

Democratising force of ICT

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The whole world is heartrending to establish human rights, peace and happiness, fighting against the degradation of human values. Majority access to basic information and people's participation are the precondition for human rights development and millennium targets. ICT has potentiality to serve as a democratising force. It provides public access to information, builds a virtual space for community gathering and grassroots development for repression, propaganda and enforces authoritarian control, particularly for the marginalised community. ICT, specially Internet, used in collaboration with human rights activism, creates virtual alternative tunnels for the free flow of uncensored information within and out of country. Global information systems, Internet as well as ICTs have opened up the golden gate for human rights promotion in Bangladesh.

It is proved that only one responsible website can change the situation dramatically by encouraging, awakening and making people sensitive to participation for protecting the violence and human rights abuses. It gives continuous objective education and awareness both to the defenders and offenders. Such type of effective and popular portal or website has not yet been launched in Bangladesh. The society is still very reluctant in development of human rights and power of people's participation. Maximum people have no clear concept or interest about the rights, reality and participation although Bangladesh has two great examples of participation and success; one is language movement in 1952 and another is liberation war in 1971.

Because of excessive focus on personal matters and benefits; the extreme individualism, selfishness, corruption, dogmatism, violence (both visible and invisible) are increasing dangerously in Bangladesh. People

are becoming separated to separate, divided to divide. This is the time to inform and educate the people about rights and power of participation by grasping the new media opportunities. ICTs, particularly the Internet and multimedia, can play most important role for promotion of human rights.

The history of Internet in Bangladesh is young, only 10 years old. In April 1994, from Netherlands, off-line e-mail system was started and in June 1996, first ISP was set up in Bangladesh. With low bandwidth and high price limitations also, Internet and mobile telecommunication are gaining popularity since 2000. But the access is limited up to certain level in urban areas only. Majority of the rural people don't have access or involvement with this powerful media. Because of illiteracy, poverty and lack of awareness, villagers cannot even read newspapers. They totally depend on the centralised radio, television or verbally transmitted news and information which are mostly contaminated by the heralds.

The positive sign is that the national policy on ICT declaration and unprecedented youth participation in ICT fields have created great opportunity for social change by making community based ICT initiatives a reality.

Challenges and opportunity

According to national ICT policy, 'Bangladesh is committed to provide the Internet facility which will be extended to all the district headquarters and subsequently to its adjacent area up to 'upzila' (sub-district) levels. Internet will be provided to the educational institutions and libraries. To ensure public access to information, cyber kiosks will be set up in all post offices, union complex and 'upzila' complex...'. But the implementation is still in file and has not been reflected even in the national budget 2005.

Though our target is to ensure nationwide Internet connectivity and ICT infrastructure within 2006, but we have not yet been able to ensure minimum rural connectivity.

Presently Bangladesh has more than 80 ISPs. But there is no VISP (Village Internet Service Provider) who will be responsible for majority people. The ICT service providers are focusing predominantly on the city area and are not interested in the village, even though 80% population of the country live in villages. All are reluctant with the prejudice that village is not a profitable region; but there are successful examples of Grameen Phone's rural telecommunication initiative.

Low percentage of education and computer penetration, lack of Bangla interface, software and community based ICT as well as lack of proper ICT leadership have led to low Internet penetration in rural areas. The cost of computer, which is approximately equal to middle class farmers' annual crop values, and more than 6 months salary of a middle income group person is another barrier. The crude reality is that more than 90% people do not know yet what is Internet, even haven't seen a computer.

Within these barriers also, the use of ICT is increasing in the human rights and development arenas of Bangladesh, especially by the youth leaders, journalists and media activists. The global information system is affecting positively towards behavioural change and practices. But the spirit of information and consciousness have not yet touched the heads of the society as it is needed.

Initiatives and success

Using Internet as a tool of social activism started in Bangladesh from the online forum 'Alochona' and webzine, 'Meghbartha'. 'Meghbartha' (www.meghbartha.org) covers every aspect of the state, society and people of different class, gender, caste, nationality and group since its inception in October 1999.

'Alochona' (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/alochona>) introduces itself as the first human rights web portal in Bangladesh. It was in the month of February, back in 1998, when the idea of 'Alochona' was first proposed in the chat email list 'ADDA'. 'Alochona's' goal was to provide voice to Bangladeshis worldwide to discuss serious issues and news using the Internet. Finally, on June 11, 1998 'Alochona' (<http://www.alochona.org>) was launched with 44 interested subscribers from the United States, United Kingdom, and

Bangladesh. Hosted from a laptop using the Internet resources in Dhaka, 'Alochona' was the first moderated forum for Bangladeshis.

'Banglarights.net' (www.banglarights.net) was launched in February 2001 with the collaboration of the British Council and Drik. It is the outcome of a successful workshop on 'Effective use of the media and the Internet to promote human rights'. The author was involved with this initiative as site designer and online editor (2001-2004). It is an independent platform for media professionals and human rights activists who believe in a society respectful of the rights of all its members.

The second initiative, 'Drishtipat' (www.drishtipat.org) was taken in November, 2001 from USA. It is a non-profit, non-political expatriate Bangladeshi organisation, committed to safeguarding every individual's basic democratic rights, including freedom of expression, and is opposed to any and all kinds of human rights abuses in Bangladesh. This website is intended for disseminating information about the state of human rights and social change in Bangladesh, and to discuss potential campaigns. 'Drishtipat' and its local chapters have undertaken numerous campaigns every year since its inception in 2001.

'Mukto-mona' (www.mukto-mona.com) and 'Uttorshuri' are also famous for their progressive online activism in favour of human rights development. 'Mukto-mona' is a loose Internet congregation of secularists, freethinkers, rationalists, skeptics and humanists of mainly Bengali and South Asian origin scattered across the globe against all kinds of social injustices. And the online discussion forum 'Uttorshuri' (www.uttorshuri.net) is an Internet based socio-cultural network dedicated to the Bangla speaking people from around the world, including Bangladesh and West Bengal of India.

Including the Daily Star (www.thedailystar.net), 'Prothom Alo' (<http://www.prothom-alo.net>), etc., all popular national newspapers which are now available online, and are providing everyday human rights news and situation. The Daily Star regularly publishes a special chapter on human rights, 'Law and Our Rights' (www.thedailystar.net/law). Beside these, personal mailing list 'Shahidul News' and 'Shobak News' (www.shobak.org) are acting as the most popular human rights list servers. 'Shobak' is famous for its alternative views and antiwar activities. The 'Shahidul News' (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/shahidulnews>) is initiated by photographer Shahidul Alam for announcements on media and human rights related issues, with a specific emphasis on photography.

'Manusher Jonno' (www.manusher.org) and 'Shushashoner Jonno', 'Procharavijan - SUPRO' (www.supro.org) are prominent human rights networks in Bangladesh. Moreover, BRAC (www.brac.net), 'Proshika' (www.proshika.org), 'Ain O Shalik Kendro' (www.askbd.org) and SEHD (www.sehd.org) and 'Bangladesh Shishu Odhikar Forum' (www.bsafchild.org), Work for a Better Bangladesh (WBB) (www.wbbtrust.org), VOICE (www.voicebd.org) are doing good job for human rights development. Few of them regularly publish the updated news, human rights reports and observations online.

Among NGOs, Young Power in Social Action (YPSA) (www.ypsa.org) has established the country's first community multimedia centre. The Bangladesh NGOs Network for Radio and Communication (BNNRC) (www.bnnrc.net) is promoting community radio and doing advocacy.



Credit: Poffet Christian

Nowadays, most of all Dhaka based human rights organisations have websites and Internet connectivity which increase human rights awareness and networking. But more than 2000 grassroots organisations and NGOs don't have minimum ICT capacity and minimum updates of information about contemporary human rights movement of the world. Without them, it is impossible to establish nationwide human rights and the desired peaceful information society. UnnayanNet (www.unnayan.net) is providing web site design and ICT capacity building training to grassroots human rights and development organisations in order to give the ownership of modern information and technology to majority of the people.

Along with local organisations, international human rights agency and the organisations such as Amnesty International, the Committee Protect Journalists (CPJ), Human Rights Watch, Transparency International are also playing important role through ICT for human rights promotion in Bangladesh.

ICT as the action media

In remote villages, Internet facility is not available, but there are NGO activities. To establish 'Human rights multimedia resource centre' in every village nationwide, large number of NGOs network can play an important role. Since 2001, the use of ICT tools has increased dramatically in Dhaka as well as in major districts and divisional cities. More than 90% cyber and ICT businesses are run successfully by young ICT entrepreneurs. It is proved that the youth entrepreneurship and youth participation can make ICT as action media for human rights and aspects of information society promotion. In context of Bangladesh, the following recommendations can be effective for human rights promotion through ICTs -

- Use of ICTs as human rights advocacy tools for strengthening the virtual presence and networking capacities of human rights organisations;
- Use of website, blog, online forum, mailing list for online campaign, mobilisation and urgent news dissemination;
- Promotion of online journalism and human rights activism for strengthening civil society involvement and people participation;
- Establish community based human rights multimedia resource centre 'InfoCentre' and 'InfoBooth' fixed with one computer (in advanced cases, multimedia computer/touch screen can be used) in every village as an initiative of NGO or local community organisations;



Women participation in rural community meeting Credit: Poffet Christian

- Promote the use of multimedia local content, interactive legal quiz on declarations and human rights, audio-visual presentation in public place and mass media.;
- 24 hours 'hot line', 'free dial', SMS for reporting human rights violations can be effective for instant communication, help against abuse and proper treatment;
- Promote decentralised community radio project which can be effective for making social awareness on the local issues;
- Compulsory ICT and human rights education in schools can give institutionalisation of the human rights discourse.

Searching the new dimension

The establishment of VISP and community human rights media resource centre/booth as well as nationwide Internet access can ensure the ownership of modern information and technology for the majority rural poor which can be advanced in Bangladesh with a jump for human rights promotion and development.

The intolerance and violence against women and minorities makes tension in Bangladesh. There is need to educate, involve and inspire the people including religious community. The author has a dear vision to see the priests of Bangladesh as Internet users, and establishment of community multimedia/ cyber center/Info-Centre in religious institutes, like mosques, madrasahs, temples, pagodas, etc. in Bangladesh. It is needed to inform the masses that human rights means the surety of qualitative and dignified lives which is the consequence of people's participation, contribution and awareness. ■

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