Dynamics of Valentine's Day Celebrations in Bangladesh

Dr. Zahidul Islam Biswas
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DR. ZAHIDUL ISLAM BISWAS muses on the growing popularity of the day of love.

Some parts of Europe have been observing February 14 as Valentine's Day for centuries, but a large-scale observation of this day in Europe and the USA started only in the 19th century. It attained familiarity across the globe in the last half of the 20th century; and in the last 20 or 25 years, it has been a popular celebration in many countries including Asian countries such as Bangladesh, India, China, Thailand, Japan, and even the Islamic Republic of Iran, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. The celebration has encountered strong resistance as well in many non-western societies. Some people have viewed the celebration as 'cultural aggression' by the west to displace or destroy local culture of similar essence of the non-western societies; religious communities such as the Muslims in many countries and some groups of Hindus in India have viewed this as a 'western' or 'Christian plot' to destroy 'sacred' Muslim or Hindu culture. Some people have criticised it as one of many 'creations' of capitalism to secure larger consumption of various goods and products. In Bangladesh, Valentine's Day celebration started in the 1990s, but it has not encountered any considerable resistance so far from any front. Meanwhile, it has gained huge popularity among the young generation. What are the dynamics of Valentine's Day celebrations in Bangladesh? In the following, I have attempted to explore this question by examining the emergence and development trajectory of Valentine's Day in Bangladesh.

There is no doubt that Valentine's Day celebrations worldwide are a clear manifestation of contemporary cultural globalisation. Cultural globalisation, simply put, is the transmission of culture globally, facilitated by the movement of people, objects, signs and symbols. Different factors in different times and ages played important roles in the globalisation of culture. The major world religions such as Christianity and Islam played important roles in the globalisation of religious culture. The Empires and colonial powers such as the Roman, British and French empires imposed or diffused their religious, social, political, administrative and legal cultures in the colonies. Modern national culture, which is based on nationalism and in nation state, is a powerful source of cultural globalisation. An idea of such culture travels from nation to nation. Celebration of Independence Day or National Day, for example, is a national culture, which is also an international culture because almost every nation state celebrates such a day. In the same way, translational secular ideologies such as socialism and Marxism, Enlightenment ideologies, liberal political discourse, civil and political rights, limited government, self-determination and capitalism played and still play significant roles in cultural globalisation.

Contemporary cultural is widely described as technology-driven, where economic liberalisation is a
great factor and where the USA is thought to be the most dominant actor. While modern information technologies like radio, cinema, television, satellite and cable, internet and internet-based social networking sites are prime vehicles for culture transmission in contemporary cultural globalisation, music, film, package programmes, news channels and advertisements are major cultural products. The history of celebration of Valentine’s Day across the world shows that factors like world religions, empires, modern national cultures and translational secular ideologies have very little to do with its spread around the world. Rather, all the abovementioned modern information technologies have played a pivotal role in the familiarisation and promotion of Valentine’s Day celebrations worldwide in the last and present century, hence, it can be described as one of the best examples of contemporary cultural globalisation.

It is needless to say that contemporary cultural globalisation and its means, that is, information technologies, have a great impact on the celebration of Valentine’s Day in Bangladesh as well. However, it is interesting to note that the celebration of Valentine’s Day started in Bangladesh when these modern information technologies such as electronic media, cable television, internet, etc., were not within the reach of the common man. All the information media played a pivotal role in familiarising the celebration in Bangladesh. Veteran journalist Shafique Rehman, in the early 1990s, took the first initiative to introduce Valentine’s Day to the young generation of the country. He popularised this special day through his famous weekly magazine Jai Jai Din. He inspired the readers of the magazine to write their love stories and love experiences, and with those write-ups, he published a voluminous Valentine’s Day special issue of the magazine for several years. In following years, other electronic and print media of the country also began instilling the ‘spirit’ of Valentine’s Day into the psyche of the young generation. As a result, within a few years, the celebration became popular among the young generation, especially among students. Even students of schools and colleges at the district level were aware of this celebration and started observing this day in the late 1990s.

Alongside the media, the ‘age-factor’ played a crucial role in making the celebration popular among the young generation. The media had successfully delivered the message of Valentine’s Day as ‘love for the opposite sex’, no matter whether the message was right or wrong. And the young generation received the message enthusiastically, and started to celebrate the day, without putting much cultural or political thought into it. Though at the same time, the media introduced some other special days like Father’s Day, Mother’s Day, Teacher’s Day, Friendship Day, etc., none of these days was more appealing than Valentine’s Day.

Following the media and the youth appeal came the profit-seeking market. It started making special offers and discounts on various essential and luxury commodities on the occasion of Valentine’s Day. Travel companies, hotels and motels in different tourist spots came up with special offers and discount rates. Cosmetics and gift items producing companies’ lucrative advertisements in the print and electronic media obliged people to celebrate Valentine’s Day as a special day. To make the day more special, different local and multinational cosmetics and luxury items producing companies, and mobile phone companies started to sponsor different cultural programmes, music concerts, etc., in big cities countrywide. These cultural programmes created a celebration condition, and succeeded in getting people together in a festive mood throughout the country.

The state’s role in this respect was neutral as opposed to liberal or conservative, which created a conducive atmosphere for celebration of the day. All major festival days are national holidays in Bangladesh, and the government usually undertakes various programmes on such days. In spite of the fact that Valentine’s Day celebration was gaining huge popularity in Bangladesh, successive governments did not any cultural initiative to promote it, nor did they discouraged people to celebrate it. The state-led resistance to the celebration in the name of preserving its ‘own’ culture and tradition is not rare. Many Muslim countries, especially Islamic Republic of Iran and Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates’ state authorities, not only discourage people to celebrate it but also take action so that gift shops cannot make red flowers, chocolates and other Valentine’s Day gifts available to consumers. Even China and Japan discouraged people to celebrate Valentine’s Day by promoting their own similar type of celebration. For example, in China 7 July is a special day carrying a message similar to that of Valentine’s Day. In this regard, the neutral role of the state of Bangladesh facilitated the idea of celebration of Valentine’s Day to be open to public judgment and whether or not they should accept it.

The political reactions towards the day in Bangladesh was also quite different from other Muslim-dominated countries. In some countries, for example Saudi Arabia, Islamic Republic of Iran and India, the celebration of Valentine’s Day was and is opposed on the grounds of religion and morality. While some people oppose it as a ‘culture of the Christians’, some oppose it from a perception India, as it was reported in electronic and print media, some activists from fundamental groups like Viskha Hindu Parishad and Bajrang Dal harassed couples celebrating the day in different places of the country and in some places, they forcefully made some couples get married (The Times of India, 15 February, 2008). However, this type of strong opposition did not occur in Bangladesh. Though some Muslim community leaders or imams in the mosques requested people not to celebrate the ‘anti-Islamic’ festival, there was no considerable resistance from any section of the public.

The global politics, terrorism and Islamism too played a great role in this respect. This celebration started in Bangladesh at a time when European and American ‘Islamophobia’ was affecting the whole world, Afghanistan was being run by the Taliban who were destroying thousands of years of historical and religious cultural artefacts, different global groups were gradually categorised by the USA and Europe as liberal, moderate, fundamental, etc. In that categorisation, Bangladesh got a ‘certificate’ as a ‘moderate Muslim country’. On the one hand, Bangladesh government was keen to uphold this western ‘character certificate’. On the other hand, the other Islamic political parties like Jamaat-i-Islami Bangladesh or Islami Oikya Jote who were supposed to oppose Valentine’s Day celebration as an un-Islamic culture did not want to be labelled as a fundamental or terrorist organisation by the global politics led by the USA.
Gradual depoliticisation of the people is another dynamics of Valentine's Day celebration in Bangladesh. The celebration has been popular so far only among the young people in urban areas; the vast rural population is still indifferent to it. These urban people have accepted the Valentine's culture without really thinking about it and it is a means of release from the drudgeries of life. They take little time to look at their life and surroundings critically. In this situation, on the one hand, the media is teaching them how various celebrations add enjoyment and vigour in their life, and on the other, the market is teaching them how consumption of different products give one a 'real' taste of life. This happened with Valentine's Day too. The media and market have depoliticised the masses in such a way that they do not question if giving a rose on that day is the best way to propose to a girl/boy or to express love to their partners. They do not question whether such celebrations correspond to their beliefs, attitudes and social arrangements. They celebrate this as the media tells them to, and they too need a respite from their busy lives.

The celebration of Valentine's Day in today's Bangladesh is, thus, a cumulative outcome of all the abovementioned dynamics, namely, contemporary cultural globalisation and the revolutions of modern technologies, the specific message of Valentine's Day and its appeal to the young generation, the ever-increasing busyness in people's lives, the global market economy and depoliticisation of the masses, the state's neutral role, and the 'powerlessness' or the 'strategic position' of the Islamists in Bangladesh in view of the contemporary global politics. The future of Valentine's Day celebrations is also depending on the dynamics. By analysing societal changes, we may foresee the future, though we cannot be sure of it.

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