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VIOLENCE IN BANGLADESH SOCIETY: FALLOUT ON DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION

Perpetual violence signifies the pathological state of our society. When the regular institutional order does not operate in a society and unusual incidents mark its normal function, a pathological state sets in. It is very likely that any deviation from the normal institutional order would have negative bearing on the progressive course of a society.

Bangladesh has a long tradition of violence particularly in the domain of politics. In this paper I would lay special emphasis on the history, nature and consequence of political violence and its fall-out on the process of democratic transition in our country. It is well known that this country emerged as an independent nation in the wake of a violent struggle and the subsequent political history also shows that violence remained an inseperable part of our socio-political order. Apart from political sphere, violence at different levels of our society will also be briefly reviewed.

I. THEORETICAL OVERVIEW

What does violence (or for that matter violent action) mean? In one place, it has been defined in the following manner, "a violent action is one which involves doing harm, injury or damage to a human being, or to a non-human being, or perhaps, but more dubiously.....to things which are owned, i.e., property, and the harm or injury conceived of is characteristically physical, or at least, quasi physical......causing suffering and affecting health" (Arblaster 1975: 225). The above definition points out the disastrous impact of any violence and also underlines that it is detrimental not only to living existence but also to the surrounding that sustains us. However, there are few more things that need to be taken in to consideration in the definitional understanding of violence

1. The expression 'pathological' has been derived from the writings of Durkheim, however, not exactly with the same connotation he used for, see Aron (177).
and violent action. Riches (1986) reminds us of a cross cultural perspective related to the definitional understanding of violence. For example, hurting someone is not necessarily an act of violence (of course it is contrary in the case of a Western society) if we look at the traditional healing procedure for those in our rural areas who are considered as in the grip of some inimical supernatural being.

Apart from above, the question of legitimacy also assumes importance while labelling certain act as violent. In this respect, difference in interpretation is likely across the perpetrator, victim and witness of a violent action. Perpetrator may find some legitimacy in the action, victim would invariably call it illegitimate while the witness may take either of the positions. Some views underline the part of irrationality and bestiality of violence (Ibid:2)

Sometimes, a designer of the violence remains absent from the actual spot while the perpetrator bears only the responsibility. There are some acts which are physically not violent but have the potential of violence. Providing very low wage and the resultant starvation of a poor worker is no less a violence.

A pertinent question in this respect is where does the root of violence lie. Several answers may be provided in this regard. One view says that it is genetically determined and being inherited by a person from the previous generation. This kind of analysis has not gained much currency. The Freudian interpretation that it is the expression of death instinct in human being also did not receive permanent acceptance. Instead, the root of violence has been sought within the boundary of a society. It has got tremendous instrumental value in a society. At the plains of family, community or state, violent actions are undertaken to attain some definite goals.

Some may like to interpret it as the manifestation of degradation of values. But we should not miss to notice its heuristic value. Even when it becomes the part of a tradition, we should take care to look into whether it contributes to the sustenance of certain structure in the society. In a class structured society, violence is often resorted to resolve the contradiction that endangers the structure itself. State on behalf of the ruling class falls back on violence to contain the challenge to it. In a sharply class divided society, thus, the process of democracy often encounters obstacles particularly when a political movement very strongly goes against the

2. In our society violence has been recoursed to on the part of the state as a political wherewithal, as has been underlined in a recent study, Jahangir (1990).
interest of the ruling class. However, it does not rule out that a democratic structure may also provide the space for accommodating opposing class interests.

II. METHODOLOGY

The issue of violence has not been paid adequate attention. Thus, systematic information in this regard is not available that much. In view of given limitation of information, I have chosen content analysis method to present empirical facts that would underpin different observations being made in course of this paper. In addition, information from other secondary literature have been used also. In tune with the method of content analysis, I have picked up several incidents related to violence in our society, particularly in the sphere of politics, to reflect on their causal background as well as to understand its relevance to the process of democratic transition.

The remaining part of this paper will be organized in the following way:

iii) Violence at the level of family, neighbourhood and community;

iv) Political violence - a historical backdrop;

v) State, political parties and the students - heuristic recourse to political violence;

vi) Political violence and the process of democratic transition.

III. VIOLENCE AT THE LEVEL OF FAMILY, NEIGHBOURHOOD AND COMMUNITY

The central concern of this paper is political violence and its impact on the process of democratic transition in our society. However, a brief look at the phenomenon of violence at some other levels of the society would be supplementary to our understanding. Since we do not have adequate information to comment on its statistical frequency, we would like to confine to reflecting on the social perspective by way of describing few incidents.

Violence in the family is not a new phenomenon in our society. A fresh look into it may provide us its contemporary perspective. A tremendously sensational incident of this kind took place in the recent time was the killing of a young woman, named Rima by her fabulously rich and young husband. Before their marriage could sustain for few months the

3. It has been elaborately reported in a widely circulated Bangla weekly, Bichitra (10 June, 1988).
family was doomed to extinction. The confession of the killer husband took
the nation aback. Investigations revealed that manifold tensions affecting the
relations between the husband and wife gradually led to the shocking end
and, in turn, it refers to the changed normative and cultural perspectives of
our society. Booming materialistic culture renders a new dimension to the
goal of the individuals of our society. Well-being of the life is perceived
through material gains being made in the society. Materialistic culture
largely determines the level of social status and power which often leads
an individual to shift from legitimate to illegitimate means of appropriating
wealth. On the other hand, spreading urban culture, liberal attitudes along
with the expansion of emotional space beyond the family result in a new
social perspective expanding the horizon of intra-personal relations between
the sexes (e.g., the case of extra-marital relation). Although the new social
perspective is largely class specific, (encompassing urban middle and upper
class) it is infusing tension into the old normative structure. From the Rima
murder story, we see the reflections of above observations. The husband of
Rima was involved in drug trafficking as well as extra-marital relation
which was vehemently opposed by the slain wife and Munir hardly could
withstand that opposition. Sensing the risk of leakage of news by his wife
Rima, the most inhuman decision was taken by the husband, the killing of
the wife. However, post-killing incidents show that Munir could not absorb
the shock of the dastradly act carried out by himself.

Violence at the level of neighbourhood and community erupts for
various reasons, which may include gaining control over power structure,
economic resource, exertion of power by the resourceful people. I would
mention here two separate incidents to exemplify the rural violence.

In the suburb of Jessore, one person named Kashem was abducted and
later killed in the night of 22 May, 1988. Above mentioned Kashem was
the dweller of Sultanpur village and a building contractor by his occupation.
Owing to poor economic condition he could not continue his studies beyond
the intermediate level. However, his philanthropic attitudes towards fellow
villagers substantially contributed to his growing popularity. Previously, he
was associated with a political party but disengaged himself later on. The
people of Fatehpur union (to which Sultanpur village belongs to) almost
compelled him to file nomination in the union parishad election of that
year. However, for unknown reasons he withdrew his candidature. After the
election, a group of people started terrorizing the residents of this village and
at one stage killed two persons. The leader of that group was related to the
incumbent chairman of Fatehpur union parishad. Again, upon the request of
the villagers, Kashem stood up against the violence. In course of this opposition, he was abducted and brutally killed by the ruling group of that union parishad.

The second story depicts the violence out of unbridled power enjoyed by a rural elite in a village of Noakhali. It happened in the night of 16 April, 1988. The preamble of the incident shows that garlic was stolen from the field of that powerful elite. A rural magician was consulted and he apprised that a poor fellow named Naku of the adjacent village had stolen the garlic. Then that powerful person sent a group of people to recover the stolen goods. Afterwards, the house of Naku and his neighbours had been ransacked and were thrown out of their houses. Poor Naku and his neighbours could not do anything against the repression. This incident very clearly shows the consequence of repression out of exploitative social relations in rural Bangladesh. In the urban areas also factionalism along neighbourhood line is quite visible and at times that result in violent arms clashes.

IV. POLITICAL VIOLENCE: HISTORICAL BACKDROP

Widescale violence in the domain of politics which marked the years after 1971 in our country was in fact a legacy of a particular political tradition predominating the time of pre-independence era. In late 1940s, severe communal strife followed the partition of Bangal. Within the framework of the theological state of Pakistan, regional exploitation crept in and took manifold shapes. From the very early days of its inception the ruling regime of Pakistan, overwhelmingly dominated by the West Pakistanis, hatched the conspiracy to overhaul the cultural fabric of our society which first reflected in an abominable design to reduce the status of Bangla language. Dhaka University students braved against this move and, in course of language movement, several students were killed in early 1952 by the brutal force of the Pakistani state, people here first encountered the violent behaviour of the state.

In the successive years, democratic aspirations of the common people of Pakistan were nakedly trampled by the ruthless military dictatorial regime. Budding democracy was crushed down rendering the state a violent appearance. Force (or legal violence) replaced the mediating role of a democratic state. Accompanying regional exploitation of the then East

Pakistan by its western counterpart disillusioned the elite and common people here.

Repression and violence of the ruling regime of Pakistan culminated in erstwhile East Pakistan through the formation of a notorious students organization (which was called the National Student's Front or NSF) directly patronized by the state. Thugs, goons and the anti-socials took the rein of that notorious organization in order to muzzle the democratic voice risen against a torturous state. Terror set in and shamelessly attempted to eliminate any democratic protest against torture and repression. A Dhaka University teacher was mercilessly beaten by the thugs of the NSF while exercising the minimum democratic right to differ with the state.

Meanwhile, lives of many common people, students and other professionals were laid down in course of democratic uprising. In turn, the moderate political parties resorted to different protest programmes which had the element of potential violence. Strikes, demonstrations, hartals and killings comprised the political events in the pre-independence time which largely influenced the political happenings in the post-independence era.

Complicacy of the political problems between the two parts of Pakistan deepened further when it was alleged by the government of Pakistan that a neighbouring state with the connivance of the most popular party in the then East Pakistan was conspirating to disintegrate the country. Permanent distrust between the political elites of two parts of Pakistan took a strong root. This kind of distrust substantially contributed to the formation of militant attitude on the part of Bangalee population here who almost lost hope in the efficacy of a democratic way to stand up against the repressive order of the Pakistani state to bring in any change to it. Successive military regimes hardly understood the long term contribution of the democratic means to contain the opposition, instead they played with democratic institution rendering it a fraudulent character.

Long repressive process of the dictatorial regimes was formidably challenged by the people of two parts of Pakistan in late 1960s and culminated in early 1970s. Despite repeated violence, the ruling regime could hardly put down the strong movement of the people. In the wake of the movement general election was declared in the early part of 1970.

Bangalee nationism which swept every nook and corner of this part of the country crucially decided the outcome of the general election in 1970. The Awami League emerged as the single largest party in Pakistan National Assembly with the requisite strength to form the government independently. Unfortunately (and perhaps resonating the logic of the long drawn
exploitative process of the West Pakistani regime) a fresh conspiracy was on the anvil to deprive the single largest party in the National Assembly of assuming the power of the future government. What was ironical for that occasion was the unholy alliance between the military and few political parties (remember that late Z. A. Bhutto's Peoples Party objected to the Awami League's assumption of power). The first session of the Pakistan National Assembly was deferred for an indefinite period.

Not very unexpectedly, the entire Bangalee nation rose against this conspiracy and took to the street. Violent movements in the early days of March 1971 crippled the governmental machinery in East Pakistan and the West Pakistani military junta utilized that period to take the preparation for an unbelievable move which after few days baffled the entire world. In the process, the feeble democratic formation of the Pakistan society once more demonstrated its extreme vulnerability to the evil designs and conspiracies of the politico-military dictatorial force.

In the night of 25 March 1971, ruling Pakistani Military regime unleashed the phase of massive killings and destruction against the entire Bangalee nation blocking for ever the possibility of any democratic transition. Under the situational compulsion, people here took up arms and for months fought against the forces of aggression.5

V. STATE, POLITICAL PARTIES AND THE STUDENTS: HEURISTIC RECURSE TO POLITICAL VIOLENCE

Through a violent military struggle, which continued for about nine months (late March to mid of Dec.) in 1971, Bangladesh emerged as an independent state and that simultaneously brought a complete end to the existence of erstwhile Pakistan. Of course, large scale destruction, killing and torture on women and children marked the events that took place in nine months. By virtue of the mandate of the people in the general election of 1970, the Awami League assumed the political power of the newly emerged state. However, only within two months of its assumption of power, the ruling party had the bitter taste of schism in the fold of its students

5. To know about the language movement of 1952, successive military takeover before 1971, state autocracy, disparity against the then East Pakistan, formation of the NSF and the political programmes of the opposition parties between the period 1947-70, see the following literature: Haque (1972), Hasanuzzaman (1984), Jahan (1980) and Umar (1970).
organization. Subsequent events exemplified that the incipient schism had the potential to infuse serious instability into the political process of the country. It is needless to mention that the mounting instability not only jeopardised the democratic formation of the society but also eventually led to the making of a violent phase of the political history of this country.

It was found that very soon after the independence, one section of the Charta League (students wing of the Awami League) led by Rob and Shiraj advanced the idea of a genuinely revolutionary government to serve the peasants and workers, while the other section led by Siddique advocated transition to socialism through parliamentary means under 'Mujibism'. (Maniruzzaman 1980: 167) The leader of the Awami League late Sheikh Mujibur Rahman sided with the latter group. Split in Chatra League subsequently produced the similar impact on the labour front of the Awami League and the Association of Freedom Fighters. Afterwards, a new political party with the name Jatiyo Samajtantrik Dal (JSD) came into being and received the support of above disgruntled groups. As a part of the political ideology, JSD preached the socialist revolutionary politics and called for a class struggle by the revolutionary classes comprising of workers, peasants and other deprived sections of the society against the exploiting classes primarily represented by the Awami League. Besides the JSD, another political party working from underground, embarked on militant politics and the party was known as Sarbohara Party led by late Siraj Sikder. It comes out very palpably that the post-independent pre-dominant oppositional politics was substantially radicalized and ideologically corroborated the armed campaign that broke out intermittently.

In the changed milieu, the new state turned autocratic and recourse to force, quite often repressive to a considerable degree, to contain the challenge of the opposition. Formation of the para military force, the Rakhi Bahini, crystallized the repressive mechanism the new state installed against the politics of the opposition. The subsequent events helplessly proved the failure of the democratic polity the common people of this country aspired for long.

Resultant political void out of the abolition of multi-party democratic political system in the early part of 1975 created the opportunity for a dictatorial backlash under the leadership of few military officers. In course of events, Sheikh Mujib along with most of the members of his family got

6. More account of the Sarbohara Party may be obtained from Amin (1985).
annihilated. Beastly violence followed in the political arena ridiculing the democratic process of the country badly needed to accommodate the conflicting interests of the society.

What is commonly known as the civilianization of the military regime in mid 1970's even though allowed a feeble process of democratic practices, the state could hardly afford to get rid of violence to sustain the political power. During the regime of General Zia, besides a relative calm at the level of politics, people witnessed the conspiratorial designs the state hatched now and then. The proverbial statement of Gen Zia, "I will make politics difficult" is really remarkable. Also remember his another remarkable statement, "Money is not a problem." Corrupting the political community and invoking factionalism in the military organization created the opportunity for future political violence. Once more, thugs and goons (remember the names of Galkata Kamal" and 'Imdu') received the patronization and blessings of the state and have been skillfully used against the politics of the opposition. However, steep factionalism in the military eventually led to the killing of Gen. Zia in 1981.

The so-called civilian facade of a military regime was turned down by a new group of political elites whom General Ershad assembled behind him. Ironically a section of the political community rallied behind him against the interest of the fragile democratic process. During the regime of Ershad, state not only intensified political violence but played with the democratic institutions of the society to earn some legitimacy to his autocratic rule (one of the parliamentary elections under Ershad got famous for the suppression of news known as media coup). Besides, on several occasions, ruthless killing of the students nakedly unflurled the appearance of state violence. One may remember here the ways students have been brutally killed and tortured during the education policy agitation in early 1983 or driving a police truck through a student procession. Moreover, conspiratorial politics on the part of the state went to the extent of engaging agents of different intelligence services to sabotage the programmes of the opposition parties. In the face of vehement mass upsurge waged by the opposition parties, dreaded hooligans were freed from the jail to kill the students participating in the agitational programmes and which culminated in the death of Dr Milon (an office bearer of the Bangladesh Medical Association) in the campus of Dhaka University.

When we look at the relations between the political parties and try to understand the points of their differences we gather some perceptions as to their inclinations towards violence. For that purpose, we may divide the
existing political parties of our country into four major ideological groups. Apart from the rightist fundamentalist and the leftist leaning to the marxist ideology, other two groups subscribe to two variants of nationalism, namely Bangalee and Bangladeshi nationalism. The above ideological differences critically influence the relations between these parties.

In the wake of independence of this country, rightist fundamentalist politics was banned and one of the important reasons for that was the collaboration of those parties with the enemy side (i.e. Pakistan army) during the War of Liberation. In 1976, the Zia regime allowed the political revival of the fundamentalist parties and, as a result, parties like Jamat-e-Islami and Muslim League resumed their political activities. Parties belonging to this ideological camp are at the loggerheads with secular ideology which was incorporated as one of the founding principles of our constitution. The contradiction between the ideologies of secularism and Islamic fundamentalism has constituted one of the major bones of contention in our political process. While reconciliation between these two diverse ideologies seems to be a remote possibility, frequent eruption of violence between the supporters of these different ideologies severely hampered the co-existence of different creeds in our society. It is noteworthy that while secularism does not negate the existence of religion, fundamentalism places a particular religion above the state thereby subordinating the religions of others.

Ideological tension between the tenets of Bangalee and Bangladeshi nationalism has also critically polarized the political spectrum at the cost of democratic tolerance. The subtle relation between politics and culture remained ambiguous and both assign supremacy to one over another in a different manner. Bangladeshi nationalism emphasized the separate political and religious entity while determining the nationhood of the people of this country and Bangalee nationalism regards the cultural perspective as the premise for the characterization of our nationhood.

The politics of left ideology could not make any significant breakthrough after 1975 and their political programmes, on most occasions, got tuned to those designed by the so-called moderate parties (primarily the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party).

Violence has been frequently recoursed to by different political parties while interacting with each other. Even if we recall very few incidents in this regard, we can comprehend the gravity of the crisis. Apart from the killing of two elected Presidents of this country, many prominent political leaders came under gun attack by their opponents. For instance, a political
procession which was led by present Prime Minister Khaleda Zia was attacked by the gunmen. Sheikh Hasina's residence came under gun attack when she was very much there. In a political meeting, which was being addressed by the ex-president Khondakar Mushtaque Ahmed, a powerful bomb was blasted leaving a couple of people dead.

Political violence does also signify steep competition for the political power. Political violence has got other dimensions apart from the expression of ideological struggle and control over political parties to the economic resources in a country of severe scarcity. In a society market by stagnant and dependent capitalism with a broad peasant base along with prevailing illiteracy, the accountability of the political parties to the populace is hardly reckonable (it could be different had there been a sustained democratic process). Thus political violence becomes a popular means for the power aspirants to ascend into power. Ironical and equally ridiculous to note is that the fate of the democratic process in this country is largely contingent upon the desires and likings of the donor countries and the degree of pressure they can exert upon different dictatorial regimes.

Since the resource channel now encapsulates the vast rural areas competition to gain control over rural power structure has reached the grass root level. Sharp competition often leads to massive violence. In a recent research finding, it has been shown that it has been increasing over the years at an alarming scale.7

Historically, the students community in this country have been playing a pivotal role in different political movements that have very significantly shaped the political history of this country. The language movement of 1950s, anti-autocratic movement in 1960s, independent struggle in 1971 as well as the very recent democracy restoration movement were spearheaded by the students community of this country. Although in course of these movements, people from different walks of life (e. g. workers, peasants, middle class professionals) have come forward to join, the first move in most occasions had been taken by the students. One important reason for the apathy to initiate political movements on the part of different section of the society derives from very limited credibility the political parties enjoy. Nevertheless, the students community takes the lead to initiate movement against different autocratic regimes.

7. Violence over the last few years at the union level election has been recently reported in, Rahman (1990).
If we look at few observations made in a reputed weekly with regard to the role of the students in the democratic movement of 1990, we may get some insight into the importance of the student as a catalyzing force in this movement. After the failure of the opposition parties movement in late 1987, there was a lull for a long period in the opposition camp owing to the internal disunity. Already I have mentioned that there is a lot of controversial issues that breach the opposition unity and hardly there could emerge any national issue to supersede the narrow party interest. One political commentator remarks on the students in the following way, "Problems in the public life aggravates after the Middle East crisis. Human siege on the central secretariat signified the grievances of the common people and their deep aspiration for a change. A common platform of the leadership was sought by the people and through the creation of All Party Students Unity on 10th October that dream came into light. In the task of organizing the people's upsurge and to take it to the projected goal, the students community under the leadership of All Party Student's Unity played the most effective role. On Oct. 11 most of the prominent student leaders were lathicharged by the police and got injured. In no time the student community took to the street with the strongest resolution of overthrowing the autocratic regime and not to pull back until they succeed in it." One may observe that above pivotal role of the student community to carry forward different political movements is a recurrent phenomenon of our history.

On account of crucial importance of the student community to wage successful political struggle, most of the universities and educational institutions have become the hot bed of national politics. For very obvious reason, most of the political parties would like to ensure that their respective student organizations occupy and dominate the political space of various universities and educational institutions. A piece of revealing information with regard to above observation is in order. It actually pertains to an interview given by an armed cadre of a student organization to a reputed weekly and illustrates the cruciality of the students in our national politics. Excerpt from the interview follows: "Minto observed that in order to keep alive the struggle of the students he has taken up arms. When he was asked to reflect on the necessity of a student movement he asserted that in the context of useless national politics only the students are playing the concrete role for our nation. He says that if his organization does not

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survive their opponents would come and occupy the university. Then it will be very difficult for them to wage a movement. He strongly believes that they do not survive merely on arms, certainly they have support among the general students." 9

VI. POLITICAL VIOLENCE AND THE PROCESS OF DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION

It hardly takes any trouble to comprehend the polar diversity of political violence and the transition to democracy in our society. Political violence is largely detrimental to the essence of democracy. In a heterogeneous society like ours, a degree of consensus in terms of ideology, creed, religion, control of economic resource, remains to be a crucial necessity for the emergence of a democratic order. It is, of course, difficult to precisely ascertain the form of class and political structure needed to sustain a democratic process. There is no doubt that a sharp class contradiction substantially reduces the democratic tolerance. Even the experience of Western countries show that the state recourses to force when the existing social order is at stake.

On the other hand, mere economic redistribution is not a sufficient factor to attain a democratic polity. However there should not be any skepticism that a considerable equity in resource distribution is the necessary factor for the sustenance of a democratic polity. Welfare state programmes in the West showed how did they try to reduce the pitfalls of a capitalist structure, i. e., steep unequal resource distribution. On the other hand, the experience of the socialist countries also demonstrates that a democratic culture is more than mere economic homogeneity at the social level.

In our country, we have multi-pronged problems affecting the social space. Economic inequality along with widescale poverty endangers the social order in urban and rural areas. Recourse to frequent violence even by the moderate parties demonstrate the most dangerous element inimical to the process of democratic transition. Although, paradoxically on paper few of them denounce the use of arms in politics. Historically, democratic means hardly played any role for the change of political regimes in our country rather the political violence did it, thus different political parties take more care to build up a cadre base in the party who can effectively carry out political violence.

Political violence rejects the space of others in the domain of politics. Perfect democratic polity grows out of the existence of self and other.

Political violence does not allow the customs and conventions of a
democratic polity to flourish and thus the issue of democratic transition
remains a theoretical project. At present, in our country we are heading to
the crisis of democratic norms where the political parties have shown very
little respect for each others' opinions. And if our economic transformation
is disturbed by continuous political violence, that will be used by the hated
authoritarian forces to appropriate the political power again.

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