventually triggers communal violence (Minar & Naher, 2018).

The contemporary digital public sphere of Bangladesh is either undergoing a process of Islamization or turning into an Islamic digital public sphere rendering a confrontational environment there. Voices of other denominations are not prevailing in cyberspace properly. It questions the democratic nature of cyberspace as well. Furthermore, as we have seen in the earlier section, how harmful digital disinformation could be for the minorities. In such circumstances, religious minorities may find it suitable to stay either with the dominant Muslims to enjoy some power and benefits or remain silent and alienated. This situation also may create a homogenous cyberculture that would not be ideal for the collective good.

Although the pessimistic propensities and acts of sectarianism often supersede the real virtues of the digital public sphere, the instances of religious tolerance, constructive discourse, and outcomes are also ample. These might be the effective instruments to bind the social communities together. Geopolitical issues, historical legacy, and geographical position of Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and Myanmar make South Asia a sensitive zone in terms of religious confrontation. Thereby, a slight spark in the communal situation in Bangladesh even though digital media could burn down the peace and congruence of the whole region.

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