

## **Artworks as Protest after Rana Plaza Collapse: Frames, Emotions, and Injustices in the Workers' Rights Movement in Bangladesh**

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### **Abstract**

This article details the framing of emotions and workplace injustices through creative avenues and the politics of communication by activist artists from all over the world that worked in the aftermath of the Rana Plaza collapse in 2013 at Savar near Dhaka in Bangladesh. Analyzing poems, photographs, and dramatic performances, used during the protests against Rana Plaza owners, factory owners and the government, I argue that such creative works not only frame the injustices against workers but also the reflexive, affective and moral emotions to motivate audiences in resisting such injustices. After the collapse of Rana Plaza, activists framed their protests trying to express their own anguish and incite different kinds of emotions among their audience that will in turn make them active in protest. Although it is impossible to measure the impact of these creative works of art as protest, these art works are from local and international artists and were presented to transnational audiences, which sheds light on the diffusion of the protest around the world.

**Key words:** Rana Plaza, injustices against workers, reflexive, affective and moral emotions, art, protest.

### **Introduction**

Whether it is popular or exclusive, art is a major component of protest that mobilizes material and symbolic resources, endorses movement framing, activates constituencies, sensitizes the broader public, and produces social change by renewing cultural traditions.<sup>1</sup> Joe Hill, the legendary labour activist and song writer once wrote, "A pamphlet - no matter how good, is never read more than once. But a song is learned by heart and repeated over and over."<sup>2</sup> Similarly plays, cinemas, photos, paintings, sketches, performances, and poems all are creative avenues that can be rich sources of political ideas and social analysis. When politics means discursive performative communication to some scholars<sup>3</sup>, some would be interested to gauge

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1 L. Mathieu, 'Art and Social Movement', S.A. Soule, K. Hunt, and D.A. Snow (eds.), *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, (Blackwell Publishing 2004), pp. 354-368

2 J. Goodwin and J. M. Jasper (Eds.), *The social movements reader: Cases and concepts*, (No. 12), (John Wiley & Sons, 2009), p 185

3 D.N. Pathak and S. Perera, 'Introduction: Towards an inconclusive scheme of performative communication', *Culture and Politics in South Asia*, (Routledge India 2017), pp. 1-26.

the politics of performance and the art forms, for example, on a stage or at the central Shahid Minar in Dhaka, with a discursive and political communication agenda. Not that these two are very different in their aims, the expressions of these two are also similar. This article looks at some such artwork that sprung after a horrendous man-made disaster in a building near Dhaka that housed seven apparel factories and collapsed in one morning of 2013. Using social movement studies framework, it analyzes the type of framing used, and affective influence of such art and performances.

After the collapse of the plaza, there were many difficult tasks including short-terms ones like conducting the rescue operation, transportation of the wounded to the hospital, their treatment, transfer of the dead bodies to their respective families, compensation, and rehabilitation of the dead and the wounded, and the families that lost loved ones in the tragedy. In the long-term, the long-awaited inception of inspection of compliance in factories for the state to initiate and monitor, to change sections of laws to improve the legal and human rights of the workers and setting up of state-based monitoring mechanism to keep the industry owners accountable for workplace environment and rights were also present in the public discourse. According to Hussain and Luthfa<sup>4</sup>, although majority of these activities were the responsibilities of the state, most of these were left to be handled by the NGOs. Therefore, activists had to remain alert to fulfill and monitor the tasks which were the state's responsibility. Nonetheless, this article describes the background of using art as resistance in the political movements and activism after the collapse. Furthermore, it explores the nature and scope of framing used in the selected artworks and most importantly how these framing aspired to incite nuanced forms of emotions (both reflexive, affectual, and moral).

This article explores the following research questions; what type of frames are used in the creative activism in the aftermath of Rana Plaza collapse, what audiences are targeted, and the types of emotions these frames play with. Before moving on to answer the questions, I present a brief description about what happened in the case of Rana Plaza and who were responsible behind the worst industrial disaster in Bangladesh, then a brief review of the literature that deals with framing, emotions, and audience of social movement for social and environmental justice. Then, I discuss the artworks chosen from an activists' website that has translated creative works for both vernacular and international audience.

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4 S. Hussain and S. Luthfa, "After Rana Plaza: Why were NGOs left to pick up the pieces in the aftermath of the Rana Plaza factory collapse?", *Open Democracy*, (Open Democracy 2014), <https://www.opendemocracy.net/opensecurity/shahadat-hossain-samina-luthfa/after-rana-plaza>, accessed on 2.12.2019.

### **Background: The Collapse and the Aftermath**

On April 24, 2013, traffic on the Dhaka–Aricha Highway was sparser than usual due to the nation-wide *hartal* called by the then-oppositions of the ruling Awami League.<sup>5</sup> Rana Plaza’s owner, Sohel Rana (who wanted to defy *hartal*) forced the workers to enter the building disregarding their concerns about it being vulnerable that was evacuated the day before due to visible cracks in its columns. The workers feared that if they did not work on that day, their salary would not be disbursed until the end of May and therefore, they were forced to enter the building that morning. Then there was a power cut, the generators started automatically and within a few minutes the plaza collapsed with a huge noise. The upper floors of Rana Plaza fell fast in succession making the bottom half of the building crush under its weight. Within seconds, the eight-storied building was reduced to a wreckage<sup>6</sup> and around 1175 workers were killed.<sup>7</sup>

Choudhury, Luthfa and Gayen<sup>8</sup> also reported about major structural problems and governance issues of the building that were responsible for the collapse. Despite being a vulnerable structure with numerous structural limitations, its existence and sustenance as an industrial hub for big western retailers expose the true vulnerability of the industry. This vulnerability stems from the fact that brands go to Bangladesh not only because of the cheap labour but also because of the lax rules and regulation of the government that overlooks many wrongdoings and helps the frontier capitalism to accumulate profit quickly. Structurally, the Plaza did not have RAJUK approval as an industrial unit, broke government’s building code of conducts and was built partly over a landfilled pond violating the Water Bodies Act and had a weak base. The vibration of the generators in each floor combined with thousands of sewing machines and undersized columns threatened the building’s internal strength that finally, led to the collapse of the structure. Savar Municipal Corporation could not stop the establishment of such a vulnerable structure that ignored the building code, fire safety code and water-bodies policy of the country.<sup>9</sup>

According to the police investigation the following individuals were found liable for the collapse of the building and the loss of lives: the owner of Rana Plaza, the owners

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5 Jason Motlagh, “The Ghost of Rana Plaza”, *VQR – a national journal of Literature and Discussion*, Vol. 90, Issue 2, (Spring 2014), <https://pulitzercenter.org/stories/bangladesh-ghosts-rana-plaza>, accessed on 2.12.2022

6 Ibid.

7 Z. Choudhury, K. Gayen and S. Luthfa, *Women in Readymade Garment Industry: Understanding Capabilities and Vulnerabilities of Female Workers in Bangladesh*, (Bangladesh Mohila Parishad, 2016), pp. 121-124

8 Ibid, pp.130-132

9 Ibid, p. 132

of the apparel factories situated in the building, government officers, engineers and town planners of Savar municipality, the Department of Inspection of Factories and Establishment (DIFE), and the RAJUK for not monitoring the building of such a structure violating laws of our land.<sup>10</sup> However, activists argue that in accordance with national and international laws, it is the liability of the government of Bangladesh to protect human rights in the country, and it has failed in its duty to guarantee the rights and safety of those factory workers. Both national and multinational companies including the retail brands that ordered from these factories have also failed to maintain their responsibilities under national and international law. The executives of the apparel factories in the building who ordered the workers to get inside the building to work, even though it was evacuated the day before due to the appearance of cracks, were also violating the workers' human rights. Even though these factories ought to go through extensive social audits to be eligible to supply for the big multinational brand retailers, the collapse is a transparent illustration of the futility and insufficiency of these so-called 'social audits' in Bangladesh.

Scholars also identified that right after the collapse, government agencies were as non-adept in tackling issues as they were in stopping the disaster from happening. Therefore, in the aftermath of the collapse, activists and non-government agencies, groups and associations of citizens carried out a major share of responsibility for rescue, relief, and rehabilitation of victims and survivors.<sup>11</sup> During the first few days of the collapse, the activists also had the burden of organizing on-street protests, to get the perpetrators arrested. In brief, general people and activists were involved in rescue, rehabilitation and many other activities as well as on street protests to ensure justice for the workers killed or injured at the collapse. They used street protests, road marches, collective blood camps, fund raising and a lot of creative works including photography, paintings, songs, plays (both for street and stage), poems and stories.<sup>12</sup> Across social movement literature, artwork has been regarded as part of the symbolic work of identity making and making of the movement itself. The cultural aspects of movements are no longer sidelined in such literature. The so-called 'artwork' is regarded as central to the framing of injustices and create awareness among the public discourse.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, pp. 135-136

<sup>11</sup> S. Hussain and S. Luthfa, "After Rana Plaza: Why were NGOs left to pick up the pieces in the aftermath of the Rana Plaza factory collapse?", *Open Democracy*, (Open Democracy, 2014), accessed on 2.12.2019

<sup>12</sup> Samhati, *24she April: Hajar Praner Chitkar [24th April: Outcries of a thous and souls]*, (Bangladesh Garments Workers Solidarity, 2015), and [www.outcriesofthousandsouls.org](http://www.outcriesofthousandsouls.org), 2018.

## Conceptual Framework: Framing, Emotions and Injustices

### *Framing*

In social movement literature, framing has a central place. A group of researchers conceptualize frames as “negotiated shared meanings” or “claim-making performances” embedded in a “repertoire of action” that include the definition of the injustice, the agency and the identity demarking ‘we’ versus ‘they’ with a view to organizing potential supporters, attract by-standers and demobilize antagonists.<sup>13</sup> Conversely, Steinberg<sup>14</sup> suggests that framing is a dialogic activity by the activists where they are ‘constantly responding to the standpoint of the dominant opponents’.<sup>15</sup> I use the concept of strategic cultural framing to understand the process of framing affective emotions through creative projects in the aftermath of a massive industrial disaster to garner the support of the by-standers in Bangladesh. In this analysis, my emphasis is solely on the creative rationale and process of the educated, middleclass, autonomous agents of political protests and not on the ‘amorphous irrational crowd’ that can create frames of moments of kick and moments for clicks for methodological limitations (see Chowdhury<sup>16</sup> for more on the amorphous irrational crowd and their picture-thinking)

Snow, Vliгентhart and Ketelaars<sup>17</sup> suggest that frames aid the interpretive work of protest first, by focusing attention by clustering the elements that requires attention

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<sup>13</sup> R. D. Benford and D. A. Snow, “Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment”, *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 26, 2000, pp. 611-639; W. A. Gamson, *Talking Politics*, (Cambridge University Press 1992); D. McAdam, J.D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald (eds.), *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings*, (Cambridge University Press 1996); C. Ryan and W.A. Gamson, ‘Are Frames Enough? (from The Art of Reframing Political Debate)’, J Goodwin, J.M. Jasper (Eds.), *Social Movement Reader*, (Wiley-Blackwell 2009), pp. 167-74; C. Tilly, *Regimes and Repertoires*, (University of Chicago Press 2006); D. A. Snow, “Framing Processes, Ideology, and Discursive Fields.” *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*. Snow, David A., Sarah A. Soule and Hanspeter Kriesi (eds.). Blackwell Publishing, 2003. Blackwell Reference Online, 23 November 2012: [http://www.blackwellreference.com/subscriber/tocnode.html?id=g9780631226697\\_chunk\\_g978063122669718](http://www.blackwellreference.com/subscriber/tocnode.html?id=g9780631226697_chunk_g978063122669718); M.N. Zald, ‘Culture, Ideology and Strategic Framing’. D. McAdam, J.D. McCarthy and M.N. Zald (eds.), *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings*, (Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 261-274.

<sup>14</sup> M.W Steinberg, “The Talk and Back Talk of Collective Action: A Dialogic Analysis of Repertoires of Discourse among Nineteenth-Century English Cotton Spinners”, *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 105(3), 1999, pp 736-780.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> N. S. Chowdhury, *Paradoxes of the Popular: Crowd Politics in Bangladesh*, (Stanford University Press 2019), pp. 31-61

<sup>17</sup> D. A. Snow, R. Vliгентhart and P. Ketelaars, ‘The Framing Perspective on Social Movements: Its Conceptual Roots and Architecture’; David A. Snow, Sarah A. Soule, Hanspeter Kriesi, and

and what can stay outside of the realm of attention. In addition, such frames also have “articulation functions” by which process the various dispersed and muddled elements of the scenario are bound together to convey one coherent set of meanings. Finally, frames have “transformative functions” too that proposes revising the way some of the highlighted objects are viewed or understood.<sup>18</sup> They also argued that the core framing task is motivational framing or the agency component of collective action frame<sup>19</sup> that involves amplification of a justification for action that goes beyond the diagnostic and prognostic framing. Motivational framing, in other words, constructs the motive that pushes actors to action, overcoming both the fear of risks of joining any collective action and the so-called “free-rider” problem. It addresses the obstacles to action by accentuating the severity of the problem, the earnestness of taking instant action, the possible effectiveness of joining the protest/ action, the moral obligation to act, and the improvement of one’s status.<sup>20</sup>

### **Emotions**

Emotions are much debated in the social movement literature and still gets peripheral importance as a factor influencing social movements. Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta<sup>21</sup> categorizes emotions as immediate reflex emotions that comes suddenly and subside fast, longer-term affective loyalties or orientations like moods, trusts, love; and moral emotions based on complex cognitive understandings, like ‘compassion for the unfortunate and indignation towards injustice’.<sup>22</sup> They also argue that even reflex emotions encourage unreasonable acts only occasionally, let alone the other types. Emotions involve complex judgment processes and make protestors more driven, alert, and rational. However, even crowds behave rationally, most of the times, except for during moments of sudden outbursts provoked by externalities. Even when these outbursts or other mistakes are performed, we need to remember that making mistakes is not irrational, to not learn from it and to continue to make the same mistakes are.

Emotions can be treated as strategic tools too, from the protestors’ point of view. One major motive of protestors is to stimulate the police forces into discrediting

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Holly J. McCammon, *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Social Movements* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition), (John Wiley & Sons Ltd., 2019), pp.392-398.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p. 395

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 396

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p 396

<sup>21</sup> J. Goodwin, J M. Jasper and F Polletta, ‘Emotional Dimensions of Social Movements’. D.A Snow, Sarah A Soul and Hanspeter Kriesi (eds.), *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, (Blackwell Publishing 2003), pp. 410-430.

<sup>22</sup> J.M. Jasper, “Emotions and Social Movements: Twenty Years of Theory and Research”, *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 37(1), 2011, pp. 285-303.

themselves through violent repression, for example, and such responses can be strategically incited by arousing reflex emotions. On the other hand, affective emotions that can be either positive or negative commitments to a group or cause and based on both fondness, instrumental calculations, and morality but are the reasons why protestors participate in movements instead of being by-standers. They do not just organize to follow material interests, but wants to benefit those they love and penalize those they hate.<sup>23</sup>

Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta<sup>24</sup> also argue that when people protest to protect a coastline or historic building, or want better work environment for garment workers, or the honor of a nation or group to which they feel loyal or responsible for are nothing less than affective loyalties. Also, respect and trust are crucial in politics since we tend to believe the statements of people and organizations who we trust. Movement leaders also often try to arouse a feeling of hope or optimism among participants, “a sense that they can have a positive, transformative effect through their collective action.”

In addition, compassion is a complex cultural moral feeling without which, the transnational movements against slavery, sweatshops, the World Trade Organization, or the US war against Iraq would not have become so broad. Compassion as an emotion is very important in understanding the cultural activities in Bangladesh after Rana Plaza collapsed. These activities when targeted towards the international audience compassion becomes very relevant.<sup>25</sup>

### **Framing Emotions for the Audiences**

The appeal to or use of emotion is one of the central features of motivational framing. Such a frame should incite action by drawing on the severity, urgency, efficacy, moral propriety, and status enhancement.<sup>26</sup> Protestors plan about what kinds of emotions to frame in their communication to incite the urgency of the situation that leads to protests, and what kinds of emotions to try to awaken among movement

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<sup>23</sup> S. Luthfa, “Creative work as protest: Framing Injustices against RMG workers in Bangladesh”, *The Daily Star*, October 2, 2019

<sup>24</sup> J. Goodwin, J. M. Jasper and F. Polletta, “Emotional Dimensions of Social Movements”, *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, David A. Snow, Sarah A. Soule and Hanspeter Kriesi (eds.), Blackwell Publishing, 2003, Blackwell Reference Online: 23 November 2012<[http://www.blackwellreference.com/subscriber/toenode.html?id=g9780631226697\\_chunk\\_g978063122669719](http://www.blackwellreference.com/subscriber/toenode.html?id=g9780631226697_chunk_g978063122669719)>

<sup>25</sup> Ibid

<sup>26</sup> D. A. Snow, R. Vligenthart and P. Ketelaars, “The Framing Perspective on Social Movements: Its Conceptual Roots and Architecture”, David A. Snow, Sarah A. Soule, Hanspeter Kriesi, and Holly J. McCammon (eds.), *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Social Movements* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition), (John Wiley & Sons Ltd 2019). pp. 392-410.

participants, targets, and opponents. When such protestors are making claims against or in favor of something in a public space as an arena<sup>27</sup> or a stage<sup>28</sup> to mobilize support for their cause, their aims are first, voicing their claims, and second, attracting attentions of the by-standers who would support them to achieve their claims. In such a stage, individual or collective actor(s) participate in public acts (like speeches, banners, festoons, leaflets, sit-ins, strikes, and more aesthetic forms of protests like street plays, songs, art-shows and so on) centering around their expectations, an active audience witness what is staged and some of them might become autonomous enough to take sides favoring or opposing the claims being made.

### **Art as contentious resource: Framing Injustice against Workers**

Tilly<sup>29</sup> defined contentious actions as performances which refers to the improvisations in mobilizing support. Mathieu<sup>30</sup> suggests that art and contention merge in practice when protestors mobilize artistic resources or works in their protests. For example, on street protests often parody traditional songs, chants slogans in verses, illustrate posters with drawings or photographs, pickets with a specific attire, and so on. Such aestheticization of protest happens with a politicization of art.<sup>31</sup> In protests, artwork can be used in two ways, as a practice or as a resource. When a piece of art being used by a protest was not meant to be political by its creator, is given a new meaning by the protestors, that art is categorized as a contentious practice. On the other hand, when art itself is one of the various resources that movements produce to mobilize, these are labelled as contentious resources.<sup>32</sup> However, we also find artworks that are not created for a specific protest but for some other protest in the past and is then co-opted as a tool in the repertoire of performance of a newer movement. I shall categorize them as legacy resources. All these three types of resources and practices are symbolic works of social movement mobilization.

<sup>27</sup> W. A. Gamson, 'Bystanders, Public Opinion, and the Media'. D.A. Snow, Sarah A. Soul and Hanspeter Kriesi (eds), *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, Blackwell Publishing, 2003. Blackwell Reference Online: 23 Nov. 2012 <[http://www.blackwellreference.com/subscriber/tocnode.html?id=g9780631226697\\_chunk\\_g978063122669712](http://www.blackwellreference.com/subscriber/tocnode.html?id=g9780631226697_chunk_g978063122669712)>

<sup>28</sup> S. Luthfa, "Showcasing Environmental Justice Movements from the South: comparing the role of old and new media in Bangladesh", *Society and Culture in South Asia*, Vol. 5, Issue 2, 2019, pp. 290–328.

<sup>29</sup> Charles Tilly, *Social Movements, 1768–2004*, (Paradigm publishers 2004)

<sup>30</sup> L. Mathieu, 'Art and Social Movement', David A. Snow, Sarah A. Soule, Hanspeter Kriesi, and Holly J. McCammon (eds.), *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Social Movements* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition), (John Wiley & Sons Ltd. 2019.), pp. 354-367.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 357

<sup>32</sup> Ibid



Whether popular or exclusive, art is a major tool of mobilizing social movement that supplies material and symbolic resources, supports movement framing, inspires constituencies, prepares the broader public, and produces social change by renewing cultural traditions. Such work is not simple to envisage and requires complicated processes of front and backstage work. Behind making the political or artistic performance presented front stage (media/ stage) there is always a back-stage manufacturing center where the political or aesthetic “would-be performers” juggle their ideas, write scripts, design the presentation of their ideas, form coalitions/ entourage, decide how to communicate her emotion, improvise, and rehearse – the everyday work of cultural production of activism happens. Mass and social media are such stages where activists showcase and sometimes accentuate their claims through performance.<sup>33</sup>

### ***The Data***

To understand how the creative work and its framing of emotions after the collapse of Rana Plaza worked, I have chosen a book that stores a lot of such works and has a website dedicated to it with English translation of most of the artistic works. From that book I purposively chose two songs, one photograph, one exhibition of memorial quilt, one street play, and one performance art by Bangladeshi and foreign artists. The book of anthology is produced and published by a left leaning activist group called Bangladesh Garments Shamhati (Bangladesh Garment Workers Solidarity). The book is a good source of secondary information based on years of research by activists. It contains a list of the deceased, wounded and missing workers with approximately the most complete information on their origin and demographics. It also presents a good collection of immediate responses from activists as well as artists who were protesting the injustices against the Rana Plaza victims from the very onset. The works of activists whose creative contents I am focusing on are presented here too. So, I cite the 'activist' artists and their works to reveal the deliberate process of framing against injustices. In the process, they use affective loyalties and moral emotions so that the injustice against the workers becomes well known around the world. The anthology has also been partially translated by the same group of cultural activists and is uploaded in a website.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> S. Luthfa, “Showcasing Environmental Justice Movements from the South: comparing the role of old and new media in Bangladesh”, *Society and Culture in South Asia*, Vol 5, Issue 2, 2019, pp. 290–328.

<sup>34</sup> Samhati, *24she April: Hajar Praner Chitkar [24th April: Outcries of a thousand souls]*, (Bangladesh Garments Workers Solidarity, 2015)

**Table 1: Framing emotions for different audiences**

Type of Audience	Artwork	Framing	Types of Emotions		
Bangladeshi	<i>Shunte paccho ki</i> - Song Contentious resource	Diagnostic & Motivational	Anger, Fear	Outrage	Indignation, Hope
	<i>Karkhana keno bondi shibir</i> – Song Legacy resource	Motivational	Anger	Outrage	Indignation, Hope
	<i>Jatugriha</i> – play Legacy + Contentious resource	Diagnostic & Motivational	Anger, fear, hate	Outrage	Indignation, Compassion, Hope
Both	The Last Embrace – photo Contentious Resource	Motivational	Fear, Anger	Outrage	Guilt, Compassion
Westerners	Dilora’s performance Contentious Resource	Diagnostic & Motivational	Horror, Fear, Anger	Outrage	Guilt, Compassion, Hope
	The Memorial Quilt Legacy+ Contentious Resource	Motivational	Anger	Outrage	Guilt, Compassion, Hope

Source: Author’s formulation.

### The Songs of Defiance

The first song is *Shunte paccho ki?* [Can you hear me?] by a group called *Samageet*, comprised of activist singers who wrote and first sang the song after Rana Plaza collapsed in Savar to create awareness about the inhuman working conditions in the ready-made garment sector and protesting deaths at Rana Plaza. Amal Akash wrote the lyrics and music was composed by Amal Akash and Khalequr Rahman Arko. I quote from Shahidul Alam and Rahnuma Ahmed’s translation, and find that the song speaks about hope, when they say, ‘Bury not a throbbing heart, I still breathe’. The poet says:

“Can you hear me out there?  
Hey people, can you hear?  
Corpses piled high, brick rock concrete  
Bury not a throbbing heart, I still breathe.  
Bury me not alive  
Mother, o mother  
I still breathe life”<sup>35</sup>

Here the emotion that the poet is aiming to frame first is the reflex emotion of anger/frustration of the workers’ plight who are literally trapped under the debris of Rana

<sup>35</sup> Shahidul Alam and Rahnuma Ahmed, [www.outcriesofthousandsouls.org](http://www.outcriesofthousandsouls.org), 2018, accessed on 2.12.2022

Plaza and symbolically under the juggernaut of capitalist exploitation. Some of the trapped workers under Rana Plaza had to be rescued by cutting their limbs off using blunt instruments and yet their basic urge was to breathe and to survive. All the surviving victims who were stuck under the rubble wanted to live, to escape from under this trap so that they were not buried alive! Their outcries reminded us that even before the big collapse the workers of the readymade garment sector were still caught under the steamroller of high output, and fast production in the apparel sector that accumulates corpses and crushes workers under its concrete greed. From under such traps, they are crying out to breathe. However, as soon as we read more, we realize that the wider goal of the song writer is to prompt indignation towards an inhuman system that confines the workers inside factory buildings and kills them.

This song also exposes the diagnosis of how the industry is making profit by using the workers lives. With their blood, sweat and tears, the profit earnings of the owners in Bangladesh and the foreign retailers increase and 'glints in the sky'. However, he does not forget to ask, "Why then must I burn, and as ashes return". The workers report, "Your dreams I stitch, with each handle I turn...Aah aah aah aah". And also laments,

"Why's factory a death trap, on worker body feeds  
Tears of blood flow freely, my sacrifice it needs."<sup>36</sup>

The writer does not only depict a story of the workers' struggles and sufferings but also vows to stop such systemic violence and exploitation that enables the march of all the corpses. He promised that she will not stand such marches. And retorts saying,

"March of the corpses, no longer will I stand  
Corpses piled high, must end, I demand.  
My heart still pumps, don't bury me alive.  
Mother o mother"

He reminds us that the workers who are either stuck under the collapsed building or the inhuman system of contracting and sub-contracting for readymade mass fast fashion brands are shouting to our conscience to stop the march of corpses. We must remember that the worker says, "I still breathe, mother, we still have life". The outcry of their souls is directed towards the arousal of compassion among the citizens of Bangladesh. The song writer wants to communicate with the people so that they help the workers live; to the global retailers so that workers are allowed to survive; and towards the world so that it enables their hearts to pump. This is the moral obligation the singers of the song are reminding us of. In this song, we found 'art as contentious

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid

resource’ that created diagnostic frames of the injustices done against the workers, aimed to incite anger, hope and outrage as well as compassion and moral obligations to favor the workers who were smashed under the heavy structure of exploitation by big brands, local owners and the government employees and supporters of the ruling party – the powerful people. This song is a great example of framing emotions as art to use it as a resource for a specific movement, in this case, the activism to deliver justice to the dead and the wounded.

Another song titled *No More Press Notes* written and composed by Kafil Ahmed exposes how successive governments dealt with the unacceptable working conditions in the sweatshops of Bangladesh. Research findings suggest similar results.<sup>37</sup> Though written and composed earlier than the collapse, the song is about the inhuman working condition of the RMG workers and the lax government response to curb such crimes in the factories, and therefore, activists used this song quite often to frame the inability of the government to take steps to stop the heinous death traps in apparel factories in Bangladesh. The song resonated with the spirit of the activists who were protesting to achieve justice for the dead and the surviving workers from the collapse. The song is based on framing the unjust hours and inhuman working conditions in the factories that are like prisons and when the workers die there, governments issue only press-notes although such notes change nothing after the tragedies.

Rana plaza collapse that tainted the image of fast fashion in the world forever, is regarded as the harbinger of changes in the sector, though ‘accidents’ like this did not stop happening. Since the perpetrators of such negligence never get punished, the process of misusing lax government rules, monitoring and governance for profiteering continues. More workers die or get hurt despite press notes published and therefore, the song writer wants the government to take some honest and sincere steps to bring change to the inhuman system where workers are locked from outside to stop them from ‘stealing’ and left alone to die when the factory building catches fire or collapses and not writing press notes only. Here, from Naeem Mohaiemen’s translation, the frames are diagnostic in the first stanza, where the poet laments the reality where s/he is locked up and burnt to death:

“You have locked me up, you have burnt me to death.  
Press Note, only Press Note  
I don’t want, I don’t want any more Press Note”<sup>38</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Z. Choudhury, K. Gayen and S. Luthfa, *Women in Readymade Garment Industry: Understanding Capabilities and Vulnerabilities of Female Workers in Bangladesh*, (Bangladesh Mohila Parishad 2016).

<sup>38</sup> N. Mohaimen, [www.outcriesofthousandsouls.org,2018](http://www.outcriesofthousandsouls.org,2018), accessed on 2.12.2022

In the next stanza the diagnostic frames turn into prognostic ones chanting slogans of defying the “prison”. He declares that the factory is a jail for thousands, where they work but never gets paid. Then he chants again and again “I defy you”, “Yes, I defy you”, “I defy my prison” and “I defy your prison”. It reads as follows:

“Trapped in this suffocating room  
I defy my prison  
I defy your prison  
I defy you”<sup>39</sup>

This song is especially suitable to illustrate the inefficiency of the agencies that are paid by people’s tax money and not perform their duties to ensure the safety of the buildings that houses our nations’ GDP earners. The stanza of defiance is used to stimulate a sense of determination to protest the present situation. It portrays the dream of any apparel workers to have a better life, away from the greed and exploitation. At the end, the poet urges the workers to unite and smash the chains that keeps them trapped inside a burning or collapsing factory building. However, the song also portrays a more profound urge to smash the suffocating system of exploitation. Here the song takes a moral emotional turn with motivational framing:”

“Somewhere a flute plays  
Time to wake up at last  
Come friend, Come with me  
Smash these chains at last  
Come workers of the world  
Smash these chains at last”<sup>40</sup>

Whether the chains were to be smashed or not, the factories of Bangladesh stopped locking the gates of factory floors while workers were inside after a lot of lobbying after the Tazreen fashion fire in November 2012, when more than 120 young workers burnt to death while the building holding their factory burnt for 12 hours. It is impossible to say if these songs changed anything, but awareness was raised even among factory owners not to lock workers inside.

Both the songs are researched and written by the activists who organized several cultural protest rallies to mourn the losses in Rana Plaza, to demand implementing rule of law and safer working environment in the apparel industry and to end the lack of justice for these workers. They had also raised money to salvage the injured workers, pay for their treatments and rehabilitations of the victim families until the Rana Plaza Fund was organized by the global retail brands to compensate the victims. Therefore, activists are framing the injustice using words that demonize the

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid

<sup>40</sup> Ibid

desire of global economy in the peripheral nations where sweatshops and sub-contracting in non-compliant factories were routine for the industry.<sup>41</sup> The activist artists have translated their work to upload in the websites to make global consumers aware about the death traps in Bangladeshi garment sector where their blouses are being sewn. The song writers and activists are deliberately using words for raising awareness so that the workers participate in the protest. Bangladesh Garments Solidarity works in the field to raise awareness among workers to voice their concerns too.

### **The Photograph that Haunts**

Now I shall describe a Photograph titled *The Last Embrace* by Taslima Akhter<sup>42</sup>, where two victims amid the rubble of Rana are seen in a deathly embrace in the Rana Plaza debris. The photo was taken on 25th April 2013, the day after the collapse. Time Photo Department named it the most haunting photograph from Bangladesh and expanded that it was also the most heart wrenching photo, capturing an entire country's 'grief in a single image'.<sup>43</sup> Eminent activist and photographer, Shahidul Alam called the photo deeply disturbing and hauntingly beautiful at the same time. He also argued that this photograph would torment us in our dreams to remind us to 'never again'.<sup>44</sup>

Taslima Akhter, the photographer and the President of Bangladesh Garment Workers' Solidarity who is also one of the editors of the book from where most of the artworks described in this article are taken, writes that for her how she felt after she took the photo was the most important. She felt uncomfortable looking at it— "it haunts me. It's as if they are saying to me, we are not numbers — not only cheap labor and cheap lives...As a witness to this cruelty, I feel the urge to share this pain with everyone. That's why I want this photo to be seen."<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> S. Luthfa, "Creative work as protest: Framing Injustices against RMG workers in Bangladesh", *The Daily Star*, October 2, 2019

<sup>42</sup> T. Akhter, "Death of a Thousand Dreams: a photo essay on the Rana Plaza collapse and the aftermath", S. Luthfa, T.U Khan and M Kamal (eds.), *The Bangladesh Environmental Humanities Reader: Environmental justice, development victimhood and resistance*, (Lexington Books 2022). pp. 135-144.

<sup>43</sup> Time photo department, "A Final Embrace: The Most Haunting Photograph from Bangladesh", <http://time.com/3387526/a-final-embrace-the-most-haunting-photograph-from-bangladesh/>, May 8, 2013, download date: 1.10.2018

<sup>44</sup> Ibid

<sup>45</sup> Samhati, *24she April: Hajar Praner Chitkar [24th April: Outcries of a thousand souls]*, (Bangladesh Garments Workers Solidarity 2015)

**Figure 1: The Last Embrace**

Source: T. Akhter, <http://time.com/3387526/a-final-embrace-the-most-haunting-photograph-from-bangladesh/> download date: 1.10.2018

As an activist photographer, she finds herself engaged in movements for better working condition, good pay and human rights for workers in the apparel sector of Bangladesh. She says she felt compelled to remain engaged with these workers because as humans we all deserve dignity in life and the work we do. So, she argued, as a Photographer, “I have not only taken photos, but I also took part in collecting the oral historical anecdotes to keep them in our collective memories as humans and not as numbers.” She uses the photograph to create the affective bonds for the whole world to notice and do something to change. This photo frames the horrors of being stuck under the crushed juggernaut of development. It framed the injustice against the workers in Rana Plaza, it framed the affective emotions of outrage and fear to incite moral obligation to take steps to stop such heinous crimes against the workers only for political or financial benefits of owners. The photographer also did not want people to forget what happened in Rana Plaza. She wants this photo to incite indignation that will compel Bangladeshi government to take actions to bring justice to those who were victims. As an audience, to me the photo makes me cringe with guilt for letting these inhuman practices to continue to take lives. The photo is haunting because it is both inciting outrage as well as churning up guilt among those of us, the bystanders, to feel the inefficiency of our actions.

#### **Transnational Guilt through Performances**

Carla Novi (UK), Helena Waldman (Germany), and Robin Berson (USA) are artists who has based their artwork on Rana Plaza collapse. They worked to create

awareness about the terrible working conditions in Bangladesh that seem too far away and disconnected from the westerners' lives though they are closely related to each other. This is partly because the workers that were crushed under the structure of Rana Plaza were producing fast fashion for these same westerners and the way such production regimes are constructed on the foundation of greed for profit, is exactly the reason that makes the workers' lives dispensable. All three artists' works were created from that guilt – the guilt of being part of such an inhumane system of exploitation in the name of development and employment. I present here the works of two of them, Novi and Bernson.

### 1. Rana Plaza Project

Two months before the collapse, Carla Novi visited Dhaka as part of making her documentary and she interviewed fifteen workers who worked in the-then Rana Plaza. Upon returning to the UK, when she heard about the deadly disaster, she returned to Bangladesh to search for those fifteen lives and found only one – Dilora who survived the destruction. Dilora was flown to Scotland to perform or represent the one voice that could tell the horror stories of how she survived. Novireports,

I thought that if I could amplify one voice in a country where the voices of garment workers are muted and westerners choose to consume products coated by odourless sweat and colourless blood; if one voice could tell her story in one of the countries actively engaged in 21st century slavery under the guise of supporting social economical development; if only that voice could be heard by those who can't hear beyond the borders of their comfortable lives...then, maybe then, we can experience social change.<sup>46</sup>

**Figure 2:** Performance by Carla Novi and Dilora (2015) in Scotland, UK



Source: HPC (athousandcries.org)

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, Samhati, 2015



Novi also wrote about the impact of the performance.<sup>47</sup> She argued that Dilorá's voice and her story captivated the audience in the UK. She reported that some of the audiences were in tears; others were absolutely numbed as they listened to her words. "When the performance ended, there was a deafening silence in the room."<sup>48</sup> Novi argued that people did not move because they were struggling to convince themselves about the trueness of the stories they heard about the lives of people who sewed their shirts. They left the auditorium without being the same. According to Novi, the audience also had to carry the voices from Rana Plaza to their hearts. Although it is impossible to measure how much impact and in what form such framing of emotions created by the artwork can have on the action of people who are ready to act against the injustices, there is a strong chance that artworks incite different types of emotions in potential supporters of a cause. Therefore, Novi's narration about how the audiences were frozen after the performance exposes the power of performance and art as resistance. According to her, for the audiences, it was possibly the first time to comprehend that behind every Rana Plaza victim (dead or alive), or every apparel worker in any developing countries in global south, is a real individual with a real life and story to tell. When this realization dawned something changed in that room.

Novi's attempt is showcasing first, the voice of a survivor of Rana Plaza collapse to describe the horror, second, effort to incite guilt and indignation among the western consumer and last and the most important one is the hope to create social change through the audiences. Novi's work can be categorized as a transnational performance of Rana Plaza Activism that is using motivational framing to bring change to the extant practices.

## **2. The Memorial Quilt**

Since this disaster resonated to the international consumers and protestors, through another work of photography exhibition using Bangladeshi photographs, Robin Berson, an American artist created a memorial quilt for Bangladesh. Berson connected the Bangladeshi Tazreen fire incident and Rana plaza collapse with that of New York's Triangle Factory Fire incident. Berson created a memorial quilt for the triangle fire victims who died of a factory fire in 1913 in New York. The situation of Bangladeshi apparel workers after Tazreen and Rana Plaza incidents encouraged her to sew another memorial quilt with photographs of Tazreen and Rana Plaza victims.

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<sup>47</sup> C. Novi, "On a Performing Art: Thoughts on Rana Plaza project", [www.HPC\(athousandcries.org\)](http://www.HPC(athousandcries.org)), 2018.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid

In this sense, the guilt for Bangladesh that grew out of these two incidents equated with that of the Triangle Memorial Quilt remembering an incident hundred years ago.

For the Bangladeshi quilt, Berson collected photos using help from Bangladeshi activists from the posters draped by family members of victims and survivors seeking for missing workers in Rana Plaza and Tazreen. Berson preserved and used these images as she received them –unkempt, crumpled, and faded. Berson states that like the Triangle quilt, many activists and volunteers were engaged to create the quilt for Bangladesh. However, contrary to the commotion caused by the Triangle blaze in New York and America that resulted in the development of many legal instruments and institutions to monitor workplace conditions, in Bangladesh the protesting workers were scattered and lost in the labyrinths of global capitalism.

**Figure 3:** Berson’s Memorial Quilt on Bangladesh



Source: Akhter and Ahmed 2015 HPC (athousandcries.org)

“What we’ve done,” says Berson, “is exported tragedy”.<sup>49</sup>Workers from countries like Bangladesh not only keep the line of production unbroken, but also work under severe, inhumane, hazardous conditions. Berson’s quilts have been exhibited in many US cities and she hopes that these quilts will prompt compassion among her viewers for the humanity, beauty, and vulnerability shared by the dead youths.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, Samhati, 2015

<sup>50</sup> S. Luthfa, “Creative work as protest: Framing Injustices against RMG workers in Bangladesh”, *The Daily Star*, October 2, 2019

Simultaneously, they can reinforce the sense of global workers unity and responsibility among people across the world. She has literally framed the injustice and used another tragic incident that is close to the American people's heart and juxtaposed the appearances of American women with that of the Bangladeshi women who lost lives a century later in equally ruthless working conditions. So, affective emotions of trust and moral emotion of compassion are targeted to be incited among the audiences at the global centre about how their greed is taking lives in the peripheries of global economy. Therefore, the injustice frames have been successfully mainstreamed with global audience.

### ***Jatugriha: The Street Play***

Last but not the least, I discuss here, a street play that was written by me, directed by Mohammad Ali Haider and produced by BotTala— a performance space. As an activist performer, playwright, and researcher, in this play, I have framed injustices against our workers in Tazreen and Rana Plaza out of the anger I had after these disasters struck us. The play is titled *Jatugriha* (The house of melted wax) that was produced by a Dhaka based theatre troupe comprising of youngsters, BotTala— a performance space in the aftermath of Rana Plaza collapse. I wrote this play after the Tazreen fire incident in November 2012, but only a month or so after our first show (March 15, 2013) of the play, Rana Plaza crumbled. I wrote the play so that we do not forget what the Tazreen victims went through. Before touting the growth and development of the country, we should not forget the lives that were burnt by the incessant hunger for profit, lack of compassion, and disordered governance in the name of development, fast and mass production of western fashion. I wanted everyone to remember how these workers must have experienced to burn to death. What were they pondering in their last minutes? We read stories in the newspapers that women cut off each other's locks in a desperate attempt to avoid the fire catching up to them. Churred carcasses were found at Tazreen in clinches just as they were captured on camera in the rubble of Rana Plaza.

After Rana Plaza collapse *Jatugriha* was updated with new information and scores of shows were held in worker-intensive neighborhoods of Savar, Ashulia, Tongi, Gazipur. Months and years passed, the victims of the collapse are yet to receive compensation, all missing victims could not be recognized even after DNA tests, local factory owners, the owner of the building or BGMEA never paid compensation. Even, the Prime Minister's relief fund could not show transparent disbursement of all funds it received during the aftermath of Rana Plaza which is mentioned in the play. Ten years after the collapse, *Jatugriha* is still relevant and is showcased on the 10th year anniversary.

**Figure 4:** Shows of Jatugriha in front of the infamous illegal BGMEA building and at a workers' rally in Savar near Rana Plaza in Dhaka



Source: facebook page of BotTala– a performance space, the theatre group  
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/bottala/posts/10165486639165526/>

In such a setting, in the play, on a van rickshaw, dead bodies started to talk. They take us to the last hours of their lives, how they were burnt alive. They say that no one killed them, they just died! Inspired from 'no one killed Jessica', I wanted to infuse the outrage against the system among the apathetic citizens for whom even after these worst disasters everything could go on as usual. Our audiences were mostly local middle class and workers, and I used Kafil Ahmed's song 'Press note' to

sketch the dream of better working condition to make them have hope than despair. The play was directed by Mohammad Ali Haider and translated by Munasir Kamal and Saumya Sarkar. The play opens with a song:

“Jatugriha burns, the bees burn too  
The Pandavas had a tunnel to escape  
But we have no exit.  
Still, no one murdered us  
We just died.

[Three-wheel van puller, Nobi, is trying to paddle fast. But his load is so heavy that his feet refuse to work. He feels dizzy and nauseated.]

Nobi: Ufh, the stench! I can still smell it! The smoke and the stench are stuck in my head! Bodies: Stuck in your head!

Nobi: ...So many dead! Burnt to ashes! Ashes and coals! They have crammed those coals, ashes and bones into these sacks. And the stench! So many mothers bereft because of them! They have murdered so many people!

Fancy: Stop it, Nobi bhai. I wasn't murdered.

[Song] Amare keu khun kore nai (no one murdered me)

Nobi: How did you die then, stupid girl?”<sup>51</sup>

Then the girl tells how she died and chats about how whenever the workers want their dues, or better working conditions, they are labelled by the owners as conspiring against the industry. They tell their genuine worries about what will happen to their families after they have died. Dead workers tell the audiences their stories. It creates a reality where they live on very little pay, inhuman personal vulnerabilities, and ruthless working conditions to accumulate profit for a very small group of irresponsible and greedy people who desire to make money disregarding the value and dignity of many workers' lives. These owners perceive the workers as numbers, so they are unmoved when a few or a few hundred dies by building collapse or fire.

In this play, I remind audiences about the atrocious working conditions that turned the workers into churred remains, or crushed limbs under the fake house of development via industrialization. The factory building were death traps just as the *Jotugriho* was for the *Padavas* in *Mahabharata*. It is built for the residents to burn alive. Capitalist industrializations are meant for unjust working conditions and collapse and burning of factories with workers locked inside. The framing of injustices against the workers in Tazreen or Rana Plaza is depicted here through the voices of burnt corpses. The emotions that are infused among the audiences are anger, outrage, guilt, and indignation. At the end of the play Kofil Ahmed's song incites hope to defy this prison, the *Jotugriho*.

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<sup>51</sup> S. Sarker and M. Kamal, <http://www.athousandcries.org/cul/can-you-here-me.html>, 2018, accessed on 2.12.2020.

### Conclusion

Rana Plaza collapse and its aftermath saw changes in the ruthless working conditions of the apparel industry in Bangladesh<sup>52</sup>. Scholars showed that in the wake of the Rana Plaza tragedy, the Accord and the Alliance were launched as two separate private initiatives alongside the national initiative to improve the workplace safety of the RMG workers in Bangladesh. Together, these three initiatives created multi-level labour regulations, there were many factories inspected, access to labor unions eased, awareness about the safety features of buildings increased, rented factory spaces are no longer accepted and other safety situations improved significantly<sup>53</sup>. Nonetheless, one has to be cautious against over-generalizing the success, and though some changes occurred, we are far from creating a sector free from making workers vulnerable in personal and workplace environments. Much of this success can also be attributed to the long-continued effort of the activists struggling to end such dreadful labour practices since the last few decades. Some of the credit might as well go to the artists who framed the injustice through emotional, affective messages that helped create moral obligation for people to work against such brutality. Most of such artworks emphasized on prompting key reflexive (anger, fear) and complicated affective and moral emotions (outrage, guilt, indignation, compassion, hope) in the public discourse to bring changes in the working conditions of apparel workers in Bangladesh. However, Table 1 shows that the artworks which were mostly for Bangladeshi audiences were not looking for inciting guilt as much as the ones that were for the western audiences. Also, the major forms of framing were either diagnostic or motivational in nature. The contentious resources were either created to protest Rana Plaza collapse or comprising of legacy resources.

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<sup>52</sup> M. Alam, P. Singh and K. Pike, "The Post-Rana Plaza Regime: Multi-level labour regulation in Bangladesh's RMG sector", *Relations industrielles/Industrial Relations*, Vol. 76(4), 2021, pp.708-732.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.