Youth, Chandabaji, And Small Arms – A Political Nexus!

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Introduction

No society is free of social evils. Neither does this paper attempt to be philosophical on the issue, nor does it preach moral values. What this paper aims to do, however, is to examine one of the major forces of today's society, namely, the youth force and the compulsions and means that link some with the criminal underworld. In Bangladesh, social evils are a reality and increasing everyday. Crimes such as theft, hijacking, murder, dacoity, rape are to name but a few. This paper will mainly concentrate on extortion, rent-seeking and illegal toll collection under the banner of a Bengali term, 'chandabaji'. Are the youths a party to it and if so, why? Who are their targets and how is chandabaji sustaining in a society that has law enforcing bodies? It is learnt that almost all chandabajs are well-armed. In that case, how do they get access to small arms? To answer these queries, the paper will explore whether a nexus prevails between chandabaji and mainstream politics, and if there is one, what mechanism allows the nexus to sustain.

In order to gather basic information as to who the chandabaj are, who their targets are, and how they sustain, secondary sources have been mainly used. To be more precise, three consecutive months of two Bengali newspapers (Bhorer Kagoj, and The Daily Inquilab) have been thoroughly scanned. Based on the findings, trends have been identified. A few interviews were taken to confirm the reports published in the newspapers. It must be mentioned here that these are reported incidents, and the actual scenario and its intensity may be well above the coverage they receive. However, it will be useful to find a trend based on these reports and in the process help to enrich this study. The data has been compiled from the period between January to March 1998. Before going into the findings, following concepts need defining
and explaining: (i) Youth, (ii) Small Arms and (iii) Chandabaji.

(i) Youth of Bangladesh

Youth can be defined in terms of age, physical appearance, or socio-economic conditions. In other words there appears to be no universal definition of the term ‘youth’. The West or the developed countries define youth slightly differently from the developing world. Encyclopedia Britannica defines youth broadly as the transition stage between childhood and adulthood. It gives a biological definition - a stage during which certain physiological changes occur, and a socio-cultural one - a stage during which youth is faced with certain problems of adjustment, both to self and to society at large. The United Nations has defined 15 to 24 years as youth, which has been adopted in many of the Western countries. While some of the Asian countries have extended this to 30 years, in Nepal, youthhood starts as early as 10 years. In India, the official age group of youth is between 15-34 years. The reason being, according to one author, “the social, cultural and psychological problems of adult life and responsibilities.” Then there is “extended youth” meaning youthhood being extended due to prolonged education and thereby postponing the burden of responsibilities. On the other hand, in developing countries like India, there is the absence of youthhood or even childhood among the poor as they enter into a phase that is not suitable. The author cites the example of a female child entering into marriage and a male by being employed and thereby shouldering responsibilities.¹

Keeping the Western and Indian definitions in mind, there is a middle-ground definition for the Bangladeshi youth. In the Fifth Five Year Plan, 1997-2002, published by the Planning Commission, youths are between the age of 15 to 30 years. In Bangladesh, 30 per cent of the total population comprise of youth. According to the census of 1991, the number of youths was 360 million, of which 120 million were unemployed and 220 million were illiterate. By now the total number of youths is estimated to be about 400 million of whom 200 million are said to be unemployed or under-employed. According to the Fifth Five Year Plan, youths are “handicapped with severe poverty, lack of adequate skill and training and thus most of them remain outside the mainstream of development paradigm.”¹² The age limit for the entry into the Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS) is 30 years for both sexes. One assumption may be drawn that officially a person is no longer considered a youth once he or she is employed. However, in the context
of the prevailing system of maintaining birth records in Bangladesh, one should not give too much emphasis on age as an indicator. Among the educated, there is a gap of at least two to three years between the official/certificate age and the actual date of birth, and in the rural areas and among the illiterate, age is determined simply on guesswork. Physical appearance can also be deceiving especially due to poverty, malnutrition, hardship, all of which can make a person look both younger and older.

(ii) Small Arms in Bangladesh

Parallel to the flow of major weapons of mass destruction, another category of weaponry, equally dangerous, is the proliferation of small arms. Small arms are defined as crew portable weapons and therefore, its destruction power is very low in intensity compared to that of a conventional weapon. Yet, in most of the conflicts of the world, weapons such as revolvers, rifles, explosives and those of the similar kind are the major, if not only, means of violence. The common perception is that small arms include only arms that are small in size. But in reality, they even encompass anti-tank weapons and rocket propelled grenades. Studies on wound ballistics have shown that small caliber weapons with higher muzzle velocity bullets cause large wounds and far more tissue damage due to the tumble effect. In World War II, the caliber of small arms was limited to 12.7 mm. Due to advanced technology that improved the accuracy, lethality, and rates of fire of these man-portable weapons, NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) in 1983 extended its definition of small arms as “all crew portable direct fire weapons of a caliber less than 50mm and will include a secondary capability to defeat light armour and helicopters”.

Small arms are the cause of injuries and deaths in most, if not all, forms of armed strife. According to one expert on small arms, “while a fully loaded fighter plane obviously can be much more destructive than a rifle, there are many more rifles in the world and they are used with much less discretion.” Though small in size, small arms have a few advantages that are the cause for its popularity, specially among non-state actors. For instance, because of its relative small size and lightweight, small arms and light weapons can be transferred from one place to another in large bulks. Secondly, small arms are less technical, requiring almost no complex training. Thirdly, they are much cheaper in comparison to highly sophisticated weapons. Last but not least, small arms can be indigenously made, lowering the cost further.
Thus, in the light of these and many more advantages, it is the obvious choice in ethnic and internal conflicts. As one expert notes, "in terms of military and non-military demand, such criteria perfectly match the needs of those who require weapons in the violent political ethnic and criminal disputes of the post-cold war and those who desire weapons for personal protection."4

With regard to the proliferation of small arms and light weapons in Bangladesh, there is very little accuracy in quantum of small arms in macro terms. According to the former Home Minister Abdul Matin Choudhury, the number of illegal weapons in Bangladesh is a little more than one lakh, yet not even one percent of the arms have been recovered, and those that were; were usually old and rusted ones. Heavy and modern weapons were rarely recovered.5 There are allegedly around 500 illegal factories in Dhaka alone, of which most of these are floating, i.e., easily transportable or movable.6

In Bangladesh, air, land and sea routes are used for illicit proliferation of small arms. It is also alleged that an international smuggling group uses the India-Bangladesh route extensively for illegal transactions. The most frequently used land borders by the underworld network of smugglers are the country’s south-west borders of Shatkhira, Bhadiali, Madra, Keragachi, Hijoldi, Borali; Jessore’s Shikarpur, Mashila, Jhenidah, Mashpur; Chuadanga (Jibonnagar) Meherpur (Ganguni) Kushtia (Daulatpur). In the air route, the international airport in Dhaka is emerging as an oft-used route for smugglers to flow arms and ammunitions into the country. Allegations that a group of young men collaborate with corrupt custom officers of the Dhaka Airport is heard of. Among other contraband items, they manage to bring in innumerable pistol revolvers and bullets. For example, a few years back, there was a report on .32 cal. (Smith and Wason) revolvers and Yugoslavian made 7.62 cal. pistol being bought from Bangkok, and sold over Taka 25,000-30,000 in the black markets of Dhaka.7 The seaport is another, and very popular route that is used for the transshipment of arms and ammunitions. News of consignments of illicit arms seized at the Chittagong and Khulna ports are frequently heard of. Not always are they meant for the local market. In fact, the Chittagong port is allegedly used as a major transit point to ship illegal arms from one place to another.

(iii) Chandabaji

From the beginning of the 1990s, along with the transition to
parliamentary democracy, Bangladesh witnessed the introduction of economic reforms. It opened its door to economic liberalisation including private ownership and private sector investment. Today, there are small scale, medium scale and large scale investments. However, in spite of the reforms and incentives that have been introduced to investors and entrepreneurs, there are still obstacles such as infrastructural backwardness, red tapism, and long gap between verbal promises and implementation. The second variation of barriers are commonly known as economic crimes. These involve corruption in tax administration, defaulted bank loans and so on. Although corruption is a worldwide phenomena, it is the developing countries where it is rampant. In fact, according to one World Bank expert, widespread corruption is a symptom of a poorly functioning state and a poorly functioning state can undermine growth.\footnote{8} 

There is a third kind of obstacle that is increasingly disrupting economic development: The growth of illegal financial extortion and terrorism from illegal toll-collectors. According to noted economist, Professor Wahiduddin Mahmud, “we cannot expect the free-market reforms to produce results unless we can literally free our market places from the clutches of illegal toll-collectors.”\footnote{9} The severity of the problem is even more highlighted by his following remarks: “Today, illegal toll collection perhaps accounts for a much larger proportion of our GDP compared to rent-seeking incomes that were previously generated through government controls through permits and licenses.”\footnote{10} With economic implications being enormous, one can not help but ask as to who these ‘illegal toll-collectors’ are? Who and what are their targets? And, how do they operate in a functioning state that has both law-making and law-enforcing organs?

Chandabaji is a form of illegal toll collection, known as extortion, which literally means exaction (normally in cash) through the use of force and terror. Most of the incidents of extortion take place in industrial area, commercial area, construction sites, etc. In short, any place where money can be coerced. There are small, middle, and large scale extortion depending on the financial status of the victims. Traditionally, entrepreneurs, businessmen, industrialists were the targets of extortion. An amount of cash is demanded by the extortionist and refusal to pay results in any form of loss; both physical and material. In recent years, the extortionist is well-armed and does not shy away from displaying his muscle power that comes from the barrel of his gun. But in most cases, he remains above law in spite of the fact
that he is breaking the law by the very possession of illegal weapon. This leads one to assume that extortionist enjoy some kind of protection. In other words, their ‘godfathers’ must be influential and powerful personalities. Following are some of the findings that were compiled from reported incidents that will shed some light as to who these chandabaj are, who their targets are, how they sustain, and so forth.

**Findings based on reports on Chandabaji**

Based on the scanning results of three consecutive months of two daily vernaculars (See Annexe-One), the following assumptions can be made on chandabaji, the chandabaj, and the types and source of small arms.

(i) What is Chandabaji?

1. In the context of Bangladesh, chandabaji is one form of terrorism in which a group of young persons, of whom at least one possesses small arms, uses force or terror against an individual(s) to obtain money, with the assurance that he is protected by influential and powerful persons;
2. Chandabaji takes place in villages, towns and cities and the victims are both wealthy and poor people;
3. The amount of chanda can range between a few thousands and few lakh per month;
4. In Bangladesh, chandabaji is an ‘organised’ crime with the following features:
   - Each group has one leader;
   - The chandabajs act as a force as they move in groups of more than two;
   - They are well armed;
   - Chandabaji is localised, i.e., each group has an area under its control;
   - They have their own conveyance that increases mobility;
   - They maintain liaison with local politicians and police.

(ii) Who is a Chandabaj?

1. A ‘chandabaj’ may be a professional criminal, a frustrated youth, a student activist of a political wing, or members of the police force.
2. Most of the crimes are committed by the youth force, as their age is between 15 and 30.
3. The social background of the youth involved in various anti-social activities range from illiterate, unemployed young men to educated, university-going students.

4. The cause for being lured to *chandabaji* can be socio-economic compulsions, or political enticements, or both.

(iii) Some Facts about Small Arms

1. In almost all of the reported incidents of *chandabaji*, small arms are used.

2. The small arms that are used in criminal offences, range from locally made to highly sophisticated, imported weapons.

3. Various reports suggest that the sources of arms procurement are: (a) Local production, (b) Smuggled from abroad, (c) Insurgents, (d) Licensed arms dealers, (e) Theft from government arsenals. (f) Godfathers who have connections with influential persons including the political elite.

Analysis

From the above findings that are based on reported incidents of *chandabaji*, one can make the following assumptions:

1. A nexus prevails between the underworld criminals and mainstream politician so much so that the former receives access to arms, legal protection and financial gains, while the later consolidates his power-base through muscle-power;

2. A niche section of the society are the direct or indirect beneficiaries of the prevailing nexus, while the majority of the people are vulnerable to 'organised *chandabaji*.'

The nexus between political leaders and crime syndicates is established when the former hires the latter for a particular purpose or to serve long-term interest. The well-armed *mastan* is recruited into the politically-backed armed cadre, of which the student activists are also members. This nexus provides the activists with arms and ammunition while it gives the terrorist political identity. During the Union Parishad elections in 1998, there were more than one incident in which terrorists killed elected Chairmen. No arrest was made in connection with the murders.

The *chandabaji* can be a ‘circumstantial victim’ or ‘one by choice’. Those who are ‘victims of circumstances’ are mostly those who come from poverty-stricken background. This variety of thugs and goons is mostly illiterate street urchins or youth living in slums.
Unable to find work, they spend idle time on the streets and make 'quick money' by stealing, pick-pocketing etc. Gradually, these 'tokai's' (street children) grow up to be professional mastans. By 'professional' it means that the thugs and goons earn their living from their anti-social activities. The other kind is the 'masan by choice'; those who are school/college drop-outs with no technical skills, nor sympathy or support from the family, ending up in frustration that usually leads to drugs and alcohol consumption. In Bangladesh, at least 10 lakh people are addicted to drugs. Of this, the larger section of them are youths as their age is between 16 and 25 years. Chandabaji is one way of supporting their addiction. (See Annexe-Three)

The next point of analysis is, what is the binding force behind the criminal-politician nexus? From the criminal's point of view, such linkage gives him legal cover to his mischief. An interview with one police officer revealed that the fate of a "common criminal" and a "political-backed-terrorist" stand in contrast, even more so if the terrorist belongs to the party in power. Scanning results for this study showed that, of the terrorists arrested, either they were individuals with no political connection, or they were linked to political parties in the opposition. Ruling party-backed-terrorists receive more privileges that not only include legal cover (e.g. by withdrawing police cases, removing evidences etc.), but also access to small arms. Some political leaders use their positions and influence over the illegal arms dealers and provide the terrorists with weapons, some of them being newer and more sophisticated than those possessed by the police force.

Why and how is the politician benefited? From the politician's point of interest, his power base needs to be consolidated, and in the process he is willing to take any measures, whether these are legal or not. This category of politicians can not depend on the people's vote (for that will require him to do years of toiling). Rather, the process could be expedited by hiring professional thugs and goons and 'win' the election by intimidating, if not physically torturing his contestant, 'buying' or falsifying votes, stealing ballot boxes and so forth. Hence, the lust for power is a driving force for the politician to form a nexus with the underworld dogs who provide muscle-power and protection, in return for legal cover.

The financial consideration is another factor that links the politicians with the criminal underworld. In fact, there are many who would argue that financial gain comes first for the politician. In contemporary Bangladesh politics, many politicians have chosen
politics as a profession. Hence, politics is their source of bread-earning. A glaring example of the commercial aspect of the mastan-politician liaison is evident in issues related to tender rights, rent-seeking etc., from which the political leaders receive a significant share.

But it is not only mastans and politicians who profit from chandabaji. And hence follows the second assumption: Chandabaji is sustaining because a niche class of the society are beneficiaries of the nexus, directly or indirectly. The benefits may be in cash or in kind or both, depending on the influence s/he can exert that can be measured in terms of position/status, muscle power, wealth, connections, or location. A guesstimation is that around one lakh taka is paid to the chandabaji in Dhaka City alone. Accordingly, the share is distributed into three broad categories: (1) Top/high level beneficiaries; (2) Mid-level beneficiaries; and (3) Low/small level beneficiaries. The classification of beneficiaries are, however, flexible and may occasionally overlap.

1. **Top-level beneficiaries** (those who receive the lion’s share of the total chanda collected): The ‘godfathers’ who nurture the thugs and goons, drug lords, arm dealers, and political leaders fall into this category. Although it is difficult to say the actual amount of cash they receive, it is assumed that the largest share goes into their pockets;

2. **Mid-level beneficiaries** (those who receive a significant portion of the total chanda collected): top student leaders, senior/experienced chandabaji, the middleman in the arms and drug trade, mid and high ranking members of the law enforcing agencies;

3. **Small-level beneficiaries**: the chandabaj (who is actually extorting’ at field level receives the smallest share), the addict, low-ranking police agent, (e.g. a police constable).

While a niche group takes advantage of the prevailing nexus, the majority of the people are vulnerable to ‘organised chandabaji’. The scanning results and experiences show that there is no single, strict criteria of people who are the victims of chandabaji. Sometimes, the chandabaj is himself the victim of his own misdeed (e.g. killed or injured in cross-firing, punished by the ‘big brother’ for being unable to collect the chanda etc.) While it is true that the prime targets are business men, industrialists, and entrepreneurs, today’s chandabaj target even the common man such as the poor trader, the ‘feriwala’ (vendors), the boatman (majhi), the hawker and so on. How are
these people vulnerable? The term 'vulnerability' in this case denotes helplessness, defencelessness, unprotectedness all of which give birth to fear of being extorted. They are vulnerable because of the reality of having very limited options in the event they are confronted with extortion. The first option would be to report to the police. The chances of being victimised afterwards by the chandabaj outweighs the chances that the person would be 'protected'. There are incidents where a person finds one's life under threat as well as the amount of chanda to increase after a case is filed with the police, not to mention the fact that this gives the police a further opportunity to extort money from the extortionists as 'protection money'. The second option is to refuse to give chanda every time the chandabaj approaches the victim. The consequences of refusing to bow down to the demand of the chandabaj have been depicted in innumerable reports. The extreme situation occurs when the person or members of his immediate family is killed or murdered. (See Annexe- One) There is a third option that has come out from the scanning results, namely, to take law into one's own hand. Such incidents are isolated and remain so, but do occur. In one incident, angry public killed four terrorists. However, such actions are risky with legal implications. There is one other option, that is to protest through demonstrations, verbal statements, hunger strikes and so on. While this should have been the natural response in any civil society, in the context of Bangladesh, where a nexus prevails between the law enforcing agents and law breaking forces, the protests do little to solve the actual problem. Whatever options a victim may consider one is aware that the miscreants are well armed. Hence the combination of factors like the possession of small arms by the chandabaj, the reluctance of the law enforcing agencies to protect the citizen, the consequence to be faced if one does not comply and so on act together to make oneself feel vulnerable.

Conclusion

As the study shows, there is no such thing as a born chandabaj. Socio-economic compulsions lure many youths to the criminal underworld. These youth are unemployed, illiterate, poverty-stricken and sometimes addicted to drugs. They are the youths who are vulnerable, and thus conveniently 'pushed' into the world of crime. But in Bangladesh, educated youth who are college and university-going students, also resort to chandabaj, as an off-shoot of student politics. (See Annexe-Three). Reasons for joining student politics could be
idealism, heroism, political ambition, financial crisis, hope for better facilities in the hostels and so forth. One naturally questions the present quality of student politics, only to find that the glorious role of the student politics of the early 1950s and 1970s no longer exist. Rather, student politics and terrorism have become synonymous, as more and more student activists use force and terror against the defenceless people. They are defenceless not only because they do not possess arms, but because they do not have the law enforcing agencies to protect them. As to why the police do not take necessary actions to combat chandabaji, one police officer explained the underlying drawbacks that make the law enforcement agencies less effective. According to him, some of the obstacles are: (1) The nexus between underworld criminals and mainstream politicians that protects the terrorist from legal charges. Even if a police officer does arrest a chandabaji, he is pressurised to release the criminal on bail; (2) The benefits that some members of the police force, including the top notches, derive in cash or in kind that prevent them from exposing the criminals. For example, police have their own linemen who collect from each hawker chanda ranging from Taka 2 to Taka 20; (3) Fear of 'punishment' if a member of the police force does not comply (e.g. no promotion, transfer to remote area etc.); and (4) Limited resources that unable the police to match the terrorists in terms of conveyance, access to modern arms etc.

It is apparent that organised chandabaji will continue to sustain as long as a nexus prevails between the crime syndicates and mainstream politicians. The impact, as revealed in the study, has been the criminalisation of politics on the one hand, and societal insecurity on the other. Because of the gradual politicisation of state functionary organs, the administration literally gives a 'blind eye' to anti-social activities committed by terrorists (although verbal statements by our political leaders indicate the opposite). Otherwise, how do we explain the fact that in almost all of the arms recovery programmes, only a handful of old and rusted pistols are recovered by the police after 'vigorous' search for illegal arms in the hostels of the Dhaka University, knowing very well that the hostels are the den for storing huge quantities of small arms? Hence, if arms recovery programmes are an eyewash, if politicians count on muscle-power, if politics continues to be apolitical, violent and commercial, socio-economic compulsions and political enticements will continue to attract a considerable section of the youth force into social evils like, chandabaji.
ANNEXE ONE

Information Gathered from Scanning of News Reports from January to March 1998

1. Types of Crimes
   A. Social Crimes
      - extortion
      - rent-seeking
      - dacoity
      - robbery
      - hijacking
      - abduction
      - rape
      - pick-pocketing
      - ransacking
   
   B. Political Crime
      1. Criminal offence involving student activists;
         e.g. Clash between police and student activists, inter and intra-party fighting;
      2. Political killings involving professional thugs and goons;
         e.g. Murder of newly elected Union Parishad (UP) Chairman in Keraniganj by 10/12 armed terrorist on 4th January;
      3. Vote-rigging at polling centres during UP elections where arms were used.

2. Areas Surrounding where chandabaji occurred
   - industrial areas
   - areas adjacent to slums: shopping complex, bazaars
   - commercial areas
   - areas within the premise of education institutions: e.g. Dhaka University
   - areas surrounding education institutions: e.g. restaurants
   - agriculture, cultivation fields
   - construction sites: tender rights, development programmes
   - transport and communication: airports, riverways, highways, bus-stands
- resourceful areas: forest.


4. Age of ‘chandabaji’
- Between 15 –35 years, with a few exceptions

5. Who is a ‘chandabaji’?
- Professional thugs and goons
e.g. Mu-bahini, Jafar bahini etc.
- Leaders and activist belonging to the following student wings:
  - Chatra Dal
  - Chatra League
  - Chatra Shamaj
  - Chatra Moitri
  - Jubodal
  - Shibir
- Outlawed political parties:
  members of the Sarbahara party
- Insurgent groups
  members of the Shantibahini
- Out-of-jail youth
- Addicted youth (e.g. addicted to phensidyl, heroine)
- Unemployed, frustrated youth
- Some members of the Police force

6. Who are the victims of Chandabaji?
- Entrepreneurs
- Industrialists
- Professionals
- Small traders
- Farmers
- The common man
- The Chandabaj

7. Types of Small Arms used for Chandabaji
US-made revolvers and pipeguns, German made revolver, Chinese sub-
machine gun, Belgium made shutter gun, air gun, foreign made hand gun, home made pipe gun, pistol, revolver, Pakistani made revolver, rifle, cut-gun, SLR, two bore gun, cut rifle, one bore gun single barrel gun, Indian made gun, Indian made shutter gun, two-bore rifle, shutter gun, 303 rifle, 7.62 SLR, automatic revolver, French revolver, locally made shutter gun, Italian made pistol, SSG, sten gun, 22 bore pistol, 32 bore pistol, imported SBBL gun. Other than arms, bullets and cartridges, hand bombs cocktail, grenade, chocolate bombs, petrol bombs.

8. Size of Groupings
Largest grouping comprised of 40 persons
The minimum size of the chandabaji group is 2-4 persons.

9. Role of Civil Society
-Protest from the business community: e.g., Silk yarn factory owners in Rajshahi protested against chandabaji;
-Protest against police supported chandabaji by Chemical Association, Rajshahi;
-Protest against rent-seeking and chandabaji by contractors in Jessore;
-Public takes law into their own hands (e.g., Angry public killed 4 terrorists 14/1/'98);
-Chittagong Chamber of Commerce protested against chandabaji;
- In protest against chandabaji, memorandum submitted by the people of Jessore;
-Strike by small traders: e.g., in Nilkhet area of Dhaka, traders held strike against chandabaji.

10. In the event of refusal to give 'chanda'
- Ransacking
- Destruction of property
- Abduction/kidnapping
- Harassment
- Dacoity
- Robbery
- Forcing activities to halt
- Physical torture: assault
- Murder

11. State/Government Response to Chandabaji
- Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina, has ordered law
enforcement agencies to take stern measure against terrorists and chandabaj who are violating peace and stability in the society. She said that the terrorists have no political identity and should not be given protection.

- **Inspector General of Police**, M. Ismael Hossain has ordered all police super and metropolitan commissioners to take stern measures against chandabaj and terrorists. He has also requested the people to share any information on chadabaj or terrorist with the police. *(The Daily Inquilab, 15.1.1998)*

- Ward Commissioner of Khulna City Corporation, Ward no.7, Sheikh Shahidul Islam said that the activities of the terrorists of Ward no. 7 is increasing everyday. Boys in their growing age and their friends from outside are engaged in robbery and chandabaji and are in the process obstructing development projects.....These youth are addicted to drugs. In spite of the fact that there are cases filed against them, the police is silent on the issue. *(The Daily Inquilab,15.1.1998)*

**12. Rate of Crimes Committed**

- From January to March 1998, there were more than 120 reported crime cases in which small arms were used.
ANNEX - TWO

Nexus between crime syndicates and politicians
ANNEX -THREE

YOUTH & CHANDABAJI

YOUTH
15-30 YEARS

TOKAI
(Street urchins)

SCHOOL/COLLEGE DROP OUT

COLLEGE/UNIVERSITY GOING STUDENTS

UNSKILLED/ ILLITERATE

UNEMPLOYMENT

ADVENTURISM HEROISM

UNEMPLOYED

FRUSTRATION/ ADDICTION

FACILITIES e.g. accommodation

THEFT, PICK POCKETING

FINANCIAL BENEFITS

BAD INFLUENCE

STUDENT POLITICS

FINANCIAL HARDSHIP

MASTAN

ACTIVIST (Non-cadre)

ARMED CADRE

TERRORIST

CHANDABAJI
End Notes

1. See for more details Saraswathi S., “Matching Youth Policy with Youth Problems (with Special Reference to India)” paper presented in the International Seminar on Youth, Peace and Development, 6-10 March, 1989, India.


10. Ibid.

11. Riverway chandabaji is recently on the rise. Since Bangladesh is a riverine country, one of the major communications is its waterways. Incidences in which young extortionists demand money from boatmen and passengers alike are common in the river routes of Bangladesh. During the devastated flood of 1998, riverway chandabaji increased sharply.
Economic Liberalisation and Gender Perspective:  
The Views of Young Female Entrepreneurs and Professionals

Rukhsana Ahmed

Introduction

Liberalisation is a buzz word these days. Essentially, it connotes economic openness characterised by trade liberalisation, financial liberalisation, privatisation, deregulation and deunionisation. The justification of economic liberalisation has been provided by the virtues of free market economy including removal of restrictions on free movement of goods and capital. Beginning as a campaign for trade liberalisation, it has become an instrument for establishing the sway of the market economic system where private-led economic growth is the norm. The main impetus for economic liberalisation adopted under the structural adjustment process was provided by superior economic growth performance achieved by the East Asian economies.

In the post cold war era, there is an accelerated trend toward economic integration. The world is becoming more and more competitive economically. Nations are forming and consolidating to form economic blocks, i.e., North Atlantic Free Trade Area (NAFTA), Asia Pacific Economic Co-operation (APEC), South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) etc. These are not barriers to trade, but local efforts to promote integrated economic relations among each other and to enhance economic and social development. There is this world wide slogan of 'market economy'. It reflects free enterprise system. In a market economy, the interaction between supply and demand determines the price and allocation of resources. There is no state control and central planning of the economy. Competition and efficiency are the norms of survival.
In the contemporary global economic environment, liberalisation is a powerful strategy of growth and economic development. Economic liberalisation symbolises the significance of global economic change, the processes of economic reforms and broadening of its scope. Since 1990's, rapid changes in production methods, intensified competition, information, transport and communication revolutions have accelerated cross-border exchange of goods, services, private finance, investment and factors of production. These changes offer great opportunities for national development which lie in the prospects for greater participation in international trade, investment and financial flows. But they also pose major challenges which arise from the need for articulation of appropriate policy responses and development of institutions to participate effectively in the globalisation process.

Economic liberalisation has been a much discussed topic in recent years. It involves greater participation across national boundaries and affects many aspects of life-economic, social, cultural and political. At present, we are standing at the close end of the 20th century. The 21st century ahead offers many opportunities and challenges for us. Global and interrelated changes have ever increased impacts upon societies. Development is considered a complex and dynamic process involving numerous actors and aspects. However, there seems a lack of concerted effort in incorporating gender issues in mainstream development process of Bangladesh. In current development discussions, the focus should be more on development problems in general, and their effects on youth and gender relations in particular. It is time to bring out the deep and complex links between development, empowerment, gender, poverty, reproductive rights and health and sustainability in the context of economic liberalisation.

Against this backdrop, the paper attempts to bring forward the gender perspective on economic liberalisation in the context of Bangladesh. More specifically, the paper highlights the important views and attitudes of the young female professionals on the economic opportunities and challenges brought forward by economic liberalisation. The aim is to link academic research with the experiences of people and their organisations at the local level. An important finding of the paper is that despite widespread insecurity and uncertainty, a trend has been created towards increased participation of women in various economic activities and professional pursuits. It is definitely positive and upward but the progress is slow.
Gender and Development in Bangladesh

Women constitute about half of the population (49%) in Bangladesh. They represent half of the country’s human resources. Thus, both men and women are equal partners of development. But traditional socio-cultural practices limit women’s access to education, skill training, employment and participation in the overall development process of the country. Constitutionally, women in Bangladesh have equal rights with men in all spheres of the state and public life. However, in practice, initiatives have been limited and progress has been slow. There is continuing disparities between men and women in life expectancy, health status, income opportunities, control over assets and personal security. This in turn limits the country’s ability to achieve its development objectives.¹

From about mid 1980’s, there has been a major boost to the liberalisation of the economy of Bangladesh. The various economic liberalisation measures are designed to accelerate economic growth and to assist the people, both men and women. But experiences reveal that while economic growth has created opportunities for very substantial numbers of people it has also created new inequalities or reinforced existing ones. Most economic issues and policies pay no explicit attention to gender relations. Women’s issues in the economic sphere are narrowly construed in terms of discrimination against women in public sector agencies and private sector firms. Gender desegregation is deeply rooted in the labour market. In the case of export-oriented industrialisation, wide gender gap remain both in wage rates, and other benefits.

In almost every Asian country including Bangladesh, women comprise a large percentage of the poor. Women typically earn lower wages. They have much more limited access than do men to development resources such as land, credit, technology and opportunities. There is increasing evidence that women do not automatically benefit from anti-poverty programmes, i.e., Integrated Rural Development Programs (IRDP), special credit programmes for targeted groups (small farmers and the landless). Many growth-promotion strategies may make the conditions of significant numbers of poor women worse unless certain adjustments are made to planning and implementation. From the perspective of women, the various groups that government plans for, like ‘farmers’, the ‘poor’, are differentiated by gender. The lives of men and women within each group are structured in fundamentally different ways. The work that women do,
unpaid, as mothers, wives and daughters with obligations and responsibilities to look after others, and often in family farms and business, is defined as 'non-economic'. However, this is the most effective role of women in all aspects of economic development.

Recent years (since 1990's) have witnessed a national upsurge of women's organisations, women researchers and social scientists to empower women to enter more effectively into the discussion of economic issues. Indeed, there is increased public awareness on the significance of gender relations for the fulfillment of economic policy objectives. There seems serious involvement of the government, donor agencies, NGOs and consultancy firms in gender-related micro-credit, employment opportunities and education projects. Despite such initiatives the overall socio-economic conditions and status of the women in Bangladesh are not satisfactory. Women's unequal access to resources still remains an issue at the top of agendas of most organisations with economic power. The rapid and sudden boom of the garment industry in Bangladesh in the 1980's created a tremendous opportunity for gainful female employment and alleviation of poverty. But in addition to big gender gap, various social and health insecurity seriously undermine the participation of women in the formal manufacturing sector. All these issues are critical to the attainment of gender equity in the economic sphere.

**Economic Liberalisation: Perception of Young Female Entrepreneurs and Professionals**

This section is based on interviews and open discussions with a cross-section of young female professionals comprising, entrepreneurs, faculty member, researchers, journalist, NGO worker, administrator, fashion designer, bank manager, architect. They have expressed their experiences and examined the issue of economic liberalisation in Bangladesh from socio-political and economic perspectives. A few senior established female entrepreneurs, scholars and professionals were also consulted. It would be interesting to see how the relatively aged female professionals perceive the opportunities and challenges posed by the liberalisation and globalisation process. At the same time their valuable experiences in the field and view points are expected to empower especially, young women to engage in economic activities. The list of persons interviewed is given in the annexe.
The issue of economic liberalisation is gender neutral to begin with. The process has created equal opportunities for both men and women to engage in economic activities. Indeed, employment, income generating activities, market opportunity and competition have increased. Today, women workers are more mobile, within and across national boundaries, than they have been ever before. The sense of self-independence has coincided with greater openings in various economic pursuits. Participation of women in every kind of profession has increased. Women have come forward to gain a foothold on their economic survival through entering into diverse types of smaller informal enterprises. The eminent examples include many well-established and recognised boutique shops, tailoring shops, handicrafts shops, fashion houses, fast food shops, mini marts and shopping centres in the country which are owned, managed and run exclusively by women. Joint venture scheme is very popular among women entrepreneurs. They have organised themselves through different entrepreneurial groups and associations. At the same time, women are playing dominant roles in different gender neutral trade associations and chambers of the country. For instance, Ms. Laila Kabir is the first female President of the Metropolitan Chambers of Commerce and Industry (MCCI), Ms. Maleka Khan is the first elected female executive of the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce (FBCCI), Ms. Rokeya A. Rahman is the re-elected President of the Bangladesh Employers’ Association (BEA). Fashion designing is regarded as an independent profession by young women since they can do the job even at home. Apart from these, women are equally competent and doing a very good job as teachers, researchers, journalists, NGO workers, administrators, bank managers, lawyers, executives, architects, engineers, doctors etc. But unfortunately, widespread social insecurities both in the work place, on the street and at home, uncongenial working environment adversely affect women’s participation in employment, working ability and opportunity.

Like men, migration by women contribute directly to the well being of their family. Women’s independent migration is increasing considerably over the years. Existing literature suggests that migrant women differ markedly from migrant men in terms of employment opportunities, income, occupational mobility, access to basic services etc. However, the export-oriented and labour-intensive industries present a more positive scenario considering the pros and cons of impact of wage employment on the socio-economic condition of female
worker. Considerable female employment has been generated in the formal export based manufacturing sector. The conditions of the female garment workers is not as precarious as often portrayed in news media of the country. The very low level of education of the female workers and their low level of skill acquisition is responsible to a large extent for their low level of wage rates. This is also true for the female workers in other manufacturing factories namely, electronics, pharmaceuticals and food processing. Presently, local women are working along with men as construction workers in the Food for Work programme, embankment construction, tree plantation and other projects implemented by the Water Development Board (BWDB).

Article 29 of the Constitution of Bangladesh affirms that women cannot be discriminated in respect of any employment. But still, women’s visibility in the public service has been negligible. No single women hold the position of secretary in the secretariat. Women’s participation in institutional development and decision making is minimal. The social value that politics and administration are exclusively domains of male still works despite having women in the leadership role in the Government and Opposition parties. As per Labour Force Survey (LFS) 1995/96, of the total 56 million labour force, 34.7 million are males and 21.3 million are females (Fifth Five Year Plan). Generally, women are confined to a few low paid and low skilled jobs in the labour market primarily because of the obstacles they face in acquiring marketable skills. Even women with vocational and management skills cannot ensure accelerated entry into the formal labour force due to adverse climate.

Today, the distinct top level positions that women hold in different sectors is not the result of mercy. It is rather the product of the combination of their capability, responsibility, determination, zeal and commitment. Similarly, internal factors like motives, values, attitudes and individual dispositions determine to a large extent women’s decision to participate in employment. These factors are linked with our cultural orientation which vary from society to society. It is true that in our country a big knowledge gap exists among women about trade and commerce. There is absence of adequate networks to organise women for entrepreneurship. Moreover, lack of diversity undermines creativity. The absence of copyright leads to lack of motivation to develop skills to capture a big market. Women often give up work after gaining stability under family pressure. On the other hand, sometimes they opt to remain unemployed although having professional degrees.
Co-operative and Inter-Active Solutions

Economic liberalisation will continue to grow into a formidable competitive mode in Bangladesh. But the success largely depends upon the active involvement of an enterprising and energetic young working population. Along with networking, information sharing, participation and institution building emphasis on gender-neutral social norms, trust and reciprocity is regarded as foundations for faster economic growth. Like men, women are considered important contributors to the development of the country. However, no significant shift has yet been visible in terms of addressing women’s needs and interests. In this context the following suggestions are made to reduce gender disparity and to integrate women in the mainstream of development of Bangladesh.

# Women’s development issues should be made an integral part of the process of formulating, implementing and evaluating development programmes across all sectors;

# Women’s contribution to development is directly linked with and depend upon socio-cultural factors. Economic and social empowerments of women are linked together. Empowerment in one condition will enhance the other;

# A congenial atmosphere needs to be created for women’s increased participation in development through expanding opportunities for skill development, technology acquisition and entrepreneurship;

# There should be promotion and protection of women’s human rights, equal access to education, politics, administration, sports, culture, and socio-economic activities, health and nutrition; eradication of persistent burden of poverty on women; reflection of positive image of women in the media; elimination of trafficking and violence against women;

# Finally, a holistic, mainstreaming and integrated approach to development should be promoted pulling together the government, civil society, NGOs and donor agencies to ensure equal participation of women in all development programmes and projects.

Conclusion

The momentum of economic liberalisation is likely to continue into the 21st century. Growing participation of Bangladesh in the process opens up new opportunities for trade, investment and growth, but not necessarily guarantee equitable gains for all people.
Infrastructural inadequacies impose a major constraint on trade and financial or investment flows. For instance- increased social and political unrest is a threat to the envisaged export-oriented growth and attraction of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in Bangladesh. Thus, policy planners and policy makers should co-ordinate conscious efforts to bring about major changes in the overall socio-economic and political structure of the country. This in turn, will create more attractive avenues for employment of both young men and women who present alternative visions and prospects to contribute to a more equal place for living. A focus on gender-aware economic issues will provide a better analysis and better policies which will lead to faster economic growth. Those who have been working at the interface of gender and development should also broaden feminist conceptions of the economy itself. Unfortunately, women in our country are not effectively integrated in the national development process. Since economic, socio-demographic and psychological factors are the determinants of women’s participation in employment, failure to address these issues effectively will segregate and marginalise women in both public and private life. It should, however, be mentioned that the study was conducted through talking to a limited number of persons. Therefore, further research should be conducted on this topic with larger representatives before making generalisations.
Annex

List of the Persons Interviewed

4. Ms. Laila Kabir, President, MCCl.
5. Ms. Maleka Khan, Executive, FBCCI.
7. Ms. Nazmun Nahar Ratna, Lecturer, Dept. of Economics, University of Dhaka.
8. Ms. Rita Afsar, Research Fellow, BIDS.
10. Dr. Shaheen Afroze, Senior Research Fellow, BIASS.
End Notes.