

Hartals, but for Whom?

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FREQUENT and prolonged hartals are no doubt favorite items for the political leaders. But how much palatable are they for the general people? How do they evaluate hartal in their everyday life? These are few questions that those struggling for power never care to ask, as they may not find the answers as devious as the hartals are.

To inquire about the actual opinion of the people on hartal, we recently conducted a survey in the Dhaka City. Some interesting observations, as well as some shocking facts came out.

Let them protest in the Parliament

A large number of the respondents felt that parliament is the most appropriate place to settle 'political issues'. The issues put forward by different political parties regarding hartals were often not comprehensible to them, they found these too distant from their day to day lives. So they identified the issues to be solely about 'Rajnitik' or 'power struggle' which is the Bengali translation of politics. The parliament, in their opinion, is the most appropriate place to settle the 'Rajnitik' issues. The respondents could not find any reasons for their daily sufferings caused due to hartals. Moliz, a small trader told us that even a single day's strike costs him a loss of about Tk. 10,000 or more. He is at a loss to understand the rationale behind this hartal which brings him so much misery. To him as well, the only place to resolve problems among the politicians is the parliament, else why did we elect them to the parliament, was his question to the politicians.

Disruption of normal course of life also led some respondents to suggest about settling political issues in the parliament. Jahan Ara Khan, a housewife mentioned that the education of her children is being considerably hampered by frequent hartals. Moreover, the prices of the daily necessities go up during the prolonged periods of strikes. Such disruptions in the normal life led her also to

suggest parliamentary solutions to political issues.

Hartal in the Manifesto

Apart from settling the political issues in the parliament of the respondents called for more responsible behaviour on part of the political leaders. They urged them not to make people captive of their power rivalry. Accordingly some respondents suggested about the inclusion of a provision in their manifestos on their right to call hartals. Thus, she suggested to the hartals as anti-people not anti-government as according to them elites do not suffer, it is the common people who suffer the most.

Exemption for Public Transports

One of the sections that suffers most during prolonged hartals are obviously rickshaw pullers and taxi-drivers, whose daily income depend upon the movement of people, which is stalled by hartals. Abul Hussain a rickshaw puller told us that often during hartals he and his family have to go without food. He urged for a little sympathy on part of the politicians for the sufferings of people like them. He suggested that rickshaws and taxis may be exempted during hartals.

Actually all those who depend on daily wages for livelihood suffer tremendously due to hartals. They demanded that their daily earning activities be kept out of hartals.

Alternatives to Hartals

— Processions and Sit-in Protests

Processions and sit-in protests appeared to be more civil means of expressing political protest to some respondents. Young Tonmoy of grade three expressed his frustrations that during the hartals he cannot go to school and play with his friends. He also cannot go out in the evening for a walk. Processions, meetings and sit-ins in protests seemed to be more

appropriate even to this boy. But our politicians seem to think otherwise. What lessons are we imparting to our children?

Privatized TV Channel for the Opposition

One interviewee identified the lack of democratic space in the political arena for protests to be a major cause behind resorting to hartals. Thus, she suggested about privatized TV channels where the opposition can express their arguments and criticisms and also inform the people about their programmes and policies.

Hartals — the Gender Perspective

Apart from sufferings of the people in general, hartals cause some specific sufferings to the women. First of all, as the hartals create an insecure atmosphere in the streets the chances of mistreatment or physical harassment of the women seem to be much more during the period. A girl pointed out that during one hartal day she was caught in front of a militant procession while passing by the road. Being afraid she ran to the police for shelter. But ironically enough the police on the spot took opportunity of her vulnerability and harassed her.

Secondly, the insecurity mentioned above prompts many parents to restrict the movement of their daughters during hartals. This on the one hand hampers their education or other works and on the other, pushes them back in the competition since the male members are not usually restricted from going out. An S.S.C candidate informed us that she could not go to her coaching centre to appear in model test during a hartal day, but her male counterparts could all appear in the test.

Thirdly, hartals bring about tremendous miseries for the women who work as daily laborers or in the garment factories. The former suffers more than the male laborers since they cannot easily change their occupation and engage in plying rickshaws or sell groceries like a male. The problem of the lat-

ter is much more acute because absence or delay in going to work place during hartals lead to cut in wages and even to loss of jobs. On the other hand going out means exposing themselves to any kind of unpleasant situation. Moreover they are more easily victimized since they often are unable to put up organized protests like their male colleagues.

Fourthly in many private offices and factories there is a rule that if the place has to remain closed during a hartal, workers have to work on the following weekly holiday. This creates many problems for the female workers since going to workplace during a holiday disrupts her household works which is expected by all other members of the family. The usually does not affect the male members since they do not have to think about their household duties and there is no pressure of expectation upon them.

The interviews gave us an impression that frequent hartals by the political parties and the consequent sufferings of people are gradually eroding people's respect and confidence on democracy. Specially the issues on which hartals are called are usually so distant from the lives of the general people that they are perceiving political processes as more and more 'Rajnitik' rather than people centric. The state of affairs urgently calls for responsible and tolerant approach of our political leadership. Such approach may contain elements like arranging referendum on peoples' opinion on hartal as a means of political protest, promise in the electoral manifesto about abandoning violent and prolonged hartals.

If measures are not taken soon the future of democracy in Bangladesh may be put into question. The politicians must realize that people's patience is running out.

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Political Protest: Search for Alternatives

Imagination is more important than knowledge
—Albert Einstein

People's Perspective on Political Protest: A Report

A public dialogue on "Political Protest: Search for Alternatives" was jointly organized by Center for Alternatives and the Daily Star at the National Press Club auditorium on February 3, 1999. The objective of this dialogue was to bring together members of civil society and concerned citizens from various sections for exchanging their views on the current mode of political protest and to search for effective, viable alternative modes of political protest. Much of the discussion centered on hartal—validity of the speaker's decision in the floor crossing of two BNP members has adversely affected the image of the parliament and the democratic process. Partisan actions and politicization of the administration have made the typical middle class unwillingness to be vocal against violence, negative politics is another reason why anti-hartal movement has not been successful. Ahmed Kamal argued that the political parties need to be made to understand that they will not be in power forever and that a code of conduct will be beneficial for them when they are in the opposition.

(d) Alternative Modes of Protest: Aly Zaker, a theatre artist, pointed out that since hartal is an extreme measure, political parties should consider whether other less drastic and innovative measures such as sit in (dharna), human chain, gherao, etc. can be taken to register protest (as effectively done by the opposition parties in 1996).

call themselves democratic?" were the questions raised by Mohammed Jahangir.

Participants also expressed that hartal will take place because violence pays. Ahmed Kamal pointed out that extorting, forcible appropriation of property etc. were possible during hartal. These 'economic benefits' help to sustain hartal. Moreover, other participants felt that anti-hartal campaign has always been given a political color, which is why it has failed. Furthermore, the typical middle class unwillingness to be vocal against violence, negative politics is another reason why anti-hartal movement has not been successful. Ahmed Kamal argued that the political parties need to be made to understand that they will not be in power forever and that a code of conduct will be beneficial for them when they are in the opposition.

(e) Lack of Proper Institutional Mechanism: The participants, though they raised questions about the validity of hartal and actions of the political parties, expressed that hartal was an effective tool. Ahmed Kamal of History department, DU, pointed out that hartal forced people/government to pay attention to the demands made by the opposition. Mohammed Jahangir, a well known media critic; Mahfuz Anam, Ahmed Kamal, Enam A. Chowdhury, a former civil servant, and many others pointed out that the government control over the electronic media, parliamentary media coverage, also parliamentary agenda leaves the opposition few alternatives than to take to the streets and call hartals. The other point that was raised was that internal machinery of the political parties is not democratic. Decisions are taken over the electronic media, parliamentary media coverage, also parliamentary agenda leaves the opposition few alternatives than to take to the streets and call hartals. The other point that was raised was that internal machinery of the political parties is not democratic. Decisions are taken

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