

# Economists on the Economics of Mastani

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## Still Waiting for Good Sense to Prevail

It is a statement on the ability of our politicians that they seem to be incapable of even holding a proper discussion, leave alone solve the problems that we now face — problems that they themselves have created. Every time there is a serious effort to arrange a discussion, something happens and it falls through. Recall the efforts of Sir Ninian. He had to leave the country, literally shunted out by criticisms from one side. Then there was the effort of the Group of Five eminent citizens. From the very first day of their efforts, some people started criticising them. At one stage one of the members of the group was condemned in public by a leading opposition leader for an alleged statement, which the former had denied. In addition to the above two, there have been other attempts at individual levels that were scuttled for one reason or the other. The latest instance of negotiations, centred around the US Ambassador, has run aground because of conflicting claims by the two sides.

The question that we would like to ask is: Don't our political leaders know even how to hold talks? Not only that an ambassador of a foreign country has to baby-sit while our leaders talk, he also has to make public a statement to tell us what actually happened. Such is the level of the credibility of our national leaders.

Whatever may have happened, the talks must resume, and in earnest. The claim of imposing conditions on talks made by the ruling party, has been denied by the Awami League. So now we understand that there are no conditions. If so, why not start talking from where it was left off — meaning go back to the US Ambassador's house or preferably a local venue, and start talking again.

The two issues — one of a 'chief' for the interim government, and the second of 90 days till elections are held — are where we stand now. BNP's position of the interim government being headed by the President was once proposed by the AL chief Sheikh Hasina herself. So why can't she, and her party accept it now, especially when we all want an end to the crisis? If, in this case, the opposition relents then BNP should relent on the issue of the 90 days. Yes, there is a Constitutional bar, yet perhaps, a reference to the Supreme Court could give us a legal way out.

There are two issues. If each side gives up one of them, then we have the "Historic Compromise" that we talked about on Thursday.

## Not This Way

The trunk road connecting Dhaka with all eastern and south-eastern districts remained barricaded for over five hours at Demra yesterday. Reportedly, transport workers formed the bulk of the protest that was mounted over the arrest of one of their leaders in the course of the current arms recovery campaign. The Demra thana was also gheraoed by the protesters for as many hours.

No, this is not the form a protest should take. Very certainly a highway can in no circumstances be blocked, whatever the grievance is and whoever the aggrieved be. To protest is a universal right and even if Thursday's Demra protest was a hundred per cent justified — blocking a highway can never be condoned. It is a crime and it is more than crime. It is unethical and immoral. Plainly because it impinges upon and limits the rights of the multitude to movement. No one has the right to block free movement.

The wrong the Demra protesters did to the nation comes as a part of a pattern — a dangerous pattern set first by protests against trucks and buses running over pedestrians and fleeing the spot. We have been condemning this wrong kind of protest right from when it started. This very myopic leap into anarchy stands to harm the life and cause of the man in the street no less than it would the temper of our polity and society.

The roads, waterways and highways and the people's right to unhindered passage through them is sacrosanct and can be compromised only at great peril to the nation. Ensuring their inviolability is among the first responsibilities of a government. Blocking a highway every now and then proves only one thing: There is no effective government in the nation. And with every act of road-blockage government is further eroded, by a considerable slide. In every case of government's failure to prevent this act, it fails the whole nation and forfeits its claims to governing the polity.

A journey towards democracy should also invariably mean an all-party permanent moratorium on road and rail blockage over local, sectarian and parochial issues.

## Season of Meena Bazaars

The writer in the Dhaka Day by Day column draws our attention to one of the main features of winter — holding of meena bazaars by various social groups (mostly women) to raise funds, usually but not necessarily, for some charitable purpose. We wonder where does the term 'meena bazaar' come from? Would some well informed reader help us out.

We think Meena Bazaars are a very useful way of fund raising and also of bringing people together for community work. Over the years these 'events' have become quite colourful and their attendance has also increased manifold. However, we feel compelled to mention that many of them leave much to be desired in terms of quality, taste and sophistication. The loud speakers blaring Hindi songs give the impression of cheap event. Why is there such neglect of our own music? Too many food stalls, and absence of a clean disposal system — a unimpressive look to the whole event. The rise, which keeps many people going to meena bazaars. Can we not make it increasingly popular and profitable in a more tasteful?

THE economics of mastani seems to have infused a growing interest among some of our learned economists. Celebrated economists like Drs R H Khondakar and Kabir U Ahmad have already expressed their views on the issue. It may be recalled that the interest was ignited by another heavyweight in the realm of our economics discipline, Professor Anisur Rahman, who felt the urgent necessity of an economic analysis on this illegal and uncivilized act of mastani and thus to find out its economic ramifications. Any more dealing with the issue might sound repetition but, nonetheless, this piece is premised on the notion that the subject needs, as Kabir U Ahmad rightly remarked, "a far more serious treatment by all social scientists than just a 'Light-hearted Analysis' since its widespread practice in various forms in Bangladesh these days seems to be slowly but surely leading to the destruction of the moral and politico-economic fundamentals of the society."

### Gun Point and File Point

Mastani is narrowly defined as an act of extortion of resources at gun point or by show of muscle wherein an individual or a group of individuals is (are) forced to surrender resources in return for no services, whatsoever. A broader view of mastani would also include bribery as an act of coercion where someone is forced to surrender some claims to somebody at 'file point', if not at gun point. However, the latter kind of enforcement is hardly called mastani because, unlike in mastani: (i) the payer is likely to reap some services from the enforcement in exchange for the payment and (ii) the payer has the option of not paying at all.

The degree of mastani varies across societies de-

pending, mostly, upon economic conditions, political culture and legal enforcements. In Communist/Socialist societies, mastani is said to be non-existent mainly for three reasons: (a) there is guaranteed income and employment for all citizens, (b) consumption bundle is fixed so that extorted money might not get a place in the market and (c) there is stringent punishment for illegal activities. In other societies, mastani tends to grow taking advantage of (i) poor economic condition, (ii) weak legal system that fails to punish culprits, and (iii) political patronage. Again, in relatively developed societies, mastani shows its ugly face at household level — and is mostly at individual and unorganised level. In relatively poor and underdeveloped societies, organized mastani stretches its foothold from household to industry, trade, transport and other sectors.

### Origin of Mastani

Mastani originates from both absolute and relative deprivation. An unemployed youth might find it lucrative to grab someone's necklace at gunpoint and thus earn few bucks by selling it in the market. Another person might do the same to 'keep up with the Jones' i.e. to raise his standard of living. In societies such as ours, the risk of being caught and get punished is much lower than the dividends that mastani seems to pay. Weak legal system acts as an incentive to the growth of this 'enterprise'. Political patronage is another positive factor that encourages mastani. The higher the chance of being politically protected, the lower is the chance of being

## Beneath the Surface

by Abdul Bayes



caught and thus the higher is the incentive to go for mastani.

### Mastani and GDP

Does mastani reduce aggregate output in a given society? Dr R H Khondakar seems to think that it doesn't since the mastans merely transfer the resources from others (victims) to their own accounts. To him, perhaps, it is like a tax payment. He opines that the mastans produce a kind of 'disservice' to the society. Kabir U Ahmad seems to argue the other way round. According to him, such disservices have output reducing effects and that these cannot be mere transfers since economics does not allow illegal transfers. By and large, mastani tends to produce some output reducing impacts on the economy, some of which are cardinal and some are ordinal in nature.

Mastani is no longer to be left in the domain of crimes. Growing mastani imposes heavy costs to the economy in terms of reduced output, reduced incentive to work and 'perverse' demonstration effects. When mastans force economic agents to pay 'taxes' or when they hijack someone's working capital, the payment no longer remains as a mere transfer. Therefore, economists need to emphasise this important issue and analyse it by using proper economic tools.

Mastani in this part of the

world wears a different cap than its counterpart in other parts. The most important difference is, perhaps, the political culture groomed over the years that heavily leans on mastans. The culture has its roots in autocratic rules that dominated the country for most of the time. To do away with the pervasive presence of mastani and thus to help the growth of conducive business environment, we should immediately build up consensus with respect to (a) politics that does not nourish and nurture mastani; (b) a legal system that applies the rule of law to everybody irrespective of position in the society and (c) the establishment of a society that promises employment for all and if not, at least provides welfare schemes.

## Dr Kamal Hossain's Statement

The following are extracts from the statement of Dr Kamal Hossain, President, Gano Forum at a press conference in Dhaka yesterday

The failure to reach an understanding poses a threat to democracy and creates the danger of a constitutional vacuum in which people run the risk of losing power and the Constitution is placed in danger. This must not be allowed to happen.

We believe that the discussions centering around an interim, non-partisan and impartial administration under the President, has created the expectation that some adjustments can and should be made and an agreement can be reached. If a sincere effort is made on all sides.

We would urge immediate consultations and direct discussions between the political leaders in the Opposition and the Government round-the-clock for the next 72 hours to present to the nation a solution by consensus followed by an appropriate reference to the Supreme Court. In any event, the Government should, take into account the views expressed in the current discussions,

and after consultation with parties committed to democracy, announce a framework for a free and impartial election under which the Cabinet would be dissolved and be replaced by an impartial and non-partisan advisory council under the President. The Council should ensure that the day-to-day administration is carried out in an impartial manner so that a free and fair election can be held. This declaration can be referred to the Supreme Court for its opinion and, if approved, should be accepted by all as a basis for participating in the election. This is the only way in which a peaceful resolution can be achieved within the framework of the Constitution, and within the very short time left.

We believe that there is a national consensus that there should be an immediate resolution of the controversy regarding the framework for elections. It has, therefore, become imperative that all those who value democracy — all political parties, profes-

### Concluding Remarks

It was not the intention of this note to show as to how the effects of mastani could be evaluated. Suffice was it to say, heaving on the lines of Professor Anisur Rahman's reasoning, that the issue should not be shelved merely as an agenda in the domain of crime. In fact proper economic analyses could lead to some policy prescriptions that might not be available in the premise of the Home Ministry alone. The World Bank chief in Dhaka ascribed mastani as one of the reasons for unfavourable trade and business environment in Bangladesh. The important research agenda should be: how much of that by mastani and how to overcome it?

sional organisations and sections of conscious citizens, must untiedly demand an immediate resolution of the continuing deadlock.

We must look beyond this election to the goal of bringing about a positive and constructive political environment in which politics does not create divisions and confrontations — and violence and conflict. Instead it must promote a sense of national unity, identify national priorities and mobilize the people to achieve such major national objective as all-round development, promoting investment, creating employment, harnessing human resources through the basic reform of education. This will call for the politics of national unity which must replace divisive and confrontational politics. All democratic forces should unite to nurture non-communal and democratic politics. They must work together to adopt and implement the policies which will carry Bangladesh forward to the 21st century.

# A Year is as Happy and New as We Make it

## POSTSCRIPT

by Neeman A Sobhan

years, like wine, or remember them generally as the annus mirabilis, or put them under the protection of certain animals as the Chinese do — who for example, can forget the year of the Iron Dog, 1971? — but how we file our experiences and emotions, our fits and starts, our unfoldings and endings can all be as arbitrary as there are ways of demarcating years. We may wish to make an official beginning with the Bengali Polla Boishak, or renew ourselves on the Persian Nowroz, or wait till February to start the Chinese year of the Rat, or we may follow the Islamic calendar or even some other personal system of landmark like the rural folks do as in, "two summers since the time of the bad harvest, or the winter when the neighbour's cow calved." It is in fact the personal benchmark that divides our life into its memorable parts.

So, does a new lease of life necessarily start at the beginning of the calendar year? Do we get a chance to turn a new leaf only once or can we spring clean our souls at some other point during the year? If we can, then why this sentimental and exaggerated importance of the new year? And what is so new about it? Is a year a neat apportioning of our lives and

is it really born all innocent and pristine till it gets sullied or old at which time it dies off and is neatly discarded? Do we shed off years like a snake sheds off its skin?

Well, the idiot can risk sounding odd so I venture his opinion that there is no such thing as an old year and a new year. Any year we enter is still the used one which, along with its unresolved and imperfect bits we carry over into the new account. Our lives do not go from year to year, but from change to change, from season to season, from one experience to another, and the transformations that take place have nothing to do with time. Time and the years are things we imagine and assume as a background on which to pin or affix our experiences, attainments and achievements. Our days and years pass inexorably, anonymously, it's our actions that give them colour, identity, make them concrete and memorable. As again what is true in the singular is true of the plural.

One other myth about the new year is to think that the future resides in the year about to unfold, when really the future abides in ourselves. We dream it, create it and bring it to fruition. That march of days, weeks,

months, seasons, years, consists only of mathematically fixed boundaries. They do not delineate fate, destiny or the future. We are the cultivators, the tillers and reapers of our year's harvest of dreams. Everytime a new opportunity or experience arrives in our lives, everytime a fresh achievement or progress is made, the future has been planted and a fresh new year has been created. In the context of Bangladesh, for example, until the nation successfully passes the test of the election, we may consider ourselves still a part of the old year, still stuck in the past with the future a long way away.

I am beginning to reject the popular attitude to new year's eve and its celebration. In fact, I feel that the thirty-first of December has taken on an exaggerated importance that I feel needs to be examined. I have always been fascinated by the special frenzy and sentimentality that takes over people at year end. At the congregations and parties, without which it would be unthinkable to celebrate the so-called new year, I always feel as if we were all at a terminus of sort, a port perhaps, with everybody trying to get on to a last ferry out of the old year into the new. And the twelve o'clock signal is a kind of "land ahoy" to the sighting of the land of our deliverance — the in-coming year. It is touching to see people crowding together as if in a modern day Ark waiting to land in the terra nova of the fresh start that each new year promises.

This new year's eve too, I along with others danced through the night, with the same kind of desperate enthusiasm that the human spirit generates at its most uncertain. This year there was so much talk of rowdiness and street turbulence that the general feeling in the city, where celebrations were done in splintered groups and with restraint, was that of partying while being under siege. Still, we all danced, to good music and to bad, to commune and to connect, to remember and to forget. And then finally I stood alone looking at the dawn sky, trying to read in the streaks of light special portents about the future, some signs of the new land of our arrival. There were none, of course. The sky promised nothing and the morning of the new year was as anonymous and vague as any other. It was appropriate. For this is not our new year, and it will not be for as long as we linger in the no man's land of political insecurity. But the day we make the transition from political impasse to a concretely resolved solution, we will have entered our future, where everyday is the beginning of the rest of our lives.

Till then, I wish everyone a safe journey into another year and pray that we use all our personal resources to make it happy and brand new, because if we don't, then this year too will remain the same stagnant pool of time and not the season of renewal and of hope and optimism which is the purpose of a brand new calendar.

## To the Editor...

### Destructive politics

Sir, This is to draw your and our 'respectable' politicians' attention to the fact that the GCE Examinations for O and A Levels, in January 1996, 'coincide' with the Opposition's 48-hr hartal programme for the 8th and 9th of January. In fact, the January examinations start on the morning of the 9th which is why the candidates have much reason to be perplexed as they are. These hartals and demonstrations have affected the country's social and economic life adversely enough but it definitely crosses the line when it poses a threat to the smooth conduction of overseas examinations. I would gladly inform the Opposition if they are unaware of the fact, that these examinations are held internationally on the same days, and the British Council and Dhaka would hardly be able to reschedule the dates for as absurd a reason as 'hartal' by the Opposition who are doing their best to mar all the government's plans to hold the General Elections in a constitutional manner, as early as possible.

The Opposition might certainly press their demand for 'free and fair' elections, but certainly not in this insane manner which is aggravating city life gravely. Our admired leaders have expressed concern for people's welfare but I am certain that the people are well aware of their democratic rights, and vote-rigging — if attempted — would be detected and suitably punished, if we have the Opposition's help, rather than their hindrance. The people have proved their potential in 1990 and will do so again in 1996 if the need arises.

If our esteemed Opposition fails to compromise in this imaginary crisis, I would look to the government to shift the last date for the submission of nomination papers to the 7th of January, so that the Opposition might call the hartal on the 7th and 8th instead. The exams extend to the 25th of the January and the Opposition's cooperation during this period would be much appreciated.

On behalf of all candidates as well as other students, I am requesting both the rul-

ing and the opposition parties to prevent this political retrace for power from disrupting our education. This prolonged *cul-de-sac* in our political arena is extremely frustrating and our admiration would be with the one to resolve the crises. Farheen Khan, *Scholastica, Dhaka.*

### Modern political trend!

Sir, Living in Bangladesh has become more like living in a battlefield — a never ending battle between the one's in power and the ones fighting for power. And the victims are always us innocent citizens.

The latest victims of the political impasse are the O-level examination candidates for January 1996. Their examination is starting them in the face — only a few days, a few hours — before the Herculean task of sitting for their first major examination is due. And then, they are suddenly not sure whether they will be able to sit for their examination! Why? Because the Opposition has called a

hartal on the January — the very first day of their O-level examination. Have our 'very concerned' politicians ever stopped to think how their irrational strikes and hartals will affect us students and our future? A six-month loss in a student's life is not a matter of joke — especially not when they have prepared themselves thoroughly for the examinations.

The reason behind most of the hartals called by the Opposition is that they want a 'fair election'.

I would like to end with a sincere request to our politicians to end their fight for power and to let us appear in our O-level examinations. Sadia Sharmin, *Dhanmondi*

### Exceptional

Sir, Time Magazine chose Newt Gingrich for the prestigious man of the year award and said he belongs in the category of the exceptional. My man of the year award goes to Lt Col (ret'd) Z A Khan for epitomising the qualities of courage, gallantry and determination in the face of oppression and terrorism, and for standing up to the

mindless mastans. Oh sure, there will be many who will criticise him for taking the law into his own hands. But we, the oppressed majority, cheer for him for when a society is unable or unwilling to protect the life and property of its citizens, surely it is time we took steps to protect ourselves. By doing what he did, the great colonel has put our vaunted government officials and leaders to shame.

It has been a most depressing year for Bangladesh — a determined journey backwards to an abyss of gloom. And just when I thought the year would end on that note, Lt Col (ret'd) Z A Khan brought a thin, but wonderful ray of hope. Truly, he belongs in the category of exceptional. Sohail Qasem, *Dhaka*

### Recovery of illegal arms

Sir, It was an encouraging news for the nation when it was decided that all the illegal arms will be recovered before the election, if these were not deposited voluntarily before 20th of December, '95. The nation heaved a sigh

of relief with the announcement of the news. But to the utter surprise of all the law-abiding citizens of the country, even at the end of the twelfth day of the expiry of the deadline, the Home Minister failed to focus his attention towards the campuses which are the main depots for illegal arms.

The political activists of Dhaka University displayed their strength of arms in broad day-light on December 28 before the very nose of the law enforcing people when the campaign for recovery of illegal arms was going on. These campus terrorists are the real miscreants who are going to disrupt the electoral process. Why is not our Home Minister cracking down on them? Why is he blind to them? Are they serving the purpose of his political party? Is he not making a mockery in the name of recovery of illegal arms? The people will not forgive him for his passive attitude for which he would have to answer to the nation very soon.

Baechhu Goshalk, *Strajgonj*