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Democracy or Mastanocracy Do we have a choice?

From the Alternatives Desk

I have always found dichotomous propositions somewhat untenable, not because there are no differences between them but more because one is counterposed to another almost artificially if not arbitrarily. Moreover, experience has shown that often the dichotomous propositions live and relive collectively, with one becoming the cause as well as the consequence of the other. In this context, I have no hesitation to say that mastanocracy in Bangladesh is both the cause and consequence of the state of democracy in the country. This is not difficult to understand, as we shall see. But first let me clarify something pertaining to the concept, mastanocracy.

It has already been brought to my attention that the concept belies reality because 'mastans' are only *used*, they do not 'rule' or 'govern'. My defence here is a simple one and that is, contrary to the meaning of the term, even in a democracy the 'people' do not 'rule' or 'govern', they are merely *used*! And I guess there lies the merit in the conceptualization of mastanocracy. At least, in this case (that is, unlike democracy) the wording of the reality is less mystified.

Two factors are critically important in understanding the reproduction of mastanocracy, incidentally both linked to the democratic practices in the country. The first one relates to the gap between the voters and the voted. In fact, in terms of the actual vote cast one MP represents on the average some 143,000 people, while in terms of the overall population of the country nearly 400,000. It does not require much imagination to understand that in so far as representation is concerned this is an impossible situation. On this, I once challenged some MPs by asking, "can you really shake hands with all the people that you claim to represent?" In response, I only got a bemused look and a discomfiting silence! Indeed, it is this gap that allows 'intermediaries' (ranging from mastans, corrupt officials, hired goons and the like) to have the *real power* as both the voters and the voted, albeit for different reasons, become dependent on them.

The second factor, however, relates to our history. In so far as our civil society has been involved in overthrowing the British colonialism and later on the semi-colonial state of Pakistan, it created a situation where the civil society itself became exposed to violence and polarization. In the post-independence phase, however, with no common and dire struggles to carry out, only the mastans could profit from the reproduction of violent and polarized civil society. Put differently, in the wake of supporting one or another political party, we are all unwittingly reproducing not only a polarized and violent civil society but also the power of the mastans.

In the light of this contention, I am afraid the only way we can overcome mastanocracy is by reinventing and reformulating the present state of democracy. Anything less will only empower and embolden the mastans!



The typical confrontation: Whether on a hartal day or during a protest march the partakers, on most occasions, meet the police, mandated to maintain discipline. And more often than not their face to face meeting turns into violent confrontation; and when clash rules the street discipline finds its way through the alley to oblivion. However, here police often behave like mastans they say. One wonders whether the first seed of mastani was sown in the society from there, when and how long ago one doesn't know.

— Star photo

Mastanocracy: Reflections and Recollections

by Muzaffer Ahmad

The current political scenario is conducive for mastanocracy. It is reported that large numbers of the members of the Parliament are willful loan defaulter, tax defaulters and bill defaulters. They also make false deposition under oath about their election expenditure. They are not required to disclose sources of money for expenditure. There is total absence of voluntary work by party members.

MASTAN etymologically has come from the Turko-Persian word *mast*, which means possessed or one who is not in control of oneself and in a derivative sense one who is controlled by supernatural power. One has heard in the 50s and 60s the song 'damadam mast Kalandar'. It is still popular in Pakistan where the mazar of Kalandar Shah is situated. I presume the Turkish dancing dervishes are a variety of the mystified people and so are the Krishna consciousness group or the Sri Chaitanya Sevaks.

Mastans today are muscle-men who work for others or as a group for themselves. This country has seen lathials and kuthials in history. It is said that Yusuf Ali Chowdhury alias Mohan Mia of Faridpur used to occupy charlands with lathials. It has been alleged that Shaheed Shurawardy had close liaison with musclemen in Calcutta. It is reported that Fazlul Kader Chowdhury used men to control votes for being elected chairman of Chittagong district. The infamous governor Monem Khan proudly described himself as the lathial who once served Nurul Amin and was then serving Ayub Khan. However, the role of mastans was controlled and they were used on certain selected occasions. The role of NSF is a testimony to that.

The scenario changed with the liberation war. Despite the unity of purpose, there was no unity of command. Despite loud pronouncement of patriotism, the compulsion for emigration and expectation of reward varied as well as access to privileges and retention of arms. The heroic effort of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to disarm the civilian population and to engage the patriotic force in national development did not make much headway beyond framing the Constitution, drafting of the First Five Year Plan, and the Qudrat E Khuda Education commission report. Fractious political groups led to armed conflicts, the most notorious of which is the murder in Surja Sen Hall as well as hijacking of ballot boxes of DUCSU election by a section of BCL under the eyes of helpless teachers. That arms matter in getting privileges and establishing access to politico-economic resources was established too early in the life of a new nation. The JSD politics did not help either. It spread the armed conflict across the country and pockets of armed control areas of influence still exist today despite martial law regimes and political regimes susceptible to intelligence reports veracity of which is often doubtful as well as fear of creating displeasure amongst the people in uniform. The mastans are there be-

cause there are real gains from this business (both mastans and those who use mastans gain). The gains come from control of access to resources. The examples that come to mind are various. First, to get admission in a college/school 'bara bhai's' do matter. Second, to set up a store in a village/urban bazar one needs protection of 'big brothers'. Third, to jump a queue in getting a hearing by an elected/appointed/nominated official, the cadres matter. Fourth, to approach for redress of unjust eviction from one's own house, the mastans are more effective than lawyers. Fifth, to submit a simple tender in any public institutions, promises of commission to dominating mastan group help one and obstruct the other candidates. And so on and so forth.

The pre-conditions for rise of mastanocracy are known. The first is absence of transparency in decision making everywhere (e.g. who shall be a member of the school committee). The second is deterioration

of discipline amongst the law enforcing authority who detain and free people at will or under pressure from influential quarters. The third is presence of an army of helpless people who cannot access rightful opportunity to work, start a business, get admission to school or hospital etc. The fourth is lack of knowledge about the rules and procedure, which allows for brokering of influence. The fifth is appointment of wrong persons in position of control who depend on influence peddling. The sixth is lack of practiced and visible accountability in resource mobilization and utilization. One can add more.

The current political scenario is conducive for mastanocracy. It is reported that large numbers of the members of the Parliament are willful loan defaulter, tax defaulters and bill defaulters. They also make false deposition under oath about their election expenditure. They are not required to disclose sources of money for expenditure. There is total absence of voluntary work by party members. There is need to control polling stations and booths. This is a fertile ground for mastans to be 'effective' and extort rent from candidates that matter. Mastans even have taken

control over everyday situations. And those who associate with mastans benefit from the relationship. For example, the truck and bus owners want maximum return in the shortest possible time. The drivers have forged license and many load their vehicles beyond the authorized limits. Owners' association with mastans helps them to broker with law enforcing agencies to cut down the cost of operation. Land grabbing is done through the use of mastans. Powerful people have used mastans to threaten, intimidate others to sell their land below the market price or to evict owners from their home. Numerous stories have been published in the news papers about that people hired mastans to kidnap girls of their choice when she did not respond to their advances or to threaten the parents of the girls to give consent to marriage.

The question is how do we get out of mastanocracy. Common-men do not have the ear of administration. The NGOs have limitations as they have to protect their own activities from mastans as well. The source of common men's strength is his number and the courage to say no. At the cost of some people's life one needs to

say no to mastans. It may work.

I once faced a situation when a dismissed MBA student who was under the protection of an influential student cadre group came to my office with mastans demanding that I reverse the decision and give him pass marks in my course. I was alone with a guest. The sound of fixing of a cut rifle outside the door alerted me. I took my guest out and asked him to leave, locked my office and stood on the portico. The mastans pleaded, threatened and shot bullets in the air from 11 am till 5 pm. No one came to help me, even not the prayer goes. I simply told the mastans that the university does not pay me much but I have voluntarily accepted the job. I have two obligations to the university community, one is to abide by rules and regulations and the other is to set and maintain academic standards. I cannot compromise on these and if they wish to have a go at me they can do so. After six hours they left. I lodged a written report to the then VC and the proctor. Nothing happened to the influential cadres. I also brought the matter up in the faculty meeting, some senior teachers took a position that it was not an appropriate agenda as the student was already dismissed. I requested

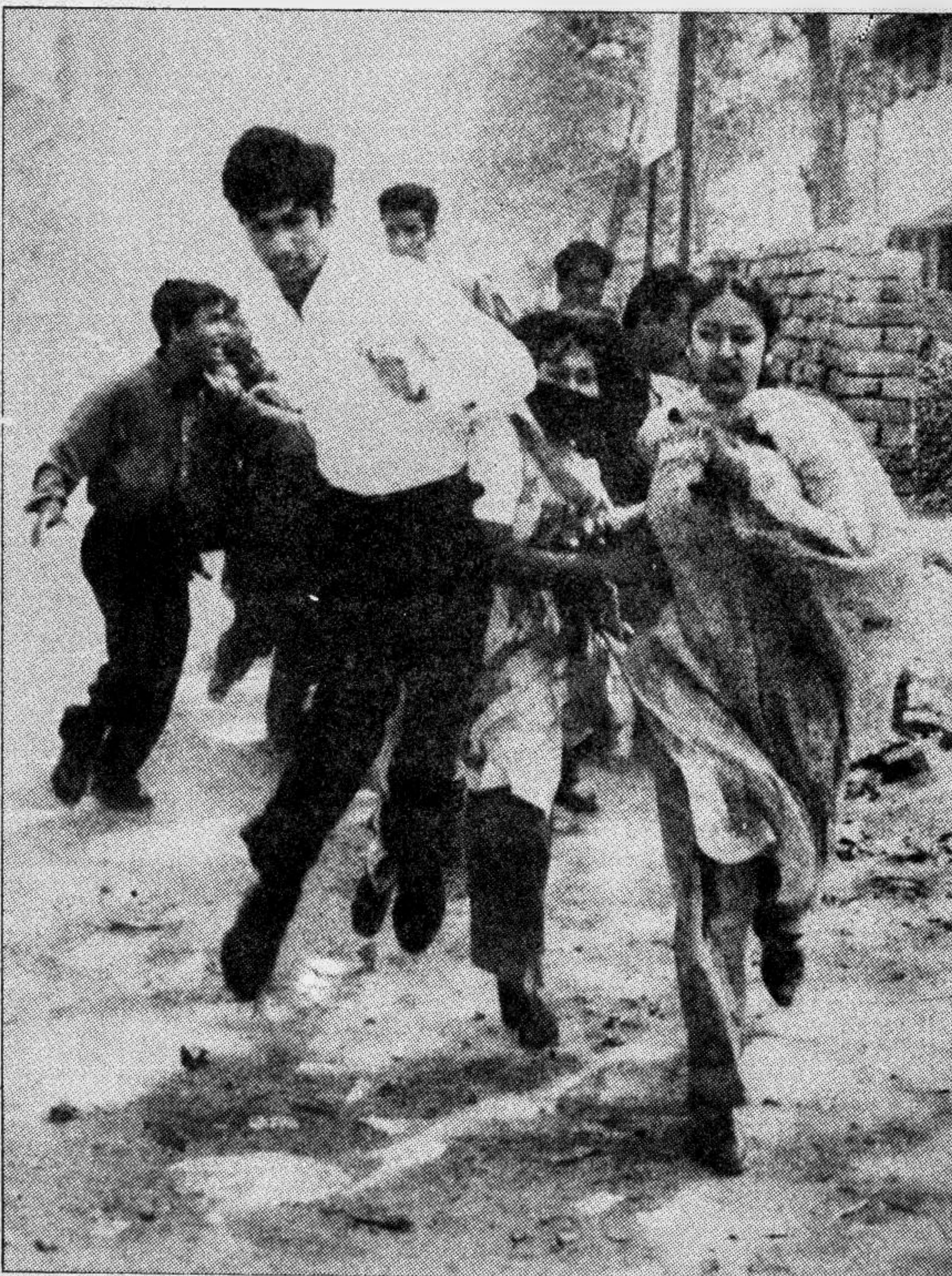
the university authority to make a GD with the police. It was not done. This shows why mastanocracy survives in Bangladesh and in public institutions. But standing up to the cadre did result in non-repetition of similar incident at the institute.

Before concluding let me state clearly it is not mastanocracy as the rule of mastans is not yet the rule of the day. But the godfathers of various sorts lend their support to the mastans for their benefit, which allows them to benefit through extra-legal operations. Recent household surveys, conducted and scanning of news reports indicate that common people are harassed by intermediaries when they seek basic health, education, and other services. These intermediaries are a variety of mastans. Mastans do not only mean armed men who extort money and harass people, they also include these 'unarmed' intermediary groups in the basic service providing institutions and in the administration (executive, law agencies, judiciary) who harass and extort money (bribes, 'service charge' etc.) from the common people. In public hospitals the helpless people are to pay for registration at outdoor (21%) and also for admission (35%). A group within the hospital sells hospital medicine. Hospital administration is unable to maintain standard and on time medicare. The admission to a school require intermediation of a pressure group (22%) getting promoted require extra payment in the form of private tuition (32%), getting FFE alloca-

tion require influence peddling (17%), and getting school registration is subjected to extortion (39%). In election the use of mastans have been reported by 20% of voters in recent election. They either vote for absentee persons or prevent voters from coming to vote or interfere with election process. As many as 37% of the households complained that payment had to be made to lodge complaint with the police and another 29% said that it was possible to influence police report on payment and/or intimidation of mastans/influence peddlers. As many as 54% of the people with pending cases in court made payments directly or through intermediaries for setting dates for hearing or influencing outcome. 85% of the people said that they made extra legal payments and sought help of intermediaries to get their land deeds written or registered. A sizable 43% said payment directly or through intermediaries were needed to get loans from banks. 23% got their WASA bill and 30% got their electricity bill reduced through the help of intermediaries. The prevalence of mastans in trade unions, bus-trucks, launch terminals, in organizations that auction parking and public places are well known.

It is time to mobilize the people to take a stand against the use of mastans by influence peddlers as the administration seem to be ineffective in this respect.

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Whither safety? Students fleeing clash of rival groups to ... well, they don't know to which security. — Star photo

Mastan: A Social Disease

by Nirupoma Chowdhury

It is our country. We have every right to live here peacefully. So the anti-socials who destroy peace, must be removed from our peaceful lives. Only being conscious and united against such social disease, we can build a mastan free society.

they would use some foul language and even sometime would beat them. They demanded two lakhs taka from Kamal. When he refused, one night they messed up his room where he was living as a tenant. Later the top terror of the area attacked him with pistol and pipe bun. But at that moment police came miraculously. That top terror escaped and he was saved.

Kamal tried to organise his neighbours against these mastans. But they were not much cooperative as they were scared of the mastans. Now Kamal also thinks that he will have to live in this area. Though the police requested him to cooperate in arresting those mastans, he refused as he is now extremely worried as to what will actually happen when he starts living in his new abode along with his family.

There is not only one Kamal but also several Kamals facing this type of incident. Is not there any remedy?

Nightmare of a Shop Owner: Eid day was very near. All the shopkeepers were busy with their sales. The market place was at its height. As the buyers and sellers keep very busy in such season, similarly mastans also remain active in raising their subscriptions (!). One fine evening, in a very busy and crowded shop of a renowned market of the city, some seven or eight musclemen came and demanded one lakh taka as their 'Eid Baksheesh' (Eid tips). When the owner of the shop refused to give money, they showed their weapons and

threatened the shop owner that they would come the next day to get the 'baksheesh'. The young son of the shop owner became very agitated and told them that they would never give such tolls, then some arguments took place between them.

Later when the young son of the shop owner was returning to his home, he was severely stabbed by those mastans. Being very scared, on the next day, the shop owner gave the mastans their demanded money. Eid came to every body with joy, but not to that shop owner's family as his son was struggling for his life. Now he is back to his normal course of life, but he has changed his views. The incident was like a nightmare to him. So he decided not to get involved in any arguments with the mastans who may even kill him just for a simple protest.

Mastans — The Social Enemy:

A flourishing village in the southern part of Bangladesh. The villagers have a long cherished desire of having a nice cobbled road, which will connect the village with the thana sadar which was just about five kms from the village. Tender notice was given and accordingly a local contractor received the work order.

But when the contractor was about to start the work, some local mastans demanded ten percent of the sanctioned money as their 'salami'. They threatened him and his employees not to start the work without satisfying them. He sought help from the local po-

lice station and the result was that the mastans who were from some influential local families, attacked his house and beat him severely for making complains against them.

The contractor is now in a helpless predicament. If he fulfills their demand, he will not be able to complete the work, let alone earn some profits. Eventually he decided not to start the work. Here only one individual is not being harassed, but the whole village community is being deprived of fulfilling its dream. Though they are greater in number, these poor villagers are hostage in the hands of a few anti social elements.

A Teen Under Evil Eyes:

Can we think that a lovely young daughter can become a burden for a family? This happened to Rashid and his family. His teenager girl, Shilpi, caught the sight of one of the local mastans on her way to college. The mastan with his companions started teasing her. She did not have the courage to protest. Then her brother or father started to accompany her. But the teasing did not stop.

After a brief period, that mastan expressed his desire to marry her. Rashid naturally refused the proposal. The mastan began to create pressure on him and even threatened to abduct his beloved daughter. Being frightened Rashid frantically tried to settle a marriage for Shilpi as soon as possible. But every time a proposal was about to be settled, her would-be-in-laws received anonymous let-

ters speaking ill of Shilpi and her family. Eventually the marriage proposal broke.

In the mean time, the mastans made an attempt to abduct Shilpi from which she luckily escaped. The whole family was under anxiety. Shilpi had to stop going to college. Her father and brother had to spend more time at home to ensure her safety. Later, Shilpi was taken to her uncle's house in another town at the dark of night. Her uncle arranged her marriage over there but her parents could not attend the function. They were scared that if they all left for the wedding ceremony, the mastans would understand it and again try to harass them. Though Shilpi did not have any vice, just being pretty, she and her family had to suffer for these mastans.

A Professional under Attack:

Rajbari town. A journalist family has been living there for a long period. Beside their house, there is a deserted house, which was the place of all anti-social activities by some local mastans. On various occasions the journalist forbade them to do these misdeeds. One of his sons reported their activities in the newspaper. Then the police raided that deserted house. From then on, the angry mastans were looking for a suitable opportunity to take the revenge.

One hartal day everybody was there at home. Press club of the town was attacked by some political mastans. On that very day, those local mastans used that opportunity. About 50-60 mastans attacked the house of the journalist. First they cut off the telephone line, and then they messed up the whole house. They came with Chinese axe, ramda, short gun and other dangerous weapons. When the journalist family tried to stop them, they hit every member of

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