

Queer Blogs and Digital Archives: A Tactical Shift towards Queer Utopia in Bangladesh

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In the Summer of 2019, a particular name was making its rounds in the LGBTQIA+ community of Bangladesh. The name was of a newly formed archival website, *Mondro*, created primarily as a queer literary digital archive and blogging platform for LGBTQIA+ subjects in a country that criminalizes people with non-normative sexual orientations and transgender identities through social stigmatization and constitutional law.¹ The hateful rendering of LGBTQIA+ subjects in the nation-state's legislation, law enforcement, religious ideologies, popular media and culture, public spheres, and society meant that such an archive needed to function by remaining hidden from the government and the public. Functioning as a not-for-profit, volunteer-run cultural organization, *Mondro* started as a blog-posting website with only three contributors. Within two and half years the site has grown into the country's largest queer literary archive and publishing platform, with forty-five volunteers currently working in the areas of publication, research, cultural text and performance archival, and social media outreach. In addition to functioning as an archival and blogging website, *Mondro* also supports LGBTQIA+ poets, performers, writers, and thinkers from all over Bangladesh, by arranging mentorship workshops that range from topics on mental health, gender and sexuality-based violence and trauma, and suicide prevention. In this essay, however, my objective is not only to describe *Mondro's* vital role in community organizing and queer curation in Bangladesh, but also to analyze how the queer blogging and archival website challenges traditional blogging platforms in the country through counter-

public formation.² I argue that by functioning as a digital counter-space that promotes solidarity and affective communication between queer publics and their allies, *Mondro* continues to operate as both reminder of and resistance to the dominant cissexism and heteronormative ideology rampant in traditional blogging communities and the Bangladeshi digital platforms writ large. As queer subjects begin to adapt to oppressive digital networks and platforms, queer blogs such as *Mondro* continue to provide an avenue to tactically challenge established community blogs by uncovering their oppressive logics.

Blogging emerged as a form of digital media in Bangladesh in 2005 with the inception of *Somewhere in... blog*, the first Bangladeshi blogging platform. Since then, blog communication has established itself as one of the most significant alternative media forms in Bangladesh, challenging mainstream and popular media production and raising questions around hegemonic discourses upheld by the political and religious institutions of power.³ Community blogging functions as one of Bangladesh's primary platforms for digital resistance and community organizing against social inequalities and oppressive government policies, as seen many times over the years during local and national uprisings such as the BDR Mutiny in 2009, the Shahbagh Mass Protests in 2013, and the Student protests against Tax on Education in 2015. In these sociopolitical movements, community blogging has played crucial roles for activism as bloggers functioned as citizen journalists and active protesters both online and offline. Through such blogger engagements and activism, the Bangladeshi blogosphere gained a reputation for being liberal, unbiased, pro-nationalist, and most importantly, progressive. Let us take the role bloggers have played during the BDR Mutiny as an example. In late February 2009, the blogging community made the first report of the BDR Mutiny, when a section of the paramilitary force for the nation's border protection rebelled and assumed control over their headquarters in Palkhana, Dhaka, killing fifty-six other army officers and holding their families hostage in the process. Fahmidul Haq, in his chapter on citizen journalists and the Bangla blog community in *Bangladesh's Changing Mediascape*, outlines how a blogger named Onrino from the *Somewhere in... blog* community reported on the BDR tragedy almost instantaneously.⁴ Onrino's one-sentence blog post read, "Since the morning exchange of fires is heard inside BDR," and this created a web of communications both inside and outside the blogging community ensuring public engagement against the mutiny. While law enforcement agencies worked hard to bring the situation under control, the

public's demands and protests led to the eventual surrender of the mutineers on the fourth day.

The Bangladeshi blogging community and blog practices, in comparison to traditional forms of mass-media, were increasingly seen as progressive, liberal, and the nation's primary platform for digital resistance against social, cultural, and political oppression. Another example of such resistance was the blogging community's contribution during the Shahbagh Mass Protests in 2013. The Shahbagh Protests, named after the neighborhood of Shahbagh within the city of Dhaka, were mass public demonstrations carried out to force the government to bring the war criminals from Bangladesh's 1971 Independence War to justice. The pro-nationalist public demonstrations demanded the trials of a handful of powerful political leaders who had climbed into positions of political power after the independence of Bangladesh. These political leaders had originally worked against the nation's independence due to their allegiance to former West Pakistan, commanding anti-independence groups during the 1971 war for Bangladesh's freedom and were responsible for the deaths of numerous Bengali freedom fighters and pro-liberation nationalists and intellectuals during the time. These leaders belonged to a political party called the Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh which is fundamentally the post-independence name of Jamaat-e-Islami Pakistan, a political party that was responsible for war atrocities during 1971. Interestingly, the political ideology of the Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh depends on Islamist Sharia'a law and the ultimate creation of a Bangladeshi Islamic State. The opposition against such a political party began to grow as the progressive and secular publics of the country started to engage in producing pro-nationalist and secular narratives primarily through blogging websites. These events are aptly recorded in Fahmidul Huq's study on Bangladeshi blogs, in which he analyzes the importance of bloggers in the movement towards bringing war criminals to justice during the Shahbag Protests of 2013. Focusing on how blog writers participate and contribute to the politics of nation-building, Huq writes in his essay:

In contemporary Bangladesh bringing war criminals to trial is a big political issue and bloggers have joined the row. They have created a mass campaign of protests against the alleged war criminals, collecting hundreds of thousands of signatures to pressurize the government into bringing the war criminals to trial. Bloggers worked for this in the real world and through their blogs. Two blog community authorities actively supported this program by opening a

corner in the front page of the blog devoted to bringing the alleged criminals to justice.⁵

These two examples suggest that the Bangladeshi blogging community in general has consistently been progressive and reactionary in the face of social and political oppressions and injustices. Much of these protests and activism can be better understood by how the blogging community engages in community blogging rather than in isolation. In other words, while the medium of the blog is mostly associated with individual people in the contemporary digital mediascape—where each digital blogspace works as a personal scope for mediated expression—in the context of Bangladesh, blogging always eventuated in the form of a community.⁶ Any Bangladeshi blogger who wishes to partake in blogging is first required to be a member of a blogging community like *Somewhere in... blog*, *Sachalayatan*, or *Amarblog*. This process does not mean that blogging websites based on individual people cannot exist in Bangladesh, but it simply suggests that most bloggers have a membership in at least one of the aforementioned digital blogging websites as their primary engagement in blogging. Additionally, already being a part of a blogging community opens up the possibilities of certain kinds of publicness based on blog discourse and affect, and in times of community organizing and protests, such familiarities between community members definitely help. However, despite being equipped with key foundations of digital resistance and community activism, and historically functioning as a medium of confrontation with oppressive political establishments and religious ideologies, the Bangladeshi blog-publics remain selectively unconcerned at the vitriolic representation and brutal treatment of queer subjects all over the nation-state. Such was the case when, in 2014, the LGBTQIA+ community officially came out in public. Additionally, queer people were made subject to online hate speech and constant abuse, even within the blogging community. It became increasingly obvious that the progressive and secular blog-publics of the Bangladeshi blogging community held specific reservations about which oppressions they would protest, and which ones they would allow to continue.

The LGBTQIA+ movement in Bangladesh was first visible in 2014 when Bangladeshi LGBTQIA+ rights activists Xulhaz Mannan, Mahbub Rabbi, and Ali Asgar organized the country's first Pride Rally on 14 April 2014, the first day of the Bengali New Year, 1421.⁷ Queer activism may not have begun with this movement, but it demanded visibility and acknowledgement from the government and the general people, for the first time in the nation's history.

Almost a hundred LGBTQIA+ people and allies took part in a rainbow-themed procession on the morning of 14 April as the assembly walked from the Fine Arts Building in Dhaka University to the Intercontinental Hotel on Minto Road. The objective was clear: abolish Section 377 of the Bangladesh Penal Code—the legislation that deems diverse sexual orientations and acts as illegal and punishable by a life sentence or even death—and establish the basic human right to love. The first wave of LGBTQIA+ rights activism, as I will henceforth address this, continued through 2015 with the organization of the second Pride Rally despite violent reactions from both the nationalist ruling party and the country’s homophobic and transphobic religious institutions. Nevertheless, severe backlash and life-threatening circumstances created by religious extremist groups like Ansarulla Bangla Team (ABT), an Islamic extremist organization responsible for the death of many secular Bangladeshi blog writers, and the antipathy of government and law enforcement agencies resulted in the cancellation of the third Pride Rally in 2016. The organizers and anyone related to the Pride Rallies received death threats and feared for their lives. Amidst the fear, Xulhaz Mannan and the other founders of the LGBTQIA+ organization *Roopban* stopped organizing physically and moved online. The *Roopban* magazine that complemented the formation of the organization also ceased print.⁸ On 25 April 2016, key Bangladeshi LGBTQIA+ movement founders Xulhaz Mannan and Mahbub Rabbi were murdered in their own apartments in Dhaka by armed assailants who later identified themselves as members of an Islamic extremist group called Ansar-al Islam.⁹ With the death of prominent LGBTQIA+ rights leaders, the *Roopban* human rights organization ceased to operate in Bangladesh, and its organizational members either went into hiding or left the country entirely under conditions of fatal danger.¹⁰



Figure 1. Pride Rally, 2014

Interestingly, the continuous assault on and oppression of queer subjects after 2014, including the deaths of Xulhaz Mannan and Mahabub Rabbi, and the forced migration of many LGBTQIA+ people and allies like Ali Asgar—who was forced to leave Bangladesh for the United States for fear of being killed—was never protested in the traditional Bangladeshi blogosphere. Extreme circumstances such as public shaming, social isolation, death threats, and even lynching led the queer population to become anonymous in the virtual worlds of social media, blogs, and digital archives. However, their efforts to protest through anonymous blog writing also proved futile as their posts were bombarded with hateful comments and later deleted by the blog administrators. The first wave of the LGBTQIA+ movement in Bangladesh would therefore face a grim setback. As one queer activist (whom I will call Robin), explains in an interview with me, this setback was also due to the rising number of homophobic and transphobic publics in the Bangladeshi networked media.¹¹ Robin suggests that 2014—which for the LGBTQIA+ community was when anti-queer violence began to reach its peak in Bangladesh—was also when the ruling political party Bangladesh Awami League got reelected to power based partly on the promises made during its previous term (2008–2014) around a digital revolution that assured high-speed networked communication services for all.¹² Networked and digital media infrastructures saw a rapid growth in the years leading up to 2014,

and more people than ever had access to the Internet and associated networked media services. This growth had profound implications on public communication, information dissemination, and more specifically, exacerbated institutional and ideological control over permissible sexual identities and practices. The networked mediascape of Bangladesh, including micro-blogging and social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, was frequented by the general homophobic and transphobic publics, who, primarily indoctrinated in religious (in most cases Islamist) beliefs, see non-normative sexual identities and practices as prohibited not only by religion, but also the country's legislation. These publics particularly affected the blogging communities, and as more people joined every day, Bangladeshi blogs started losing their initial identity as platforms that fought for justice and equity, and simply became another space for digital communication.¹³ This process became increasingly evident when queer people in these networked spaces were the subjects of extreme hate, repulsive language, and murder threats. Community blogs that once functioned as domains of sociocultural movements against systems of social oppression now either turned against queer subjects or remained silent in response to their everyday oppression. Such online hate and aggression is further legitimized by the state, who participates in systemic and structural violence against LGBTQIA+ individuals by not recognizing their socio-cultural existence or constitutional rights.¹⁴ It became increasingly clear to the queer population of the country that the publics of the blogosphere made a clear distinction between the rights of queer and non-queer subjects. Bloggers whose strong efforts have led to popular and political uprisings such as the Shahbagh Mass Protests in 2013, have seemingly forgotten how to raise their voices against queer oppression. Additionally, certain blog chapters that focus on the oppression and struggles of women in Bangladesh remarkably kept quiet on the issue of queer rights. Scholars have mentioned that specific digital spaces may work as safe options for feminists and their allies to raise and discuss social problems and solutions.¹⁵ While there are several women's rights organizations in Bangladesh—from the women's wings of political parties to non-government organizations (NGOs) such as Naripokkho, Steps Towards Development, Adhunikā, and Ain o Salish Kendro (ASK) that are active in online networks—it is interesting to note how none of these progressive organizations advocate for queer rights in Bangladesh, despite resisting Islamic fundamentalist movements.¹⁶ Clearly, there is a lack of what Audre Lorde calls "systems of shared support" as the most vocal feminist groups in Bangladesh continue to downplay the importance of

intersectionality when it comes to the dehumanization of marginal LGBTQIA+ communities.¹⁷

Queer subjects in Bangladesh quickly realized the importance of a digital counter-space that anti-queer networked publics in general would not frequent. The digital queer counterspace *Mondro* emerged out of the need to provide digital safe spaces for queer subjects and allies to communicate, and to ensure the preservation of the knowledges, experiences, and creative expressions of the Bangladeshi queer community. This shift in modality from public digital platforms such as community blogs to more secluded forms of online counter-spaces that deliberately remain hidden is crucial in reorienting the project of queer utopia in Bangladesh towards a more sustainable future. In a nation-state where the dominant public ideology results in violence towards queer subjects, it is important to keep employing tactics that reconsider publicness until conditions are more suitable for queer subjects.¹⁸ Alternate blogging and archival websites not only facilitate a digital space for queer counter-publics to engage in critical and creative expressions, but they do so without having to experience the fear of being seen. *Mondro* again provides a great example. Each of its writers and contributors write under pseudonyms such as “living large in little boxes” or “joker of Hamelin” (translated from Bangla *Hameliner Hashiwala*). Blog writing under such anonymity allows for the safety of these queer subjects, which the nation-state has failed to provide. Additionally, working under the conditions of anonymity allows for the Bangladeshi queer community to function as what Catherine Squires calls “enclave publics,” a strategic mobilizing of counter-publics that are more concealed and do not typically engage with the dominant publics in any manner, for their larger goal is to ensure the safety of their public sphere that is often under intense aggression and oppression from other dominant groups.¹⁹ *Mondro*, a Bengali word that roughly translates to a “deep calling or a sound from within that is difficult to hear from the outside,” functions specifically as a platform for Bengali queer enclave publics, hidden from the homophobic and transphobic dominant publics in Bangladesh with no intentions to become publicly available or visible in the near future. Additionally, over the last couple of years, *Mondro* published several works of literature in print. These include the inaugural non-fiction collection on LGBTQIA+ issues in Bangladesh titled *Thahor*, a collection of LGBTQIA+ short stories *Shomaroor*, and an anthology of indigenous LGBTQIA+ literature in Bangladesh titled *Ludong*. These are only made available to the LGBTQIA+ community and allies. It is also important to focus on how *Mondro* identifies itself and evaluates its mission to truly

understand its queer world-making project in Bangladesh. On the site, *Mondro* identifies its community as the queer people in Bangladesh whose “existence is denied, voices are silenced, and our organizers are murdered.”²⁰ It states its mission is “to uplift queer voices and promote histories of gender and sexual diversity in Bangladesh in order to sensitize contemporary society.” It is crucial to note that the focus on the histories of queerness in Bangladesh is a significant turn towards celebrating practices and identities of gender and sexually diverse subjects within Bangladesh that seeks to reclaim queerness not as something that has been imported from the West, but that has always already been a significant practice within the Bengali sociocultural fabric that expands beyond the South Asian subcontinent. In this sense, *Mondro* reconceptualizes queerness within a far-reaching framework of multiple yet connected historical references and cultural interpretations that may open up new ways of understanding sociocultural, political, and religious narratives and discourses originating from the region. *Mondro*’s use of culturally appropriate imagery and designs that uphold various aesthetics of Bengali culture and history can also be interpreted as a deliberate move towards constructing publics through design processes.²¹



Figure 2. *Mondro*’s use of Cultural Imagery

The emergence of queer blogging communities such as *Mondro* not only demarcates a tactical shift from traditional blogging communities that are now oppressive towards queer subjects in Bangladesh, but it also clearly points to the beginning of a second wave of queer activism in Bangladesh and lays the foundations for a possible queer utopia when certain conditions are achieved. With political and religious ideologies extremely adversative towards queer rights, identities, and existences in the real world, digital communities like *Mondro* provide ways to continue the conversations

through creative expression, affective intimacies, queer archiving, and curation in the present, and conditioning and constructing publics for the future.²² However, it is important to realize that queerness in the context of Bangladesh and Bengali culture is an extremely complex concern. At the least, networked queer activism, to achieve the conditions of queer utopia in Bangladesh, as discussed in this essay, requires an awareness of the dangers of immediately attempting radical shifts and policy alterations in this part of the world. At the same time, activists need to remain hopeful and suggestive of tactical practices that would help set long-term egalitarian conditions and equitable futures.

Notes

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- 17 Azim, “Feminist Struggles in Bangladesh,” 194–197.
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