

Madaripur Mayhem

The union could be famous only for its name, Dvitiyo Khandha — or Second Part. It will be, from now onwards, infamous for the bloody pre-election clash on Wednesday in which five died on the spot and of the 40 hospitalised some more are sure to follow.

Supporters of two chairmanship candidates of this Madaripur union brought out processions and neither of these tried to avoid taking a route other than the other's. Collision occurred as a matter of course. And both the parties had come prepared. Lathi and ram-dao went into action and firearms used. A medieval battle ensued and ended shortly after to stigmatise the extraordinary name of the union.

Election violence is not unknown in this country. Rather election itself had become a rare thing in Bangladesh. And it is futile asking what-level election draws the most money or the most blood. For it is the same power equation at the village or union level that asserts itself whatever the level of the occasion. And this is what negates our graduation into democracy at the basics. These peculiar gramya-moroli tensions, a powerful residue from our long and fruitful feudal days, would die hard in a nation that hadn't had the chance of consolidating its long experience of striving for an egalitarian and just society, or democracy in short, into enduring institutions in the years after independence.

Why do they make it a life and death question in the villages — this matter of capturing the union parishad? To the old compulsions of greed and power-hunger has been added this new promise of the base levels going to have more power than ever. The whole internecine fight is for preventing power, the new powers specially, from passing to the people and keeping these chained to the traditional bullyboys of the villages.

Can Dvitiyo Khandha be enacted in Dhaka on the national scale? Why not, if Chittagong could be blooded that way on Tuesday? Nature has offered Bangladesh an inconceivable break. It will need vision and broadness of mind as well as a businessman's circumspection and a professional's efficiency and dedication to avail this chance to break out of poverty and backwardness. Actions that may jeopardise this appointment with destiny must be guarded against at all cost.

Let it be a True Start

One of the savoury memories of the week just gone by is the beginning of what seemed to be a serious and purposeful police offensive against terrorists camping in different Dhaka University dormitories.

It is a very welcome reflection of the ruling Awami League's will to free the educational institutions from the armed goons. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has reportedly taken a stern stance against the unending and escalating factional feud in her party's student front. Bangladesh Chhatra League, and asked the administration to deal with campus violence severely.

We urge her to transform this resentment against terrorism in campus into an iron resolve for completely dissociating her party from its student front. Because only then this heightened police action would lead to any effective contribution in the war we are all caught in against terrorism. It is evident and we, in tandem with our tireless persistent President Shahabuddin Ahmed, have always maintained that any effort to stamp out violence and terrorism in Dhaka University, for that matter any educational institution, essentially boils down to insecure political will. Police action can only take care of the effect but it is up to the political parties who have to recognise and 'own' their responsibilities and really mean to uproot the cause of the trouble.

To a great extent the onus to take this recent police drive to a successful conclusion lies on Awami League for both practical and theoretical reasons. Not only that the majority in the police list of 50 terrorists belongs to BCL, Al's student front but as a party in power it has to gain the moral right of urging BNP, its rival and the other major stakeholder in the damned culture of realpolitik in the universities, to sever links with its students front JCD and its armed cadres.

The war against campus violence has begun truly. We only hope it's a true beginning with a view to ending the problem once for all.

Bumper Crop and Forebodings

Char islands in Bhola and nearby Bauphal are going to harvest a bumper rice crop in less than a month's time. Peasants are waving dreams looking at the green expanse of paddy fields in all direction. But their happiness has been greatly tempered by forebodings of bad and violent attacks on their crop. There are in the area also those who are dated at the approach of December or, precisely, Aghrahan, and unmixed with any unease over what may the month bring. They are the lathials or mercenaries wielding the special long stick called lathi.

This is an annual event. Lathials hired by jotedars and other moneyed ruffians in the chars fall upon the paddy fields of the peasants and carry away the crop. The peasants try to offer resistance and are beaten by the professional goons. This is the season of the peasants being killed and maimed and robbed. It is a strange mix that agitates the mind of the peasant for a month — a sense of fulfillment from the crops in the field and another of fear and resolution to face violence and thwart loot.

Bankim Chandra had eulogised the lathi of the Bengalees in his inimitable style. Why did our forebears shine with the stick rather than with weapons having steel blades? Perhaps this development had much to do with the phenomenon of the Buddhist martial arts — bare-handed and used only in defence. Times have changed and, with so many other things, the lathi has come to be abused.

In the chars of Bhola and Bauphal the administration makes a list of all lathials in the area and restrain them effectively for this crucial month so as to prevent crop clashes. This year no list was made and the lathials are going to have a field day. Other years police camps are set on the chars to stop crop-related eruptions. This year the policemen are busy minding UP elections.

The peasant down there has reason to be apprehensive. Bangladesh is yet to get to a stage where law would rule all collective life.

Rural Household Budget: Rich vs Poor

The over-emphasis on cereal production that sounded lucrative a decade back might not sound so now because with rise in per capita income, there occurs a transition in consumption preference. If supply is not then augmented to match demand, the 'price effect' might thwart any attempt to raise people's real income.

We all know that the households (HHs) or families living in rural areas of Bangladesh can be grouped into three main categories viz. (a) landless and landless, (b) marginal and small, and (c) medium and large HHs. Category (a) is dubbed as the poorest of all 'very poor' while category (b) is called as 'moderately poor' and (c) as solvent or 'rich' HHs. The differentiation is based on landownership. Not surprisingly, availability of land or a lack of it is all important source of richness or poverty in rural Bangladesh. Available evidence suggests that 45 per cent of all rural HHs are absolutely poor followed by 38 per cent moderately poor. The solvent and rich HHs constitute 17 per cent. In terms of ownership of total land in villages the shares are, respectively, about 5, 25 and 71 per cent. In other words, 17 per cent of rural HHs own about 71 per cent of rural land while the bottom 45 per cent own only about 5 per cent of total land. The inequality in land ownership is thus widely exposed. According to a survey carried out by the Centre for Human Resources Development (CHRD) of Jahangirnagar University, the per capita incomes (1995) were Tk 6,914, Tk 11,166 and Tk 19,594 for categories (a), (b) and (c) respectively.

People earn income to spend on goods and services. There are investment expenditures also. In a closed economy, without government expenditure in the equation, income comprises consumption and investment expenditures. The present note attempts to highlight some of the aspects of consumption expenditures among the three types of HHs mentioned above. We consider three things: Average Budget Share (ABS), Marginal Budget Share (MBS) and Expenditure Elasticity of Demand (EED). Data were collected from 425 HHs living over 22 districts of Bangladesh. The sample size is small though, the implications could be quite indicative.

The very poor tend to spend more than half of their budget on crop-products (e.g. rice, wheat, vegetables, fruits etc.). The ABS for moderately poor and rich HHs are 46 and 38, respectively. It implies, perhaps, that with graduation from very poor to richness, HHs spend less and less on those commodities. The rich appear to spend more on commodities like eggs, meats and milk. For example, the ABS of this class on this account is 8 per cent compared to a feeble 3 per cent of the HHs at the lower strata. Rich or poor, all HHs spend, on average, 18-19 per cent of their consumption budget on industrial products. Substantial difference, between the rich and the poor, could be evidenced in the case of spendings on service sector items (e.g. education, health and transport). For example,

the ABS of the 'very poor' HHs is only 11 per cent on service items compared to 17 per cent by the 'moderately poor' and 22 per cent by the 'rich'. This, perhaps, leads to the conclusion that the poverty forces a larger portion of the budget to be spent on basic food items and leaves less room for spending on education and health improvement.

The ABS on 'essential or basic' items like kerosene oil, salt, soap are more or less same across different types of HHs. Yes, it is quite obvious. We do not eat more of salt or use more kerosene when income goes up. Interestingly, the ABS of HHs without electricity tend to be more on kerosene oil than those spending on electricity. Thus the 'very poor' with access to electricity appears richer than the 'very poor' without having access to electricity.

There are some differences in the budget share of 'luxury' items (e.g. cosmetics, ghee, milk cloth, imported cloth etc.). For example, for each Tk 100, the 'very poor' HHs spend 16 paisa on the purchases of cosmetics. The 'moderately poor' spend more than two times — 36 paisa and the rich more than for times — 66 paisa. All poor HHs spend only four paisa (per Tk 100) on the purchase of ghee while the rich spend 86 paisa. The findings tend to conform economic laws: luxury commodities are income-elastic.

Earlier, we mentioned that the 'very poor' HHs spend only 11 per cent of their total consumption budget on service items. The rich spends almost double. Take the case of spendings on education. Out of a 100 taka budget, the 'very poor' HHs spend Tk 2 on education compared to Tk 8 by the rich. In between, the 'moderately poor' incur Tk 4. Thus as income goes up, spending on education also goes up.

The MBS of essential items like salt, kerosene etc. tend to remain same and a rise in budgetary amount does not seem to affect the demand substantially. By and large, the findings suggest that expenditure elasticity or demand for essential commodities are low while those for luxury items are high. With rise in per capita income, HHs tend to shift their preference from food to non-food items and among food items, from rice and wheat to livestock products. The most important changes that occur pari passu the rise in budget amount is in the case of service items. Education and health expenses are mostly related to a variation in the budget. Their expenditure elasticity, and MBS are very high for the poorer segment.

While employment generation (and hence income growth) should be the perennial objective of policy makers, the analysis tends to show that the dynamic changes that follow such generations should clearly be grasped and duly considered. Policies do not remain static. The over-emphasis on cereal production that sounded lucrative a decade back might not sound so now because with rise in per capita income, there occurs a transition in consumption preference. If supply is not then augmented to match demand, the 'price effect' might thwart any attempt to raise people's real income. In rural areas, the supply of non-rice commodities should be increased immediately. Prices of rice are rising very slowly while those of others are soaring high.

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