Unpacking the Environmental Movement in Megacity Dhaka: How Does the Resource Mobilisation Theory Explain Local Urban Complexity?

Saleh Ahmed
Boise State University
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Saleh Ahmed, Ph.D.
School of Public Service
Boise State University
Boise, ID, USA
salehahmed@boisestate.edu

Abstract
In the Global South, urban policies are heavily influenced by colonial heritages, and people often experience citizens-detached urban development initiatives. The environmental movement is seen as a new addition that might contribute to society’s efforts to achieve equal urban environmental opportunities. The geographical focus of this article is the megacity Dhaka, which is the social, political, and economic capital of Bangladesh. Unfortunately, this hyper-urbanized megacity suffers from a large poverty-stricken population, leading to a gap in environmental services between the poor and rich. In recent years, Dhaka has experienced a growing momentum with the environmental movement, demanding environmental rights and justice. Based on long-term empirical research, this article shows that even though local marginalized people were the key agents of environmental protests and demonstrations, the movements are usually initiated by a very small and relatively homogenous social and political elites, who share the common social, cultural, economic, and political identities.

Keywords: Dhaka, environmental movement, resource mobilization theory, urban poor

Introduction
Uneven distribution of benefits from globalization and neo-liberal efforts, as well as continuing democratic deficits and unequal access to opportunities and means for advancement are present in many parts of the Global South (Chorev 2005). This societal challenge has led to a renewed interest on discussing and analysing the roles and responsibilities of the state and its citizens to promote democracy and development, especially in countries where the state’s capacity to provide services to the citizens are remarkably limited (Howe, Popovski, and Notaras 2010; Sen 1999). The transition to new development thoughts and practices was inevitable, since many of the previous development models could not serve the people to attain meaningful changes or impacts on their lives (Chase-Dunn and Gills, 2005; Sen 1999).

In recent years democratic and participatory governance has emerged as the preeminent model of political organization, where concepts of human rights and political liberty are very much part of prevailing rhetoric (Sen 1999). Much of these intellectual and political discourses in pursuit of democratic participation in the decision-making process centered on “the logic of equality” (Dahl 2000). However, democratic ideas and beliefs are not widely shared or even well understood and “the logic of equality” is only in practice in extremely limited situations (Howe, Popovski, and Notaras 2010). Therefore, the world is experiencing economic growth with increasing inequality and social despair (Korzeniewicz and Smith 2000). True “democracy” and redistributive development opportunities should ensure its citizens broader ranges of personal and collective freedoms with the opportunities to thrive and prosper (Sen 1999).

In this context, the challenges for low-income developing societies are enormous, mostly due to their limited financial and institutional capacities. In countries like Bangladesh, local democracy is very fragile in nature coupled with its huge population and massive poverty. In this context, redistributive urban politics and development opportunities can provide avenues for social development, human rights and justice. This is not entirely uncommon. In recent years, “rights to the city” has appeared as an emerging urban agenda in many parts of the world, when cities in the Global South are experiencing rapid population growth and massive scale of rural-urban migration. These processes are
changing existing social relations, orders, and the pattern and nature of urban citizenships (Afsar and Hossain 2020; Lata 2020). In this context, it is relevant to understand and explore how millions of low-income urban residents are experiencing their “rights to the city” in cities like Dhaka.

While the local pattern of democracy in Dhaka—the capital of Bangladesh—often fails to recognize basic rights and choices of its low-income working class urban residents, social and environmental movements can play an instrumental role in expanding peoples ’rights and choices related to their living and communal environment. Environmental movement generates opportunities for peoples ’involvement in the decision-making process (Ahmed 2013; Foster 1998), and contributes to form different types of coalitions or associations to raise the voices of marginalized citizens (Bayat 1997; Foster 1998). Ultimately through environmental movement, people in low-income developing societies develop their capacities to demand their rights and act as pressure groups on conventional public policy and decision-making bodies to pursue a more inclusive and just outcome (Foster 1998).

Currently, Dhaka is known as one of the largest and fastest growing megacities of the Global South, in terms of its population size, economic activities and political and urban dominance in the country. The city not only offers economic and other livelihood opportunities to its growing populations, but also it is a place which is exposed to multidimensional urban inequality and despair. All these urban features shape the patterns and natures of environmental movement in the city. This article critically investigates local patterns of environmental movement through the lens of one of the most prominent social movement theories—Resource Mobilization Theory (RMT), which suggests any collective movement requires the mobilization of locally available resources (Tilly 1978). Largely, this theoretical argument has used to understand the movement emergence in urban context in the Global North, where democracy or democratic practices are generally accepted and appreciated by the citizens and politicians. People enjoy certain level of freedoms, security, and livelihood opportunities. However, since the scenario is partly different in cities like Dhaka, the theoretical arguments of the RMT cannot fully explain local complexity. Therefore, this article serves two major goals. First, it helps to understand the dynamic emergence of environmental movement in a city of the Global South, and second, it contributes to the further refinement and application of the RMT theory itself in the context of low-income developing societies, where urban residents people largely suffer from the lack of democratic practice, social, and political segregation, and unequal distributions of growth and other development opportunities.

### Resource Mobilization Theory

**Overview**

Social movement illustrates a complex social system that can be seen as disruptive to a stable social order and at the same time can be regarded as adaptive to a changing or volatile social scenario (Nicholas 1973). A dynamic relationship between the state and society is at the core of movement discourse. It is a collective response to injustice, material deprivation, and/or socio-political marginalization. It can also demonstrate the maturity of democracy, and the citizens ’freedom to express their opinions. Sometimes it emerges spontaneously without any formal organization and/or institutional approach and sometimes follows the opposite trajectories with more formalized, organizational, and institutional approach. Whatever the patterns it follows, usually social movement strives towards the goals and values that have major significance for the entire society (Nicholas 1973) and often is identified as a collective behavioral endeavour with the aim to promote meaningful and lasting change (Wilkinson 1971).

A number of social movement theories, such as mass society theory, relative deprivation theory, and collective behavioral theory highlight the increase in individual or societal level grievance often generated by “structural strains” of rapid social change. Even though the specific hypotheses of these classical movement theories might vary, there are some agreements within the core propositions, such as movement and institutionalized actions, are distinct, and often the movement players are somewhat irrational if not entirely irrational (Nicholas 1973).

The movements of the 1960s posed a critical challenge to this conventional assumption. Empirical evidence suggests that the emergence of a movement requires different types of resources, which can be instrumental for initiating the movement in a specific context. As a result, the RMT became formalized within the social movement discourse (Jenkins 1983; McCarthy and Zald 1977; Tilly 1978).

The RMT is a response to other classical social movement theories that argued strain, grievance, and individual and/or collective deprivation cause the collective behavior as well as social movements. The proponents of the RMT explain why many social groups with mountable grievances and deprivations are unable or do not organize social movements.
Social movement emerges out of pre-existing social networks, and in that way, the RMT contradicts with the Mass Society Theory or the Collective Behavioral Model (Smelser 1963 Cited in Taylor 2000: 519). This indicates that RMT explains the emergence of social movements (or community activism) mostly in societies with a democratic social order.

The central argument of this theory are movement players or movement participants are not spontaneous and disorganized, and they are not irrational (Ferree 1992); rather they are organized with focused social/economic outcomes. Social movements have been perceived by the RMT as an elaboration of institutional arrangement to change the elements of social structure and the distributive nature of social goods and resources. This interpretation from the RMT informs those mobilizations occur in an established, democratic context where mobilization holds minimal risks. However, the theoretical frameworks of the RMT also highlights some limitations of any emerging movements. Existing organizational structures or institutional elites can undermine the popular values and interests of the mass population during any movements (Chatterji 2017; Jenkins 2008).

**Resource Mobilization in Fragile Contexts**

One of the major puzzles in this article is that most of the previous social and environmental movement research focuses on movement emergence in an advanced democracy, and it is likely that the process and mechanisms of movement emergence are very different in less developed democratic situations, where political repressions, absence of social (environmental) movement organizations, and weaker and undeveloped associational life (e.g., civil society) exist. Usually, a social movement can illustrate two complete opposite scenarios: first, the democratic environment is very vibrant and state provides all sorts of cohesive environment for citizens ’engagements in all stages of decision-making or provides opportunities to demonstrate their demands and aspirations, and second, the local political culture is fragile and not welcoming enough for democratic practice and social movement emerges as a critical response to citizens ’marginalization in socio-political area.

Established democratic context usually makes opportunities for the people and ensures the rightful participation of citizens in state affairs, which involves both social and political participations. In other words, this suggests a situation where everyone enjoys “rights to have rights” (Isin and Wood 1999). On the contrary, in a fragile democracy the context is completely different. A fragile democracy is characterized by weak policies, legal systems, institutions, and governance (World Bank 2005). In developing regions, where the fragile democracy exists, often the society is polarized based on religion, political or social beliefs, choices or class-based groups. In the polarized society, it is usually difficult to form any broader coalitions and subsequent social movements (Diani 2008; Earle 2011). Social polarization impacts local social capital, which is also critically important for the emergence of social movements. Social polarization can end up with micro and macro-scale conflicts (Mcloughlin 2009). There are very limited scopes for citizens ’engagement on state’s formal and informal decision-making processes. In most cases, citizens are the passive recipients of governmental decisions. A fragile democracy reflects the structural failure of democracy, state and its institutions, and often with no or very minimal democratic opportunities. In some cases, the situations become so hostile that the citizens can get exposed to severe security and other humanitarian threats. In a fragile democracy, the ruling political power merely welcomes any democratic practice as to them any forms of associational life or organization is a potential threat to their existence. Therefore, in a fragile democracy, social movement organizations mostly do not emerge in a formal shape, rather they take a very informal and non-institutional form.

An advanced democratic society allows its citizens to engage in the decision-making process and encourages citizens to be involved in full democratic practices. In those societies, social movements are the illustrations of democratic rights. On the contrary, in a fragile democracy, the government is usually afraid of any type of social movement, because the ruling power treats social movement as a threat to their power, legitimacy or overall authority. Therefore, urban dwellers are often not able to exercise their agency to claim their rights to the city due to their governments ’intolerance to any kind of movement. Nevertheless, citizens sometimes find a way to exercise their agency in limited capacity. In those situations, environmental movements are the response to disproportionate environmental burdens, particularly when the state has a limited capacity to provide services to its citizens.

In this situation, the RMT does not explain the local environmental movement from a holistic perspective. There are some specific resources such as charismatic authority, elite social network, public drama, and wealthy citizens play more decisive roles in framing social, political, and environmental movements in a fragile context. A brief discussion is given below:
**Charismatic Authority**

Social and environmental movements are usually driven by few key actors, who can mobilize both ordinary and influential individuals (Diani 1997; Rojas and Heaney 2009). Unlike in advanced democratic contexts, charismatic authority is more influential in predicting movement emergence in fragile democracies. In advanced democracies, the organizational and institutional frameworks for social and environmental movements are usually more formalized and structured. On the contrary, in fragile democratic contexts charismatic authority and leadership become key to mobilize individuals and communities. In fragile contexts, the charismatic leaders usually synthesize and articulate the ideology of movements (Nicholas 1973). Max Weber (1968 cited in Nicholas 1973: 81) used the term ‘charisms,’ as ‘gift of grace, ’from church history and applied it to a general social process. The concept of charisma might also be defined as the ability of a popular leader to mobilize his/her followers without the benefits or constraints of formal institutions (Andreas 2007). In various fragile contexts, charisms always played critical role in movement emergence. For example, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (1920-75) of Bangladesh, a charismatic leader, who is the father of the Nation, inspired the entire country to be liberated from Pakistan in 1971 (Field 2013). Similar evidences are available across geographies, such as Mexico, Bolivia, Lebanon, Iraq, Libya, and India (Andreas 2007). In Weberian understanding, ‘charisma ’is probably the most important revolutionary power during the established tradition and typically it neglects considerations of economic efficiency and rationality (Bendix 1970). Charisma is intrinsically hostile or incompatible to formalized institutions, or institutional hierarchies, rules, regulations, that characterize bureaucracy (Andreas 2007). This illustrates the feature of charisma that reflects the rational importance of charismatic leadership in a fragile democracy.

**Elite Social Network**

Even though some post-industrial cities have experienced de-concentration of political powers and dynamic patterns of decentralized policymaking , the presence of “a tightly-knit band of likeminded elites (Stone and Stoker 2015: 26)” in any social and environmental movements is not uncommon. In a fragile democracy, elite social network is also another important prerequisite of movement emergence. In advanced democracies, things like social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter) and other types of communication technologies make movements less dependent on traditional social networks. In fragile democratic contexts, inter-personal networks and communication are often more important due to the lack of established communication technologies. Often environmental movement organizations include social elites for accomplishing some strategic tasks, such as neutralizing or transforming mass population into sympathizers (McCarthy and Zald 1977). The networks among social, economic or political elites in a society, particularly in the fragile context where democratic spaces are relatively small, can help to achieve ultimate goals, since elites are those who control society’s larger resource pool (Stiglitz 2013). In most social and environmental movements, elites usually join the movements either being influenced by the core actors of the movements or by observing the popularity or potential implications of the movement (Soule and Olzak 2004).

**Public Drama**

Public drama is another important component in explaining environmental movements in fragile democratic contexts. It is not rare that public figures display emotions or actions which seem pure, when in reality they do these things in front of media or citizens simply to gain public sentiment. Sometimes that can be also for increasing monetary donations, or number of followers (members) (Brannan 2009). In the movement contexts, it is not uncommon to use public drama by political or other public figures to divert people from movement goals. There is a perception about the gap between public figures or politicians and their followers. Public dramas are often used to minimize that gap.

**Wealthy Citizens**

Wealthy citizens also contribute to explain the movement emergence in a fragile context. In a way, they are also available resources for a movement emergence. These resources are not very formalized; rather these resources are unstructured and unpredictable. In some cases, wealthy citizens use their environmental involvement for personal benefits, rather than collective ‘social ’benefits or goals. In a fragile democracy, some people might get interested to be involved in an environmental movement for increasing their social status and/or for enhancing their socio-political influence by their presence in the movement. Since wealthy citizens accumulate substantial portion of social, economic, and political powers, that can influence movements in larger scale. Inequality could be one of the outcomes
(Scully et al., 2018). However, since social and environmental movements are often complex, and involve stakeholders from different backgrounds and with different interests, the wealthy sub-groups in any movements are increasingly varied and fragmented (Mizruchi 2014).

All these factors, such as charismatic authority, elite social networks or wealthy citizens, show that even though in advanced democracies the arguments related to the RMT explain movement emergence, in fragile context movement emergence is very spontaneous. Some might argue these factors are integral part of the availability of resources for movement emergence. Still, the movement emergence in fragile democracies can be partially explained by the RMT. This article is not aimed to dismiss the RMT; rather to show how local experience or dynamics can add a newer dimension to this theoretical argument in a fragile context.

**Institutional Arrangement and Governance Practice in Dhaka**

In cities of Global South, urban governance is complex and usually intertwined with several socioeconomic and political determinants. In South Asian context, it is heavily influenced by the colonial heritage (Anwar, 2014; Baffoe and Roy 2022). Urban local government was seen by the colonial authorities as day-to-day administration of services, with little thought of democratic representation (Home 2014). In most cases, the functions of the colonial administration were to maintain law and order and to ensure a minimum level of services in urban areas, where their functionaries were usually located, e.g., water, electricity, railways to connect urban centers (Mehrotra 2008). These functions were to be maintained so that the objective of surplus extraction would continue smoothly without any obstacles. The postcolonial state was superimposed on the structure of the colonial state (Mehrotra 2008), and often citizens have little or no access to the decision-making process.

In Dhaka, forty-one different government organizations are involved in the city’s planning and development activities. The overlapping responsibilities and legal authorities of different relevant ministries and government agencies to provide urban services to the poor are some of the major challenges of planning and management in Dhaka (World Bank, 2007). Such a multiplicity of organizations creates problems in coordination and good governance. The problem has been so serious, that a separate committee for good governance and development was established under the Office of the Prime Minister (Islam, 2006). Despite these institutional efforts and governance restructuring, working class urban residents are most disenfranchised from basic urban services (Baffoe and Roy 2022).

The polarization of power and responsibilities between center and periphery is a typical trait of post-colonial states (Ullah, 2005). This shows there is lack of adequate decentralization of power and authority to urban local bodies from the central government and similarly within the city authority to transfer power and responsibility to the lower-level hierarchy, such as the wards (Islam, 2006).

The process of neoliberalism in Dhaka both empowered and marginalized citizens ’voices or engagements in the public policy and decision-making (Sobhan, 2007). People in Kolkata (India) also experienced the similar outcomes, where low-income working-class populations were marginalized and also at the same time reengaged in the process of reclaiming their rights to basic urban services (Chatterjee, 2004). An increasing interest in associations or voluntary organizations started to be visible in the social and political milieu of Bangladesh since the early 1990s (World Value Survey, 2004). Apparently, there is no existing participation framework, so the citizens can actively make their voices heard constructively in the decision-making process. Except for the voting, citizens in Bangladesh have limited power to apply political pressure to the ruling class and local decision-makers (Rahman and Rahman 2005; Lata 2020). This is clearly evident that in Bangladesh political freedoms are not fully effective and adequately functional. Political participation is biased by inequalities in socio-economic status and is strongly constrained by the party system and dysfunctional political culture. The biggest cost is paid by unprivileged social classes and citizens, who can exert limited powers in setting the political agenda (Khan 1997).

Although the urban poor participate sometimes in political and decision-making process, they are generally marginalized in terms of their integration into the urban planning and governance mechanism (Baffoe and Roy 2022). These low-income working class urban residents tend to develop an ‘informal ’power structure (Hossain and Humphrey 2002) and informal governance (Institute of Governance Studies, 2012) by forming small associations or groups and select their leaders, who can represent their needs and desires to the local public authorities or other democratically elected political representatives. However, in this process, factionalism and conflicts are very common.
among the poor marginalized people (Institute of Governance Studies, 2012). It is important to understand that unless democracy permeates to the lowest level of the powerless, or less powerful urban population, even elementary functionings\(^1\) could be impossible to realize in cities of the Global South (Sen 2000).

Since its birth in 1971 as a sovereign country, Bangladesh has experienced a number of governance transitions from military authoritarian government to democratically elected government (Sobhan 2007). The country suffers from its fragile democracy mostly due to the confrontational political culture, and oppressive politics from the ruling party. In recent years, people have seen that the ruling party uses its administrative and executive powers to suppress political oppositions (Jackman 2018), which has substantially undermined peoples’ ‘agency in the local level and translated to peoples’ collective capacity to initiate any form of environmental movement.

**Unequal Environmental Challenges in Dhaka**

Dhaka is one of the major megacities in the Global South. The city is experiencing one of the fastest growth rates in the world. There might be very few cities in world history which have experienced this level of phenomenal increase in this order of magnitude. Dhaka has led to a degree of urbanization, which could be termed as ‘Hyperurbanization’ or ‘Overurbanization’.\(^2\) Now this megacity is the home of almost 18 million people (UN 2017) and everyday thousands of people add to this number (The Daily Ittefaq 2010).

The greater Dhaka’s urban agglomeration is projected to grow at an annual average rate of 2.72 during the period 2007–2025, making it one of the fastest growing mega-cities in the world (Angeles et al. 2009). In addition to this, the population increase in Dhaka was never accompanied to the level of planned spatial expansion and development, and remained as one of the most densely populated and laissez-faire type megacities in the world. In addition to experiencing phenomenal population growth and spatial expansion, urban services in cities like Dhaka “…often strained to the point of collapse and the quality of urban environmental deteriorated rapidly” (Chatterjee 2004, 142).

Most megacities in the Global South have materialized ahead of any systematic-regularized modernization. Urbanization has not been accompanied by an appropriate level of economic development and opportunity (Davis 2006; Kim and Short 2008). These rapidly-growing megacities often fail to provide supports to their urban poor and local informal sectors (Brown 2001; Roy and AlSayyad 2004). History shows that poor peoples’ access to housing, livelihoods, and other basic urban services (e.g., water supply, sanitation) has not been prioritized. The structural constraints of urbanization usually frame the patterns and features of location-based poverty and inequality (Ahmed and Rahaman 2014; Baffoe and Roy 2022; Hossain 2006).

Dhaka followed this similar trajectory of development by failing to create opportunities for its underclass, poor, and marginalized populations (Ahmed 2020). This unequal pattern of development gradually influences the disproportionate environmental burdens among marginalized citizens, who have little or no voice in the decision-making process (Onstad 1997). An environmental injustice occurs when members of certain disadvantaged social groups suffer disproportionately at the local, regional or national levels, from environmental risks or hazards (Rashid and Paul 2014), or in other words, environmental burdens are usually evident in the neighborhoods or communities where poor and/or marginalized citizens are located (Pellow 2007). In the local context, people experience this unequal environmental burden through their differential exposures to poor housing and/or living conditions, along with a lack of access to safe drinking water, adequate waste disposal systems, etc. (Chowdhury and Amin 2006; Siddiqui et al. 2000). Ultimately, the process of marginalization is not only present with their unequal environmental burdens, but also correlates with many other aspects of urban living.

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\(^1\) Sen (2000) defines ‘functionings’ as the things which a person may value doing or being – simple ones like being able to read and write, being well-nourished and being free from avoidable disease, or complex ones like being able to take part in the life of the community and having self-respect.

\(^2\) Hyperurbanization ‘or ‘Overurbanization’ is a term which was first used in the 1950s. It describes the phenomenon of the excessive growth of a country’s urban population, relative to its economic growth. This economic growth is usually represented by the size of the industrial labor force (Bairoch, 1975).
Research Methodology

Kayethulti, which is located in Old Dhaka, was chosen as the research site. It’s a densely populated urban neighborhood in Old Dhaka. Even though there is no exact idea, some estimation suggests that the population density was 150,000 people per square kilometer in Kayethulti (Standing 2012).

As a response to the overwhelming living condition, people in Kayethulti initiated a number of environmental movements with the supports from local and national environmental activists’ groups. One of the national environmental movement organizations was invited to help local associations to organize an environmental movement, which can capture attentions of national policy makers about a local environmental issue.

The empirical part of this research spans across several years involving collection of primary information, informal community observations, focus group discussions, interviews with environmental volunteers, as well as community elders, who play a major role in community affairs. The details of the field work are as follows:

Step 1: Understanding the Local Organization

At the beginning, the working patterns of the national environmental group were observed, and for doing that, author was involved in their works, and tried to understand the social networks as well as other resources that are required for initiating any environmental movement.

Author also reviewed the official records and documentations to understand more about their history, previous works and media and government responses. Then, author interviewed the coordinator of that environmental organization to better understand the underlying philosophy of their environmental movement and their working patterns. He mentioned:

“…initially […] was a small organization with limited capacities to initiate local environmental movement. People were also sceptic about […]’s engagements with environmental issues. The government thought […] was just another group of enthusiasts with a short-term interest on environment. However, over time […] gained citizens ’trusts and due to their consistency with environmentalism and with the growing surge of environmental justice movements organized by […], the government found this environmental organization as a disturbing force in the country’s socio-political landscape”.

He also added that sometimes the state received the environmental movement positively, as the environmental organization raised issues which were often overlooked. However, in most cases that did not happen. The state treated these environmental movement organizations as a threat to them, as often these organizations raised awareness and mobilized citizens against market or state forces.

In the next phase, environmental volunteers both associated with local environmental awareness group and national environmental activist group were interview. These volunteers were diverse. Many of them got involved out of their interests at the beginning and many of them, after a certain period, got disinterested, and then they left. But at the same time, there were also groups of volunteers, who were engaged for quite a long time. The reasons were mostly twofold: (a) they were either being exposed to environmental injustice in their personal lives or had been exposed earlier in life; or (b) they wanted to make meaningful changes in their society and work for the poor, marginalized people during their free time.

One of the core volunteers mentioned: “…I was always interested for meaningful change in the Old Dhaka. We suffer a lot from poor environments….” The responses differed depending on gender and religious affiliations. One female respondent told:

“…local environment is so poor and my children are constantly sick. I cannot tolerate this. But the problem is local politicians are corrupt; they only come to us during the election. They do not care for our environment. They do care for money and power…”

A religious minority focused on past social and cultural discrimination in their life being the major motivation for his/her engagement with environmental justice movement.
Despite the motivation of the volunteers, the national environmental movement group did not have any stable financial sources to support their movements. They had to depend largely on personal-level donations from various local philanthropists and pro-environmental people. However, they were always reluctant of receiving any foreign donations or supports.

**Step 2: Discussions with the Change Agents: Core Volunteer Groups**

At this stage, author interviewed members of core volunteer groups, who are the most important part of that national environmental group’s engagements with the community, state, and media through different forms of environmental movements. Usually, members of core volunteers are engaged in participating in events as well as donating and/or actively engaging in the decision-making process. They were actually the “change agents” for that national environmental group. In most cases, these change agents were middle-aged, ranging from 40-60 years old. Socially, most of them were upper-middle class and were either businessmen or other professionals. There were no direct representations of poor or marginalized people among the change agents.

During the interview with change agents, these core volunteers shared important life events and experiences that inspired them to be engaged in environmental justice movements. One volunteer, who was a businessman from the Kayethulti mentioned:

“…I used to respond to community issues even from my earlier age. I loved doing this. Currently, I am involved with different social and environmental movement organizations. I am just happy that I can make small contributions to my society.”

More specifically, author tried to get information on their socioeconomic and educational backgrounds and reasons behind their environmental engagements. Change agents were mostly engaged with the national environmental organization for more than three years

**Step 3: Interview of the Affected Community People**

The author also interviewed a few affected community people, who were exposed to unequal environmental burdens, to understand their involvements or awareness about the environmental justice movement in their community. During those unstructured interviews, local people shared information on their local major environmental problems, unequal environmental burdens, and their perceptions on environmental movements. One respondent, who was a local shop-owner, mentioned:

“…urban floods, water logging and poor drainage are our major environmental problems. So, when I get these issues, I experience very poor business performance of my shop and therefore my income goes drastically down. Since this is my only source of income, any kind of environmental problems put me and my family in distress”.

But when the author asked him about the shop owner’s experience with national environmental group or any state agencies, he replied, “…no one cares for us. I trust none of them.” So, there was a clear indication that poor and marginalized people had limited trust on state or non-state actors on basic urban service delivery.

**Step 4: Discussions with the Local Environmental Justice Experts**

Author also discussed local environmental issues and environmental movement with the a few local activists from Kayethulti. One of them mentioned:

“…there are usually two different perspectives of Dhaka’s environmental movements. I support environmental movement personally, since it helps the government to address localized environmental issues. On the other hand, I also do not like some of environmental organizations, since they have no ideas how government functions or what is the available resources or capacity of the government to address every single environmental issue in such a big megacity like in Dhaka. Sometimes government wants to make positive impacts in the community, but since they have resource constraints, they cannot make it happen in all circumstances.”

It was clear during the empirical work, that local poor marginalized people are the major victims of any localized environmental challenges; however, mainstream media did not put much attention on it.
Case Study: Urban Environmental Struggle in Kayethuli

Context

In Kayethuli, majority of the people are low-income and engaged in various informal activities. The neighborhood had severe shortage of basic urban services, such as water supply, swerage and sanitation services. Local residents also reported various water borne diseases. Like most other impoverished urban residents in Dhaka, people in Kayethuli have no options for better living conditions because of their limited financial capacities (Alam and Rabbani 2007).

In Kayethuli, there was only one public open space. It was locally known as Kayethuli Water Pump Playground (KWPP). Apart from the essential water pump that served the community, the existing open space provides a playground for local children. In that space, there were some large trees, which used to provide shades and other recreational facilities. It also provided critical urban facilities during any crisis, such as urban fire, or floods. Old Dhaka is one of the most fire hazard-prone segments in the city. Last few years some major fire incidents happened, and hundreds of people lost their lives. During some of the recent fire events, people in Kayethuli neighborhood came to KWPP.

Dhaka is also one of the most earthquake-prone zone. In Kayethuli, most of the building structures are poor and developed in highly congested situation. The perceived risks of earthquake damage is higher in Kayethuli. KWPP is therefore a major safety escape during any urban emergency. However, in theory this open space is owned by the government, but the local people had been using and maintaining the KWPP for several years without any issues.

Growing Citizens’ Concerns and Demonstration

In 2011, without any community consultation, government decided to build a high rise building in response to increasing housing demands among the Water Supply and Swareage Authority’s officials. Comparing to Dhaka’s massive housing shortage, it can only contribute to a very tiny share of the problem. But it impact overall quality of life in Kayethuli neighborhood and its thousands of people. The decision of building the highrise construction would also drastically impact local air quality and deteriorate existing nightmarish traffic congestion problem. The project was entirely against the public sentiment. People felt anger, frustrations, and a sense of “losing hope.”

It is important to mention that in Old Dhaka water supply during the summer months is a critical issue. Few years ago, the Dhaka Water Supply & Sewerage Authority built the water pump at the corner of this open space. That initiative was warmly welcomed by the Kayethuli residents, even though they were not consulted before the water pump construction in their neighborhood.

Local citizens formed a neighborhood association and named Kayethuli Maat o Panir Pump Rokkha Committee (in English, Kayethuli Field and Water Pump Protection Committee). On May 14, 2011 they organized their first major street demonstration. Neighborhood dwellers actively participated that along with representatives and volunteers from the national environmental group and other social and environmental organizations. There were also substantial presence of print and news media, which helped to spread the key concerns of the Kayethuli residents. This citizens’ demonstration in Kayethuli illustrated the heightened tensions between local citizens and the state functionaries. Local people were able to mobilize their social capital for the wellbeing of their community.

After the citizens demonstration, local activists had a small informal gathering and discussed their future plan of actions. They discussed to identify locally-relevant environmental issues and brainstormed on the procedure to negotiate with the government on their environmental demands. The national environmental group was actively engaged in all phases of these activities and discussions. Later the Kayethuli Field and Water Pump Protection Committee formed an executive committee to organize different social and environmental awareness related activities as well as festivals to engage people on environmental affairs. Later they organized tree planting festivals in the KWPP, which gave the playground more social and environmental value.

Findings

Despite three decades of a minimalist democratic governance system (Islam 2017), Kayethuli evidence shows that environmental movements can offer the state and its people more openness, participation, legitimacy, accountability, effectiveness, equity, coherence and efficiency in different levels of the public policy domain. Often environmental
movement creates a “…political society as a site of negotiation and contestation” (Chatterjee 2004, 74), which was also reflected by a local respondent:

“Previously, we had no ideas about what government was doing in our community, but now we can ask about decisions that could affect us. Now we get a fair share of our involvement in decision-making, even though we have to accomplish much more before we can be satisfied” (July 5, 2011).

Previously there was no active civil society organization in the Kayeththuli neighbourhood. Since the Kayeththuli Field and Water Pump Protection Committee formed as a reactive response to local environmental crisis, it was not clear how long this neighborhood committee could serve as a local community voice on issues related to environmental rights and justice. Kayeththuli evidence highlights that most environmental movements in Dhaka are focused on neighborhood issues. They are mostly reactive, short-sighted, and short-lived. These are not just unique in Kayeththuli. Movements by underrepresented populations often draw criticisms for their scope and implications on larger society (Piven and Cloward 1977). While location-based movements initiated criticisms, however, this is not uncommon that those initiatives created opportunities for redistribution of social and environmental opportunities, goals, goods, and services.

In Dhaka, there were not many opportunities to institutionalize environmental movements. Within existing social, political, organizational, and financial constraints, there are few environmental organizations in Dhaka. However, the activities of these organizations are not always centered on environmental issues. Frequently, they are engaged in various social activities as well. Since the state functionaries are not very favourable to citizens’ mobilizations or movements, social and environmental organizations follow the “check-and-balance” with the sentiments of ruling political power. Therefore, it is sometimes challenging for the environmental movement organizations to think or adopt long-term working plans or organizational structures. This leads to their reactive nature of environmental movements.

Since their responses are spontaneous, those could be criticised for having limited insights. From resource perspective, local environmental organizations suffer from limited resources that are often required for initiating movements. Available financial or human resources are very irregular and unpredictable. They often depend on local individual level contributions. Largely, local environmental movements organizations emerged out of individual level charisma and passion on environmental protection. Even though there were some elite involvements in different phases of organizational development or movement, it mostly reflected on the Weberian thoughts on charismatic leadership. At the same time, the leadership of local environmental organizations was not beyond criticisms. They failed to promote an organizational format from the very beginning, even though there were multiple efforts to fill this gap. However, there were several incidents when environmental organizations in Dhaka tried to adopt more decentralized organizational forms; but later mostly transitioned to a group of like-minded people, who cared for environment, environmental rights and social justice.

In Dhaka, environmental movement is very elitist in nature. Poor and working class people, who are often the major victims of poor living conditions, are not usually involved in meaningful ways in local environmental movement process. Local evidence shows that the success of local environmental movement largely depends on local social, economic, and political elites, including the supports from news and print media.

This elite social network, apart from charismatic leadership, is the major driving force for any emergence of environmental movement in local context. Some criticized that this elite social network serves the mutual purposes, and their presence in environmental movement usually brings social prestige and influence, which might be partially true. Apart from charismatic leadership and social network, wealthy citizens and their public drama were also important to highlight. Therefore, the question can arise that environmental movement in Dhaka serve whose and which purpose. The expectation of environmental movement is to address local environmental challenges by developing awareness among the state, society, media and citizens. The growing environmental movements in Dhaka could be characterized by greater diversity of movement tactics, mobilization of resources, as well as expansive citizens.
The RMT focuses on the “role of power and power struggles in mobilizing people for collective action” (Burton 1984: 48). The theory emerged with increasing observations in the 1960s as the “decade of movement” in the United States of America (Harper and Leicht 2011). The proponents of this theoretical argument was related to some of the major societal trends in America in that decade, and at the same time, those trends can explain why emergence of environmental movements can be a difficult choice for Dhaka.

First, in the 60s the US society experienced a growth of public foundations and church support (Harper and Leicht 2011). On the contrary, even though Dhaka has experienced a surge of non-governmental organizations they are mostly dependent on foreign aids, and very few actually could work independently due to their legal and financial obligations to the state or foreign counterparts.

Second, the 60s also experienced that mass media gave larger attention to the domestic social problems in the US (Harper and Leicht 2011). Until now, that did not work very well in Dhaka. The government claimed that there is enough freedom of speech or media liberty, but the reality demonstrated and also supported by different sources was that state had strong control and/ or influence on media (Khan 2014, Riaz 2021).

Third, in the 60s, there was extensive governmental support for social movements through agencies, such as the Office of Economic Opportunity, the U.S. Civil Rights Commission and various other commissions on the status of the women (Harper and Leicht 2011). All these things helped to energize the social and environmental movement. On the contrary, in fragile democracy, more particularly in Dhaka, the state didn’t provide any coherent environment or incentives for emerging social and environmental movement. Various national policies and laws (e.g., Digital Security Act, 2018) proved to be non-favorable to any form of movement emergence, and created a culture of fear (Riaz 2021).

Fourth, in the 60s, there was emergence of career social movement organizers which also helped for mobilizing the resources in the US (Harper and Leicht 2011). But in Dhaka, it is not a career; rather people engage in environmental movement as part of their passion or commitments to environmental conditions.

Finally, in the 60s, the US enjoyed an emerging body of literature, which also contributed to social and environmental movements and resource mobilization (Harper and Leicht 2011). However, there is not much research on how the RMT can explain social movement in fragile democracy, more particularly in the context of Bangladesh.

**Conclusion**

Across geographies, inequality, injustice, and grievances are the major drivers of any social and environmental movement, which aim to challenge traditional power and social and political hierarchies (Barnartt 2014; Tilly 1999). In several cities in the Global South, working class urban dwellers were able to use their collective agency to resist state “authoritative” power (Crosa 2009; Roever 2016). Even though protests and social movements increase spread, extent, and quality of democracy, in Bangladesh, which experiences largely an unstable fragile democratic condition, social or environmental movement does not function in that way like it does in developed societies or where the democracy is in advanced stage. Kayethuli environmental movement illustrates the pattern of urban politics and social movements in megacity Dhaka, which are mostly initiated by a very small and relatively homogenous social and economic elites, who share the common social, cultural, economic, and political identities. These elite groups are highly personalized and at the same time their working philosophies are based on patronimonial authority and loyalty. The criticisms might arise that the strength of these vertically based ties (i.e., extra-local) made it difficult for Bangladeshis to develop effective horizontal (i.e., local) relationships regarding social and environmental movements in the local level.

Fragile democracy played an important role in this dynamic. Peoples’ involvements are limited and emergence of most of the social and environmental movements are determined by the patronimal leadership based on charisma and patronage. Therefore, this was not surprising that even for communal level environmental movements, the national environmental group had yet to work more for an inclusive approach by involving the people who are mostly affected by unequal environmental burdens. They also needed to focus on the organizational aspects of environmental movement, which are highlighted by the theoretical arguments of the RMT.
The politics of the Kayethtuli civic engagement on environmental issues have gone through a gradual transformation from non-organized street politics to more organized civic engagement on the issue of environmental justice. So there was a gradual transformation of the process and the emergence of local resources and innovations, which ultimately contributed to the renewed urban politics and more redistributive opportunities, particularly for citizens' interactions with the state on issues related to various urban service delivery.

In the Kayethtuli movement, local marginalized people were the key agents of protests and demonstrations by demanding their environmental rights. These social agents were largely from the desparate clusters of the urban unemployed, underemployed, or other marginalized groups. This process demonstrated new forms of civic innovations, where marginalized people organized themselves, opted for common goals, demanded their rights, and opposed environmental injustice collectively. Usually these marginalized citizens had fewer or no opportunities to urban services, mostly due to their impoverished social and political status and unrepresentativeness in urban politics.

Bayat (1997) investigated a similar situation. Through this process, he mentioned that the people seemed to pursue two major goals:

- The first is the redistribution of social goods and opportunities in the form of the (unlawful and direct) acquisition of collective consumption (land, shelter, piped water, electricity, roads), public space (street pavements, intersections, street parking places), opportunities (favourable business conditions, locations and labels), and other life chances essential for survival and minimal living standards. The other goal is attaining autonomy, both cultural and political, from the regulations, institutions and discipline imposed by the state (1997: 59).

The Kayethtuli experience supported both of Bayat’s arguments. Also, empirical evidence demonstrated the failure of bureaucracies and “modern” institutions in Dhaka to deliver services to the poor marginalized citizens. Local people, with the help of national environmental group, initiated an environmental movement as a response to their demands and rights for environmental justice, where social network, charismatic leadership and some social dramas played role to a large scale.
References


