

Pragmatic Dimension of Nonviolence in Bangladesh: The Case of Shahbagh Movement

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Abstract : Nonviolence activism, in popular sense, often assumes that it is ideological and is only for total pacifists- that is, those who, for religious or moral reasons, refuse to use any form of violence under any circumstances. The pragmatic basis of nonviolence, on the other hand, suggests that it is an active struggle, which necessarily eschewed pacifist ideology, to bring social and political changes without resorting any violence or threat of violence. Following the surge of nonviolence phenomenon in Asia, Africa and most recently in the Middle East and North Africa by the name of Arab Spring, the patterns of people's political activism has caught attention to many academics and researchers. It can be argued that contemporary nonviolence is a manifestation of pragmatic action, not an act of pacifism. In Bangladesh, the contemporary events of 2013 Shahbagh protest suggests that huge civilian participation by using the methods of sit-ins, slogans, social media, is, in fact, manifestation of pragmatic nonviolent action that essentially builds on people's power and is more effective for bringing any social or political changes.

Introduction : The first half of the current decade marks a large shift in the practice of nonviolence- from ideological to pragmatic. In the last few years, popular nonviolent civil resistance in Asia, Middle East and North Africa has caught attention of many academics and political scientists to investigate the strategic logic of why nonviolence works. The dynamics of nonviolent action across the globe has changed their fashion in terms of protest style, methods and tactics. The twenty first century nonviolence phenomenon has established a new logic of political movement that essentially featured as active action, not passive. While nonviolent active resistance has engulfed across the globe, Bangladesh became part of this spectrum in 2013. The country had witnessed magnificent debut of nonviolent methods in the Shahbagh protest. People's participation in large numbers made the protest phenomenal. This unusual type of political action has unpacked the characteristics of pragmatic nonviolent action; that, it is not pacifist's act of submission, rather people united and continued to struggle until demand is met- the outcome. That is why the contemporary nonviolence is a pragmatic action to challenge against adversary or to wield power effectively.

Scholars have tended to call this new manifestation of pragmatic nonviolence as 'people's power' (Zunes, 1994) or 'unarmed insurrection'

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(Schock, 2005) that sharply differ from Gandhian pacifist nonviolence philosophy. In South Asia, the term nonviolence is popular for its moral (principled) dimension which is built upon Gandhi's pacifist philosophy of Satyagraha- "generally translated as truth force or soul-force" (Nepstad & Kurtz, 2012: xiv). Gandhian approach to nonviolence attended much academic merit due to its success in the revolutionary protest to end the British colonization. It left far reaching consequences, for that in the subsequent time of Gandhi, many South Asian countries have followed nonviolent philosophy as a tool to protest against adversary. For example, in Nepal nonviolent type of protest was observed against monarchy during 1990s (Zunes, 1994). But with the passage of time, many countries had utilized nonviolence not as philosophy but as strategy.

The philosophers of nonviolence like Gandhi had propagated the ethical and moral dimension of nonviolence. But what is exception in the twenty first century nonviolence events in Tunisia, Egypt, Honkong is that nonviolence became the tactical choice, not ideological bindings, of the people who joined in the campaign. Although the ideological dimension of nonviolence remained relevant from time being, but it is plausible to look the phenomena from tactical and strategic perspectives. Meaning that nonviolence is a strategic way to response effectively against adversary; a technique by which people who reject passivity and submission, and who see struggle as essential, can wage their conflict without violence.

The structure of this paper goes as follows: the following part will clarify philosophical and pragmatic basis of nonviolence. It will then attempt to define nonviolence as pragmatic action. To understand pragmatic nonviolence in Bangladesh, this paper will highlight the 2013 Shahbagh protest and will explain how different nonviolent tactics and methods have helped to turn an ordinary protest into a remarkable civil resistance.

Understanding Pragmatic Dimension of Nonviolence

With the pervasiveness of the nonviolence phenomenon worldwide, scholars have spent tough time in addressing what nonviolence is and what is not. It is often misinterpreted by assuming that nonviolence is ideological and is "only for total pacifists- that is, those who, for religious or moral reasons, refuse to use any form of violence under any circumstances" (Nepstad & Kurtz, 2012: xii). But Schock argued that "there is nothing passive or evasive about nonviolent resistance, as it is an active and overt means for prosecuting conflicts with opponents" (Schock, 2005: 7). Ostergaard (1974) has the view that "passive

resistance is a power struggle in which nonviolence figures as a tactic and presents a negative face. Passive resistance, when practiced skillfully, may produce favorable results, but these are likely to be limited and temporary gains, setting the stage for future conflict. When practiced unskillfully, it may, like violent action, serve simply to exacerbate the situation”.

In the changing context of the global protest dynamics, defining nonviolence as ‘passive resistance’ (Seidman, 2000: 161) is ‘misnomer’ (Schock, 2003: 207) and it often charged with lacking strategic savvy in its practice (Eddy, 2012). Therefore, nonviolence should not be limited to its pacifist conception. It is indeed, a ‘pragmatic’ action (Schock, 2005: 37) and a ‘strategy for political change’ (Chenoweth, 2013: 271). With the words of Gene Sharp, “Nonviolent action is a technique by which people who reject passivity and submission, and who see struggle as essential, can wage their conflict without violence. Nonviolent action is not an attempt to avoid or ignore conflict. It is one response to the problem of how to act effectively in politics, especially how to wield powers effectively” (Sharp, 1973: 64 cited in Weber/ Burrowess, 1991).

In majority of the successful cases, it is commonly found that the pragmatic nonviolent action has become effective in fighting against the adversary. The power of pragmatic nonviolent action brought quick result- in the Philippine, the two decades long dictatorship of Marcos ousted in just four days of active nonviolent resistance, in Ukraine orange revolution brought to an end of corrupt regime in less than two months, the nonviolent strategic action led to the removal of long term dictatorships in Tunisia and Egypt in a matter of weeks (Chenoweth 2013; Nepstad and Kurtz, 2012). In the contemporary nonviolence phenomenon, a tide of youth’s mobilization has been remarkable to demand political change (Nikolayenko, 2012). All day long sit-in, demonstration by singing patriotic song, reciting revolutionary poems, building human chains- all these acts from non-institutionalized channels imply the vibrant manifestations of the pragmatic action, not the pacifist’s or principled.

Therefore, this paper proposed to define nonviolence as pragmatic action for bringing political change. In line with Chenoweth & Stephan (2011: 12); McCarthy & Kruegler (1993: 3); Sharp (2005: 247) and Schock (2005: 6), the definition of the pragmatic nonviolent action can be further interpreted as: i) it is an active, not a passive approach to influence the course and outcome of any given conflict; ii) it is a distinct type of political activity which is based on the active participation and predominantly nonviolent methods- protest and persuasion, noncooperation, and nonviolent intervention; iii) it is a strategic tool to

protesting, resisting and intervening and should not be compromised with conflict resolution strategies- negotiation and mediation; iv) pragmatic nonviolent action is non-institutional, operates outside the normal political channels; v) unlike its name, the nonviolent action does not necessarily involve physical violence or the threat of physical violence and it involves in the activity of the collective pursuit of social or political objectives.

2013 Shahbagh Protest as Pragmatic Nonviolent Action

Bangladesh witnessed the exploration of people's power during 2013 Shahbagh protest¹ which was directed in support of capital punishment of alleged war criminals of the country. The initial action of the protest was very organized and confined within the nonviolent methods of sit-ins, slogans, candle light vigil etc.; refraining from physical coercion. The nonviolent appeal of the protest immediately attracted large number of people from different segments of people who had grievances against the alleged war criminals and who shouted for a fresh start in politics. It bears the testimony that pragmatic nonviolent action has huge potentials to pursue the demand for justice and political change.

As an exemplary pragmatic nonviolence, the 2013 Shahbagh protest is relevant in a sense that it resembled with that of civil resistance of Tahrir Square in Egypt, the umbrella revolution in Hong Kong in terms of protest style, tactics and methods. Undoubtedly, the Shahbagh officials could utilize maximum potentials of youth. The methods of sit-in, singing, mural drawing, speeches, 3 minutes silence, candle light march, banners, posters, and displayed communications, boycott- all are very much pragmatic practice of nonviolence, at the same time it was effective. Moral strength plus the violence free space actually facilitated channels for the people to make the protest more strategic. In such strategic nonviolent action, large number of participation, tactical diversity in the participation, the spirit of youth and their persistency matters in getting effective result.

¹ The Shahbagh movement or the Shahbagh protest implies the similar meaning in this article. Back in February 5, 2013, a protest was launched to demand capital punishment of alleged war criminals of the country. Mass people mobilized centering at Shahbagh square- a busy intersection of the capital city Dhaka. The protest gained lot of national and international attention and commonly dubbed as Shahbagh movement in the political history.

What is important to note that in such occurrences of nonviolence there is little option for maintaining pacifism. Pacifist might seek compromise at the expense of overt struggle, but pragmatic nonviolence, as this paper suggests, only follow active struggle without resorting any violence or threat of violence and it could lead effective result. Chenoweth & Stephan (2011) have explored the strategic effectiveness of the pragmatic nonviolent campaigns using aggregate data on major nonviolent and violent resistance campaigns from 1900 to 2006. They came up with the result that the nonviolent campaigns have achieved success 53 percent of the time, compared with 26 percent for the violent resistance campaigns. The reason for this success according to Chenoweth and Stephan,

“Nonviolent campaign facilitate the active participation of many more people than violent campaign, thereby broadening the base of resistance and raising the costs to opponents of maintaining the status quo. The mass civilian participation in a nonviolent campaign is a more likely to backfire in the face of repression, encourage loyalty shifts among regime supporters, and provide resistance leaders with a more diverse menu of tactical and strategic choices” (ibid: 11).

In such a situation, nonviolence could be people's only strategic choice to advance their demands against opponents or power and authority.

The same had happened in the Shahbagh protest onset. The protest organizers, the Bloggers and Online Activists Network (BOAN) called for a protest against the court verdict which did not satisfy the new generation youths who long waited to bring *razakars*² to justice. The initial action of the protest was very organized and confined within the nonviolent methods of sit-ins, slogans, candle light vigil etc.; refraining from physical coercion. This strategy of nonviolence immediately attracted the large number of people from different backgrounds (Habib, 2013) which made Shahbagh a strategic platform.

Looking beyond the practice of the stereotype political action in Bangladesh, the Shahbagh case demonstrates distinctiveness in methods and tactics. The protest had run through the non-institutionalized

² In Bangladesh, the war criminals are commonly known as ‘Razakars’ who colluded with Pakistani army during the 1971 liberation war. Those *razakars* mostly belonged to the Islamist party Jamaat- e- Islam, in short Jamaat. They collaborated with the Pakistani military force and allegedly killed the secular Bengali Muslims, Hindus, and the intelligentsia, raped women, destroyed infrastructure and forced thousands to flee their homes.

channels. It was operated by the activists from all segments of the society including school going and university students, professionals, artists, activists, civil society spokesman, veteran freedom fighters, are to mention of the few. Above all, Bangladesh saw the astounding participation of all classes of people in the protest which is very much resemble to recent year's civil resistance in different countries in the world.

The regular political actions which are organized by different political parties hardly see people's response with such zeal and magnetic passion as had happened at the Shahbagh protest. New York Times' Jim Yardley argued "protests and strikes, common in Dhaka, are often coordinated and organized by political parties. But the Shahbagh protests, as the demonstrations over the verdict have come to be known, were organized by bloggers and have attracted poets, artists, social activists and untold numbers of other citizens" (Yardley, 2013).

The pragmatic nonviolent approach which was constructively employed at the Shahbagh protest is undoubtedly a twenty first century addition of nonviolence. Apart from using the technological communications in the protest, the three minutes silence of all government and semi-government establishments, earth drawing, candle lighting etc. (The Daily Star, 2013) are, in fact, some of the examples of the pragmatic nonviolent tactics. The protest strategy of the Shahbagh participants can not, however, be overlooked. The tactical diversity became the boon of the protest. The mass gatherings became a centre of innovation where the young people exercised their diverse talents right from their own position. Different types of nonviolent tactics were employed following different segments. It is found that the nonviolent protest and persuasion was significant for the greater mobilization. The protest events like singing song, holding colorful banners, festoons, candle vigil etc. highly attracted people. Some methods of this segment including three minutes silence, road drawing were quite exceptional events; not usually seen in the courses of political protest in Bangladesh. The low barriers of physical participation indeed helped participants to carry out different methods of this segment.

Another uniqueness of the Shahbagh protest is its strategic characters. It made the claim true of the protagonist of nonviolent action theorists that pragmatic nonviolent action is a weapon of the strong, for the active supporters. However, the participants of the Shahbagh protest were maximum of youth, were morally strong and strategically smart. They were persistent to win their demand, showed moral courage, commitment and their subtle potency to handle various nonviolent methods of struggle that transcended all the previous scores of political

action in Bangladesh. The protestors' strategic characters- their skill and instant wit in the art of resisting without resorting any violence- could easily tame any oppressive opponents, or even political repression. This strategic dimension of nonviolence of the Shahbagh protest made the political power subservient to the people's power. It redefined the power of action and made believe to the politicians that power does not flow from the top downward. The boon of power stems from the human relationships, as expressed in the people's collective action, from the ordinary people to upward. The Shahbagh protestors tried to tap this latent potential of immense forceful people's power through contentious collective political action.

Conclusion

The argument above explicated the pragmatic dimension of nonviolent action Bangladesh encountered for the first time in history. The 2013 Shahbagh episode has showed us two important lessons: how to wield powers effectively through nonviolent way and how to act effectively in politics without resorting violence. Pragmatic dimension of nonviolence was undoubtedly a good consideration of people who completely tends to avoid violence in the act of resistance during Shahbagh protest. When a pool of people comes to join in any collective action motivated by same spirit, then it would turn into a human sea and would be called people's power. The effective use of such people's power is the boon of pragmatic nonviolence. The 2013 Shahbagh protest in Bangladesh accorded such merit to be recognized as pragmatic nonviolence at the dawn of twenty first century.

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