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RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE POLITICAL PROTEST: THE CASE OF 'SHAHBAGH MOVEMENT'.

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Manuscript Info	*Abstract*
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In the twenty first century, the social media as a powerful tool has connected people from every walk of life around the world. This medium is no longer just used for communicating with friends and family rather it is creating a bridge among people living in the farthest corners of the globe. This study examines the influence of social media in terms galvanizing public support to organize a political protest that took place in Shahbagh, Bangladesh. While a plethora of literature have studied the massive impacts of the movement in the wider society but the role of social media in triggering the protest is largely missing. By applying the strength of weak-ties theory propounded by Granovetter, this paper argues that the popular social media platform like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube played a key role in terms of building the micro–macro bridges among the public that ultimately fostered social mobilization and hence, collective action for social movement.

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Introduction:-

The movements in Iran, Middle East and North African (MENA) countries, USA, Iceland, Spain, more recently in Hong Kong and relatively less known Shahbagh in Bangladesh gives us significant insights into the role of social media in organizing political protest. It is widely believed that social media played a vital role in galvanizing public support in all these instances. It acted as a useful tool to create shared awareness among the people and carry out protests and uprisings. Mediated by social media, most movements drew long sustaining popular support for their dedicated cause and demands.

As reviewed, the literature provides a mixed view of the social media's role in accelerating socially driven mass movements. While broader recognition of such correlation seems generally to exist, disagreements appear as result of multiple interpretation of what the nature of that correlation could be. This article takes note of the multidimensional aspects of interpretation and ontologically recognizes the interrelationship between social media and social movements.

On 5 February 2013, Bangladesh experienced a new kind of protest movement which was initially initiated beyond the party political context. The protestors gathered at the Shahbagh intersection of the Dhaka city with the demand to ensure capital punishment for the war crimes committed during the independence war against Pakistan in 1971. The later days saw thousands of people actively joined in while others showed solidarity from abroad. Though the

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high speed of the movement falls sharply within two or three weeks, but its impact is still strongly visible in the political arena. The movement has polarized the whole society into multiple streams which gives birth to diverse views about the intention and logic behind the movement.

Experts claim that social media and the online young bloggers played the key role in mobilizing and sustaining the protest. In contrast, others believe that though social media was used as a useful tool, but it was the grievance within the people, mainstream media's sustained campaign and strong ties among a clique of the group helped to bring people in the street. Keeping those debates in mind, this article examines the correlation between social media and social movements in the context of Shahbagh protest in light of the strength of the weak-ties theory propounded by Granovetter (1973, 1983). The theory's emphasis on the weak ties' framework helps us to understand the micro–macro bridges that foster social mobilization and hence, collective action for social movement.

However, the aim of this inquiry is not to undermine or highlight the role what other types of network and ties did in Shahbagh movement; the purpose rather is to examine the degree of influence the social media had through weak ties in the mobilization of people to the Shahbagh intersection.

Statement of the Problem and Research Question
In Bangladesh, the public discussion on the role of social media in triggering political protest has grown significantly in recent years. Especially, after the protest in Shahbagh, experts are increasingly debating and trying to understand how the bloggers could manage to influence such a large section of the population with just a laptop and an internet modem. The activists' creative ways of using social networks, the popularity of little known websites and Facebook pages as a source of information, reaction and often overreaction on national issues in the social media has provided good spices to social scientists to rethink the role social networking site's and activists are playing in the social and political sphere.

As the Shahbagh movement is relatively a recent phenomenon so substantive research on its processes and outcomes has not been undertaken, and hence, notable in-depth analyses have not been done yet. A good number of works are available in Bengali Language, but they are mostly of random discussions on the protest events. Available sources are mostly protest in the form of news coverage, blog posts, Op-Ed, large volumes of features, television commentaries and video clips of the protests.
Against this backdrop, the following paper aims to examine the following key questions:
1. Why did the calls for protest that started in the virtual world lead to actual movement in Shahbag square, Bangladesh?
2. How important the role of social networking sites in activism during the Shahbag movement in Bangladesh?

Answering the above fundamental questions is important for several reasons. First, social media is tangibly working as a powerful medium in social and political interaction in the country which blurred the social customs, class and gender, and hence it has the potential as a topic in the future research work. Second, it is important to see how social media as a powerful instrument is generating mass consciousness and pushes individuals towards social movement. And third, the study might help to comprehend whether the evolution of social movement with the new media technologies has the potential to repeat in some other places somewhere in the country in future.
The remaining sections of the paper are categorized as follows. Section two will zoom into the conceptual definition of social media, section three looks into the role social media played in organizing and mobilizing political protests around the globe. Section four which discusses the theoretical part of the paper and moreover, this section discusses about a specific case study. Section five makes the concluding remarks.

Defining Social Media
The last few years have seen the unprecedented rise of the social media technologies around the globe. The easy mode of communication offered by the social media attracted a large number of people to open accounts and actively use them round the clock. The contemporary social media tools like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Youtube are just few among many others that are enabling people to share thoughts, pictures, videos and personal information across the virtual space.

With the proliferation of new technologies, each day new features are being added in this platform and making the definition more complex and dynamic. Castells (1996), one of the renowned sociologists defined information technology as "the converging set of technologies in microelectronics, computing (machines and software),

telecommunications/broadcasting, and optoelectronics" (Castells, 1996: 1). While Boyd and Ellison (2008) defines social network sites as "web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site" (Boyd and Ellison, 2008: 211). The unique feature of social networking sites is that these can enable the users to articulate and see the extent of their social networks (Boyd and Ellison, 2008).

In short, social media is an online platform which connects people from across boundary and allows people to interact in a more friendly way. The opinions are transmitted by this media get echoed by friends, family members, relatives, colleagues and so on. It makes easier for the likeminded persons to gather and share opinion on an issue of interest and thus strengthening the echoes in the public sphere. It has created a new social reality by providing space for discussion and agreement among politically engaged citizens. The most important element of social media is its speed of interactivity which allows the participants to swiftly disseminate the information. The platform does not have any gatekeeper like the traditional media to restrict the flow of information and as a result people can share and receive the knowledge without filtration.

Role of Social Media in the Mobilization of Political Protest
The volume of networked population globally is rising significantly in recent years. Number of people who are using internet has shifted from millions to billions (Shirky, 2011). Over the same period, the number of people using social media sites have also increased and it involves people from different strata - regular citizens, civil society members, media people, rights activists, NGOs, telecommunications firms, software companies, governments and so on (Shirky, 2011). Gladwell wrote that "the new tools of social media have reinvented social activism. With Facebook and Twitter and the like, the traditional relationship between political authority and popular will has been upended, making it easier for the powerless to collaborate, coordinate, and give voice to their concerns" (Gladwell, 2010).

With the enormous expansion of social media platforms and the number of users, people are now having greater access to information, more opportunity to engage in public debates and in many cases, this growing social media activism empowers people to undertake collective actions. Platforms like Face book and Twitter have been widely credited for creating necessary ground for such immense mobilization of protest networks across countries and beyond. Some Face book pages and popular blogs did the initial steering (Dutt, 2013). Extensive social networks, embedded in the greater cause of such movements, accomplished the lateral rowing. Bennett & Segerberg (2013) says that 'connective action' in addition to collective action is creating permeable space for personalized politics in the contemporary era. The authors mentioned that how digital technologies have created a dynamic platform that fosters political mobilization and enables people to become the catalyst of collective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013).

The available literature on the protests in recent times shows that social media works as a catalyst in bringing people to the streets in many countries across the world that were going through a period of political uprisings. From the protest events in Philippine, Moldova to green movement in Iran, Jasmine revolution in Tunisia, Egyptian uprising, social movement in Israel, USA, protest events in Syria, Lebanon, Lybia, Bahrain, corruption protest in India and more recently the protest in Hong Kong social media played its part by helping to rally mass protests. Initially, in all these cases, the movements were civic non- violent democratic protests but later the events turned into different directions.

The study by Hussain and Howard (2013) claims that social media platform played the central role in shaping political debates during the Arab Spring. Castells (2012) also came up with the same argument and found the strong relationships between the new media technologies and the occurring of the mass movements around the globe, especially in the Arab world. For him, these are networks of fear and hope and it is the search for dignity amid the suffering of humiliation that pushes hundreds of thousands of people to the streets against social injustice.

In the Tunisian case, after the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi the government controlled all the media platforms to stop dissemination of the information but social media paved the way to make the breakthrough (Malhotra, 2011). When the video repeatedly posted in You Tube by the citizens who witnessed the event then it worked as a trigger point for the subsequent massive upheaval (Safranek, 2012). Thousands of people in Tunisia and

across the globe were a part of the movement as the photos and short video clips of the protests were spread through social media platform.

However, the outsized enthusiasm about the role of social media in political protest has faced criticisms. Hass (2011) claims that social media worked as a powerful force in the Egyptian uprising but it's role has largely been exaggerated. He wrote that "it is hardly the first disruptive technology to come along: the printing press, telegraph, telephone, radio, television, and cassettes all posed challenges to the existing order of their day" (Hass, 2011). Some scholars believe that social media didn't cause the movements in all those places rather it facilitated the events and they also claim that social media is only one factor among other elements like leadership, funding and financing that played key role in carrying out the protest.

So, the debate continues to grow among scholars about the role of social media in the protest events across countries but they seem all agree at one point that the role of social media can't be undervalued and it deserves more inquiry.

Theoretical Framework
People usually live within the groups with whom they have stronger social relations. Their ideas, information, opinion and thoughts flow quickly within these intra-group circular networks. Each member in the same group tends to know what the other person knows. So, the information or message does not easily reach to the distant clusters of the social graph. Hence, the exchange of new information and perspectives to the wider community has to pass through what Granovetter (1973) termed as "weak ties" network. Weak ties are those with whom people interact less frequently if at all.

In a seminal paper titled as "The Strength of Weak Ties", Granovetter (1973) analyzed the micro-individual level interaction and macro-societal level phenomena, and he concluded that the power of weak ties depends on "[d]iffusion, social mobility, political organization, and social cohesion in general" across different clusters of the social map.

Granovetter argued that though it appears to most people that the strong ties in a society would be more advantageous for society than the weaker ones but that is not the real case (Granovetter, 1973). He convincingly showed through examples that the weak ties act more powerfully than the stronger ties in the diffusion of information since the later one runs only through the intra-group networks.

The weak ties work as a vital instrument to integrate the disconnected social clusters into broader aspects of the society (Burt, 1995). Granovetter claims that "weak ties are more likely to link members of different small groups than are strong ones, which tend to be concentrated within particular groups" (Granovetter in Lim, 2013: 643). In terms of diffusing idea, weak ties are so important that "[R]moval of the average weak tie would do more "damage" to transmission probabilities than would do that of the average strong one" (Granovetter, 1973: 1366).

Social Media and Shahbagh Movement
Context of the Shahbagh Movement
Bangladesh, as a country, got its independence in 1971 after nine months of struggle against then West Pakistan (Bass, 2014). The country, however, never had been able to come out from the tumultuous history as every government including the military rulers since the nation's birth has been either unwilling or helpless to try the war criminals mainly Pakistan army involved in killings and their local collaborators, known as Rajakar (meaning "volunteer" in Urdu language).

The 'Razakars' were accused of killing and assisted in killing mass people during the war. In 1992, Shaheed Janani Jahanara Imam, a women freedom fighter and writer in Bangladesh initiated the campaign for the trial of war criminals but she died in 1994 (Dhaka Tribune, 2014) without much success. Since the year 2000, some people from different corners again raised the issue of justice for war crimes. The issue got prominence in the election manifesto of the current ruling party during the 2008 general election (Manik and Tusher, 2010). In 2009, international War Crimes Tribunal was set up to try the local collaborators involved in the crime during the war (The Economist, 2014).

It is against this backdrop, on February 5, 2013, the verdict of Abdul Quader Molla, assistant secretary of the largest Islamic party, Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), was announced and he was awarded with lifetime imprisonment for the crime

against humanity in 1971 liberation war against West Pakistan (Motlagh, 2013). To protest the verdict, some young men and women gathered in Shahbagh intersection in the capital city of Dhaka. The protest started after the provocative call from a young bloggers network called Blogger and Online Activist Network (BOAN) to join in a demonstration at Shahbagh intersection. In response, the people from different walks of life came to support by commenting on social networking sites (Joarder, 2013). The movement began with the regular people, and the people who joined later not all of them necessarily know each other but they share the common concern.

The protesters were demanding capital punishment of the leader and eight others instead who were under trial in the International War Crimes Tribunal (ICT). The protest movement later termed as "Shahbagh movement" or "Gonojagoron Mancha (massive awakening)". The following days saw thousands of people joining in this protest event and expressed their solidarity with the demands of the protest.

Role of Social Media in the Shahbagh Movement
According to Gladwell "the platforms of social media are built around weak ties" (Gladwell, 2010). Unlike close friends and families in the offline environment which are basically grounded on strong ties, the friendship and networks in the social media are mainly based on weak ties. In Shahbagh protest, if the online bloggers did share their thoughts and pass information only with their family, friends and relatives then it is highly unlikely that the people from disparate social clusters would have joined in the movement. By efficiently using the weak ties network, the young online activist's fostered discussion, debates, shared the cause and justification of the protest through social media technologies which gradually resulted in a mass mobilization.

In addition to the consent among a large group of people, the level of grievances within them and perceived injustices, the social media worked as a perfect tool to gather and mobilize the sentiment pool during the protest. Though one may argue that the strong ties among the bloggers have played a significant role to raise the issue of justice regarding war crimes and their long campaign shaped the mental feature of the people to join in the movement. It's true but the strong ties among this people also created through the weak ties network created through social media. Their friendship and alliance created by their writings in the social networking sites. Before the advent of the social media, some people urged young generation to come out in the street by using the mainstream media platform but that didn't work well.

Due to Bangladesh government's 'Digital Bangladesh' initiative which later turned as a slogan since 2009, a substantial number of the urban population has internet access (Chandan, 2015). In Bangladesh, 33 million people are using internet connection which is 20% of Bangladesh's total population of 163 million and 95% of these 33 million people access the internet through their mobile phones (The Independent, 2 January 2014). According to the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC), at the end of April 2014 the total number of mobile phone users has reached 115.627 million (BTRC, April 2014).

Till August 2012, some 2.80 million people have facebook accounts and the country secured 51st position among the nations using the network globally (Financial Express, 14 August 2012). According to Internet World Statistics (2013), around three and half million people have Face book account in Bangladesh till December 2013.

In Shahbagh, the organizers initially thought that the protest would draw between four to five hundred people has swelled to over 100,000, with some estimates placing the number higher (Motlagh, 2013). When the protest in its full swing, different social networking sites and blogs especially Facebook, were flooded with comments, cartoons, short videos, photographic presentations seeking capital punishment for the war criminals (Joarder, 2013). The appeal of social media appeared so high that some bloggers had disproportionate impact on the masses even than the politicians.

Whatever its magnitude, the protest reflected the deep frustration of young generation in the existing political culture and greater justice system deriving from the neo-patrimonial political system. The civil society members view that such demonstrations reveal the broader public dissatisfaction over the current way of doing politics in Bangladesh (Yardley, 2013). Now the question arises is how this popular mobilization became a reality.

There is little doubt that the increased internet connectivity helped the online bloggers to reach people more easily than before. The bloggers did successfully implant Bengali nationalism among a segment of the population group that responded quickly after the call from the social media.

For the last couple of years, the young bloggers were fighting for the cause of justice of 1971 war through blogs, face book and twitter. Their effort in the virtual medium has created a network of sympathizers who share the cause of the protest. They used virtual space in a creative and conscious way. The sharing of emotions, facts and images through social media helped them to create identity formation and raising voice (Ahmed, 2014).

In Shahbagh, the protestors were mobilized by Face book status, message alerts, blogging and other social media communications. Eventual protest moments at the Shahbagh intersection marked a unique event in the history of previous social movements in the country of any kind.

"I do not think in my lifetime I have ever witnessed people spill onto the streets for anything not somehow related to Awami League or BNP-led michils or hartals. I do not think I have ever seen an on-going protest of this magnitude in Bangladesh ever that was not partisan" (Hossain, 2013).

Another political commentator wrote that "[S]ocial media established itself as the new form of political influence and the young found a space in the political map" (Rashid, 2013).

Though deep contestations existed vis-à-vis this genre of protest, the movement, however, drew large popular support from people of all clusters of the society and across all ages. Some even went further to find the Shahbagh protest reminiscent with Tahrir square in Egypt (Qayum, 2013; Joarder, 2013). As Ziegler puts it "connected in rhetoric and method by social media and the Internet, Shahbag was in many ways a manifestation of the same spirit we saw at Tahrir, in Tunisia, and beyond, cast in a struggle with its own unique implications" (Ziegler, 2014) .

The widely coordinated social media and cyber activism introduced a new forum for protest that made the movement to reach across vast spaces of internet. The high mobile phone usage among the urban youth in the capital city played a significant role to connect the community of protest and gain popular support from the wider public. Unlike offline protests where the centralized coordination does the bulk of public mobilization, Shahbagh protest was initially anchored on de-centralized style connecting both online and offline supporters. More interactive and self-configurable networks lead to less hierarchical and more participatory movement (Castells, 2012). The high speed activism at the Shabagh square led one Bangladeshi Diaspora writer to write-"I never knew how active Bangladesh, as an entire country, was virtually until the Shahbag story broke out on social media this year. You can have your opinions about the movement, be dismissive or inspired, but one thing few can argue is that online activists played a critical role in using the Internet to organize and spread the story, and got thousands of young Bangladeshis to work together" (Hossain, 2013).

The protest in such a nature is partly self-organizing. Social media is used as a bridging factor to connect the people who can translate discussion on the ground or discussion in the broader area though it may not act as a non-biased bridging function as they aim to accomplish something.

Besides internal mobilization, social media was also used to disseminate the protest demands to the wider audience in the international arena. The non-residential Bangladeshis expressed their solidarity by arranging protests in different countries and by sharing the protest photos, video clips in the social media. Three days after the protest began at Shahbag, Bangladeshi youth in London organized protest (via blogs and social media) in London's Altab Ali Park to express their solidarity with the protestors at Shahbag (Ziegler, 2014).

In the wake of Shahbagh protest, Face book emerged as a powerful infrastructure for its multiple weak-tie networks. The platform had been a host of protest-related photographic presentation, text-message alert, protest notes, infographics and videos during the protest. The upload of thousands of night-mood images with candle vigils and short form of customized video clips featured the Shahbag square live online. The content themes travelled beyond Shahbag square and allow people thousands of miles apart to connect and telling a pre-text to the present context of the movement based on the past histories and haunting memories of the 1971 War of Liberation. Sitting on the roadside of Shahbag armed with laptops engaged in citizen journalism, a tech-savvy youth group named "Cyber warriors" organized on and off ground mobilization of people on social media to promote the spirit of the movement (Hossain, 2013).

The hashtag activism (#Shahbag) in Twitter by protest organizers and supporters did impressive jobs to unfold the story to the world. It helped to get feedback and responses in real time. Compared to other countries in South Asia,

quite a few people in Bangladesh used to have Twitter accounts (People's Insight, 2(3)). As the protest beginning to grow, new users signed up and started to build a complex web of networks with frequent tweets live on Shahbag square. In the analysis of one Twitter user on CNN iReport:

"[M]any of the tweets are from very new users, those people joined Twitter with the spirit to share the words, to tell the world how they feel about this movement, I could see that they still do not have any profile picture, so Twitter used the default 'egg' icon for their profile pictures" (Awalin, 2013).

Figure 1:-The development of tweets on Shahbag protest
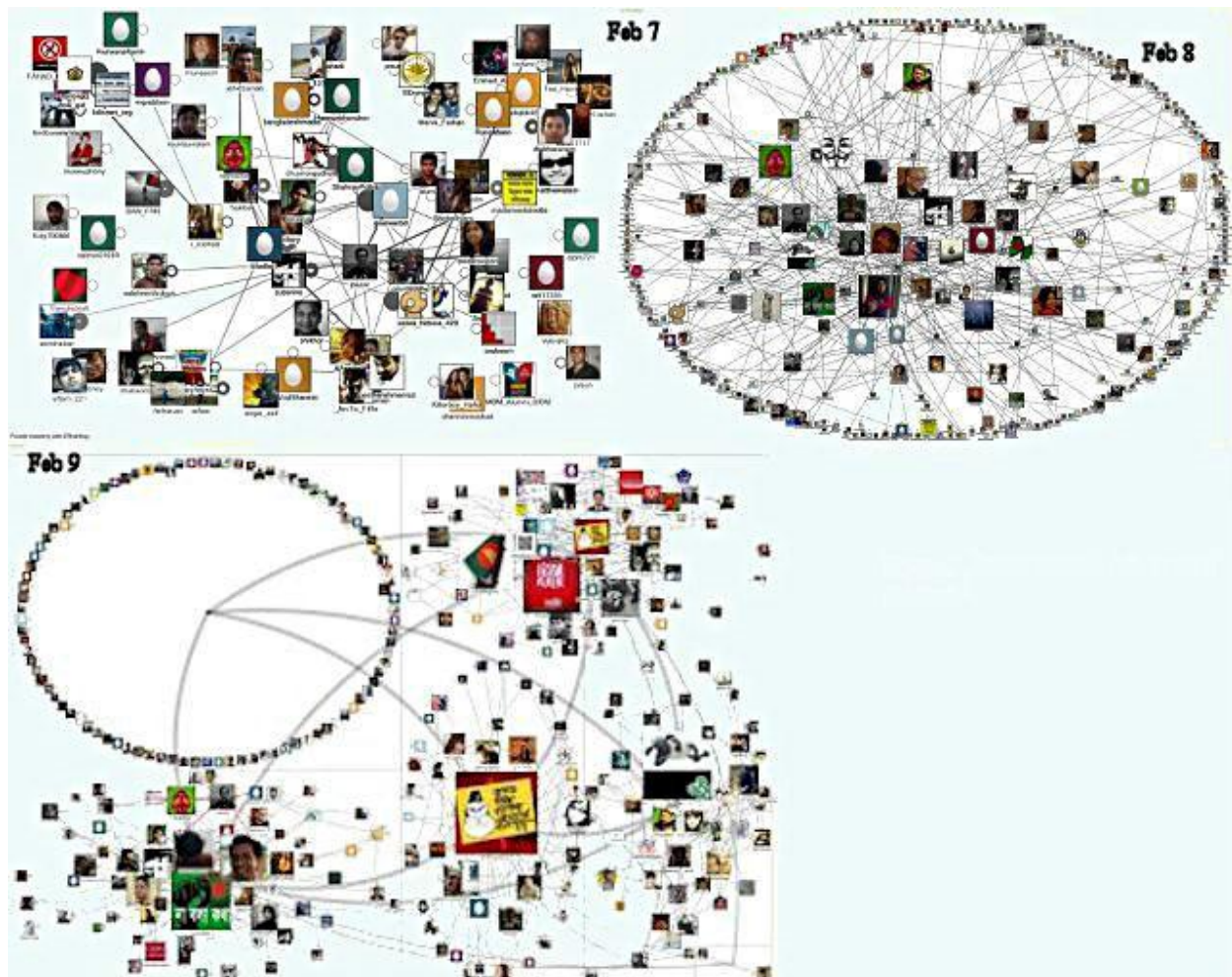
Source: Analyzing social network (7, 8, 9 February 2013).

The figure 1 displays the evolving discussion of the Shahbagh movement. Bangladesh portrayed with red color while UK in purple color and USA is highlighted with blue color. At the inception, the Twitter activism was not so vibrant. However, as the time went by, more people began to join on Twitter and involved in frequent exchanges of hashtag through sharing of protest-related short speech and news, re-twitted them on this social networking site. The purple nodes are more frequent in the cluster as many Bangladeshis live in the UK and they largely opposed the movement and its demand. The pro-Shahbag cluster does not have many purple nodes, indicating they received more support from Bangladesh and USA and less from UK/London.

Figure 2:-The graph shows the people using #shahbag
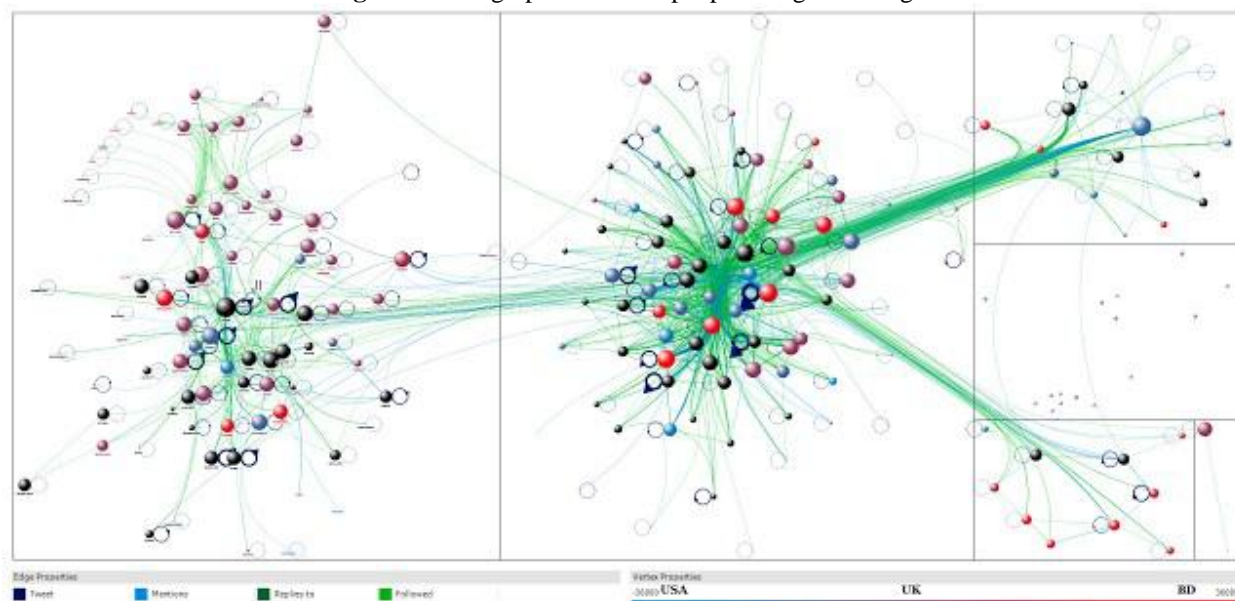
Source: Analyzing social network (26 February 2013).

The figure-2 shows the echo of Shahbagh protest outside the country. Aggregating different cluster of networks on Twitter shows the eventual development of nodes and bridges connecting different users within and beyond the country, mostly from the USA (blue color) and the UK (purple color). Bangladesh is highlighted with the 'Red' color. This analytics which was more likely created after 25th February also shows the gradual emergence of anti-Shahbagh online group (purple nodes) opposing Shahbag hmovement by using hashtag (#savebangladesh) from within and outside the country.

As shown above, social media worked as a great source of information during the protest. By working as the hub of social and political interaction, Twitter and Facebook especially facilitated a collective action where ideas and thoughts had been shared, dialogues among the protestors initiated.

However, the mainstream media also played its part, widely covered the protests and mobilized people on the ground. The journalist's contribution came through the development of protest contents in the form of news, texts, images, and videos. The TV channels arranged regular talk show programs and sometimes they brought the blogger activists to share their opinion. The difference between the Shahbagh protest and other events that took place in MENA countries is that in later cases the mainstream media were kept silent but in the Shahbagh protest the mainstream media played a leading role in broadcasting the movement.

No doubt those online and offline grievances of the protestors in Shahbag were met with tremendous counter-movement from the groups challenging the way the movement made their demands. The rise of counter- movement, which is also organized through social media, appeared as a strong challenge for Shahbagh movement that experienced a sharp downfall in its popular base as the time went by. The powerful paths of connectivity through social media have contributed to gather the people who counter ideas started questioning the movement's demands. Some experts now say that the movement was politically manipulated and hence, it failed to achieve its target. As Salam (2013) wrote that the Shahbagh protest "[I]nstead of healing old wounds, has opened up new ones in Bangladesh society" (Salam, 2013). The other group says that the protest was successful as the govt. was forced to change the law of the International War Crimes Tribunal (ICT) based on their demand and subsequently hanged Abdul Quader Mollah to death.

Conclusion:-
There is little doubt that social media as a powerful resource played the leading role in organizing and sustaining the protest. Of course, there may be some other factors worked behind mass mobilization, but the above facts suggest

that the weak ties network created through social media appeared as a key factor in the transformation of collective discontent into collective action.

In the case of Shahbagh, the activists were engaged in writing, discussing the issue of war crimes for the last couple of years but the tool used for internal and external communication represents a vital resource for collective action. Unlike newspaper websites and other portals, social media proved as crucial alternative tools for the activists in the Shahbagh. It has created a virtual society where people shared political speech, conversation, and coordination. The platform provided a vast unrestricted social and political space for dialogue and debates on the protest; and it also offered the networked youth bulge open access to the highly generated protest-related mass contents (news and videos and so on) on the movement.

The shahbagh protest, therefore, demonstrates the opportunities unveiled by social media for mass mobilization, organization and implementation of social movement. The electrifying transformation of message through social media marked a significant difference from the traditional way of communication like letter, telephone and faxes etc.

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