

## Mastanocracy

Imagination is more important than knowledge  
— Albert Einstein

## Mind Your Mastani Language

by Ekram Kabir

Once peace-loving populace has transformed into an arrogant lot these days. Today, Bangladesh is a country of 120 million mastans. Despite the increasing number of knaves, miscreants, ruffians and social villains being on the rise to an alarming proportion, yet socially, "language", "body language" and "attitude" of every individual imply that people have lost their sense of politeness, and a conspicuous magnitude of incivility has set in.

Our psychological passages from highbrow way of thinking to a discourteous-at-heart are manifest in every walk of life. It goes without saying that the police are the mastans of mastans. Apart from them, bureaucrats, shopkeepers, bus conductors, auto-rickshaw drivers, rickshaw-pullers in our public life are all mastans in one way or the other. Surprisingly on the domestic front, majority of the husbands becomes too cavalier while practicing their macho mastani over their wives. Well, the domestic mastani goes beyond even husband-wife relationship; mother, sister and daughters-in-law experience and exercise their way of mastani among them which gives rise to a spectacle of social arrogance.

There's a lot of initiatives to eliminate this domestic mastani both at the governmental and non-governmental levels; and is reducible over time. But our political leaders and "their" way of doing politics are to be blamed for each and every mastani that unfortunately takes place in the country. In fact, the various "statements" they churn out in their quixotic effort to degrade their opposition in the public eye. By making political statements, they virtually — in a war of threats and counter-threats — humiliate their fellow political colleagues. The politicians' undignified way to intimidate others leaves a quacking influence on the people at large. This also influences the followers and breeds conceited attitude among them. These verbal venom-like slingshots get re-mitted and transplanted in the minds of the citizens.

The threatening verbalisms from the political arena psychologically affect the people, irrespective of age, profession and gender. Imagine Anwar Hossain Manju is warning Hossain Mohammad Ershad to stop behaving like a military dictator, the opposition political parties giving the ruling party an ultimatum to meet their four-point demand and step down from power; and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina stating that she would call the elections when and only when her party can win!

Again consider these: Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina says while inaugurating Bangladesh Krishak League Council: "The opposition has only one issue, which they are afraid to say, that is, to protect the killers of the Father of the Nation." Foreign Minister Abdus Samad Azad says during an AL working committee meeting: "Doler bhetore o baire jara' edik-dik korchhen, tara shabdhan hoaye jan, nolley greptar hoaye naben." (Those dilly dallying, both within and without the party, beware else you'll be arrested.) Jatiya Party chief says: "I am an elephant; and Manju, Rabbi and Jhantu are mosquitoes; there's no point comparing me with them. I'll become the prime minister in future; and with their treachery, they will at best be ministers."

Now consider the underlying implications of these statements of people who are given the mandate to steer the country. Don't their words sound threatening and mastani-like? Most of the readers would agree, because if the political "mastanocrats" don't have the conscience of civility when they speak, debate or rebuke others on state affairs, then what do you think a commoner will learn? In fact they have created a political culture of mastanocracy and violence.

The only alternative, I believe, to "mastanocracy" lies in changing the arrogant attitudes of these political "mastanocrats". There must be a code of conduct while they speak to the people, to their fellow party-men and when they criticize other political parties or persons.

The author is Feature Writer in the Op/Ed Section of The Daily Star.

## Being a Mastan

by Abdullah-al-Hasan Shamim and Sharif Atiqur Rahman

**Lack of education or sound social life also helps to create mastans. There are examples of even 'tokais' becoming mastans. Involvement of any member of the family in anti social activities may lead others to this path. Some also choose this way of life as the easiest way to become rich and powerful in the shortest period of time.**

## Becoming of a Mastan

The factor that seems to have greater influence in the making of a mastan, directly or indirectly, is the armed wing of political parties, popularly known as the 'cadre group'. In their young age some of them might have a kind of inclination towards particular political parties. When they got admitted in universities or other educational institutions, this inclination turned into active student politics. And later on, to have a leading post in the party, and sometimes to maintain party domination, some of them got involved in arms politics.

According to some top terrorists of the 1980's, the then government was directly involved in creating mastans. The objective was to dominate the educational institutions (the powerhouse of anti autocratic movement) and eventually to stop the anti government movement. The ruling party through the government machinery created and backed these anti social elements. But then the evils of these mastans did not remain limited only within the educational institutions; it spread out in every section of urban life, even to rural areas. At the same time, some students also got involved in arms politics to save themselves and their fellow activists from the oppression of the ruling party backed mastans.

It is unfortunate that university authorities have little control over the allocation of seats for students in the hostels. Students coming from outside the city have to depend on 'bara bhaais' (leaders of the ruling students' political parties who are in control of that particular hostel) for their accommodation. In return they have to be loyal towards the 'bara bhaais' and have to act according to their will. In many cases, being occupied in working for them, these poor students cannot even attend their classes. These students are more likely to get themselves involved in arms politics, sometimes under pressure and sometimes as an expression of gratitude.

A person involved in arms politics, ultimately starts to use those arms for many more rea-

sons. For instance, he starts to threaten people, collects "commission" from contractors, compels businessmen or shop owners to give "salami". Eventually a mastan is born.

Lack of education or sound social life also helps to create mastans. There are examples of even 'tokais' becoming mastans. Involvement of any member of the family in anti social activities may lead others to this path. Some also choose this way of life as the easiest way to become rich and powerful in the shortest period of time.

## Mastanocracy and Arms

For all the mastans, arms is their main source of power. Be it a knife or a hockey stick or a pistol—it is most essential to them. Even a strong man feels scared and helpless in front of a person with deadly weapons. Mastans use this sense of fright to fulfill their evil ends and compel others to satisfy their demands. Mastans use from commando knife to sword, from "cocktail" to grenade, from pipe gun to short gun, from "three not three" to most sophisticated automatic weapons, and what not. Some of these are produced locally, while some are from abroad. But whatever the source is, most of the mastans are not willing to talk about that. Still it was clear that they collect a lot of these arms from the Chittagong Hill Tracts area. An ex top terrorist of Dhaka University area pointed out that the DGF supplied different models of automatic weapons during the autocratic rule of the 60's. On many occasions, law enforcement agencies admitted that transnational arms syndicate are operating within the country which is a major source of weapons.

Through these weapons provide them a sense of power and strength, these may also put them in troubles. Mastans are categorised according to the types of weapons their gangs hold. Eventually inter and intra gang wars take place for the possession of these weapons.

## Political Party-Partner and Traitor

Political parties are the

biggest sponsors of mastanocracy. They create, nourish and back the mastans. To maintain dominance in the political field, or to suppress the leaders, activists and supporters of the opposition, mastans are powerful weapons. All the mastans that we interviewed admitted that political parties used them on various occasions. None of them were ever warned of the consequences of getting involved in armed politics by their mentors. On the contrary, they were encouraged.

Mastans do not have any political ideology or allegiance. They can surrender their political allegiance to the opposition at any time. They will definitely take that side, where they will be benefited most. Mastans admitted that it is always good for them to be with the ruling party. This gives them security from the law enforcing agencies. That is why as soon as a new political party forms the government, the mastans start joining the ruling party.

Political parties are also not different from them in character. Whenever these mastans become a burden or embarrassment to the party due to their excessive involvement in violence, party leaders never hesitate to expel them from the party. Still mastans continue to work for political parties, as they are equally useful to each other's purpose. In fact, mastans and political parties have become complementary to each other.

## The Evils Mastans Do

Mastans are involved in all kinds of anti-social activities. They mainly collect tolls from shop owners and businessmen. The rate and intensity of toll collection is exceptionally high before festivals like Eid-ul-Fitre and Eid-ul-Azha. Sometimes they take money and sometimes they take away goods free of cost. Their victims range from large departmental storeowners to mere hawkers. If any body dares resist them, they do not hesitate to beat them or even kill them in order to keep others under pressure. There are numerous instances of conflicts, even murders taking place out of such fights.

It has now become almost impossible to start any con-

struction work, be it private or governmental, without being disturbed by the mastans. Mastans of present and past of university area admitted that there exists almost an unwritten rule that the mastans belonging to the ruling party will receive 2% to 5% of the sanctioned work within the university area. On various occasions, campus violence broke out due to conflicting demands of the mastans from different groups for this share of money. The toll collected by using the name of the political party is seldom used for the purpose of the party, rather they use it for personal gains.

Mastans are also involved in drug trafficking, smuggling, gambling etc. They are also hired for various purposes like threatening people, monopolising tenders and other illegal activities. To avoid unnecessary conflicts among different gangs of these mastans, they divide their areas of influence and continue their activities accordingly. Still gang wars take place when one gang challenges the other or a revolt takes place within the gang.

## Family Life of the Mastans

Families of the mastans, who live outside the city, are not aware of their activities. They do not question their source of income. In fact, those coming from poor background are quite happy as their sons have taken the responsibility of the family. Mastans always want to keep the dark side of their lives a secret to their family members.

No educated family however would allow its son to spoil his life in such a way. But by the time they come to realise of his activities, he is already so much absorbed in the system that there is no turning back.

But, exceptions are there. One of the mastans, now back in normal life, admitted that it is only his family, which made the difference for him. It turned him from a ruthless top terror to a loving family man.

## A Look Back

Mastans when asked to evaluate their doings expressed mixed feelings.

One of them boldly admitted that what he did in the past was completely wrong. He created a "black hole" in his life through which some of his golden years flew away. After passing through a terrible period, now with his family and far away from that cursed life, he feels himself as the happiest man on earth. He surely is a lucky man. Because rarely anyone can make the way back. Some of the mastans still crave for a normal, tension free life. But the system is not allowing them to get out of it. The way to go in was easy, but the way to get out is difficult.

On the other hand, one of them, once a 'tokai' is happy with his present life. He has power and at the same time he has money to support his family and himself. He is not at all concerned about the source of his power or money. Another ex top terror, now an MP, boasts "once they called me law breaker, now I am the law maker".

Whatever the mastans feel the reality is that the society is now suffering due to this evil force. Time has come to prevent them and to eliminate them. The civil society must take the leading role in this respect. At the same time, proper steps should be taken to stop the nurturing of these mastans. We cannot let our young generation spoil their future in such a heinous way. Serious academic research should be undertaken to explore the lives of the mastans. This surely will show the guideline to fight the menace of mastanocracy.

But prior to everything, political parties must stop their dependency on mastans. They should realise the importance of popular support instead of forced allegiance. If political parties stop nourishing mastanocracy, the mastans will ultimately become helpless. Then the law enforcement agencies will be able to take their needed steps to eliminate these mastans freely and impartially. The media, both electronic and print, has a distinct role to play here. They have to bring out the real facts of mastanocracy and make the general people aware of it. Media can make the political leaders accountable. To eliminate mastans from universities and educational institutions, it is imperative that at first the administration should free itself from the mastans. Only then any social movement will become fruitful.

The authors are Research Interns, Centre for Alternatives.

## Mastans and Arms

by Neila Husain

**Interestingly, the dictionary meaning of the Bengali term mastan means one who is in the state of intoxication, i.e. a drunkard. In the olden days, when a fakir or 'darbesh' would get drunk, he would be called a mastan. However, the Bengali dictionary also provides a contemporary definition which is by all means more familiar to the readers: A mastan is an armed individual who uses force or terror to obtain something. The possession of arms is his source of strength. The question is, how does he get access to arms which are obviously illegal?**

For consideration: a revolver smuggled from India to Bangladesh can be sold three to five times more in Bangladesh. In addition to foreign made small arms, in recent years more and more weaponry and explosives are being locally made.

There are 1000 illegal arms factories in Bangladesh which are running with foreign spare parts, foreign catalogue and other supports. To make a local two-bore pistol, the cost is maximum 5000 Taka. However, the resale value, depending on the place and time, can go up to 25,000 Taka. Most of these factories are floating meaning that the machinery set up in abandoned or even rented houses, can be dismantled once the mission is over, or when the police is on the verge of discovering their hide-outs.

The other source of arms procurement is theft of arms and ammunition from government arsenals. Arms are frequently stolen from the police station and *malikhana*, some of the weapons being stored for years as evidences of cases filed against alleged terrorists. Licensed arms dealers also enrich the black market with fresh supply of arms and ammunition. Most of the shooting clubs in Bangladesh import guns and bullets with the permission of the state. However, a large portion are sold to specific agents

or to armed terrorists. A few years back, the then Leader of the Opposition, Sheikh Hasina said that 10,000 licensed arms were missing in Bangladesh. How is mastani sustaining, and that even without any discretion? Is it only because mastans have access to small arms and light weapons? Definitely not. While arms provide muscle-power, mastani is sustaining because of the funding and patronage the mastans receive from godfathers who are very influential persons disguised as the "elite" of the society. Some of them are drug lords, some are arms dealers, while others are smugglers, all of whom harbour mastans to protect their illegal business. Then, there is the growing number of politicians who either give shelter to mastans or 'hire' mastans into their respective party-backed armed cadres.

The nexus between politicians and criminals allows the politician to strengthen his/her

power base on the one hand, while it allows the mastans to enjoy legal and political protection on the other. Other than the underworld crime syndicates and politicians, some business men and industrialists are aware that the State is failing to provide security — also recruit mastans for personnel and material protection against other mastans. In short, mastans are able to sustain because of the various vested interest groups of the society. Whether the cause is political, commercial or personal, there is invariably a constant demand for mastans in the society. And, as long as there is a demand for them, basic economics tells us that there will be a supply.

Therefore, demand and supply of mastans would continue unless focus is put on the exposure of the 'godfathers' who use them for their vested interest. There is no such thing as a born mastan. Many of them are victims of circumstances. Socio-economic conditions such as

poverty, unemployment, homelessness, etc. lure many to the world of crime. There are also young school/college going boys who, at the vulnerable stage of youthhood (15-30 years), are attracted to the world of danger, adventure, heroism, idealism and so forth. Armed with deadly weapons, they derive a sense of "power" that they know would not have been possible otherwise. The other category of youths who fall prey to mastani are those addicted to drugs. In Bangladesh there are at least 10,000 drug addicts. So, mastani is one, if not only, way of supporting their addiction.

The impact of mastani is felt in almost all spheres of life: economic, social and political. Societal insecurity is increasing with law and order situation deteriorating every day in cities, towns and villages alike. The law enforcing agencies admit that violence, rape, political killings and extortion are on the rise. In the economic

front, development is being hindered because of extortion, illegal rent-seeking etc. Not only is this discouraging the growth of young entrepreneurs in spite of introducing economic liberalization policies in the country, but also attracting large section of the vulnerable youth into emerging as professional thugs and goons. With the income some of the top mastans generate, it is not surprising that the new-comers or future aspirants look at mastani as an enviable "career" — as long as they are not caught by law enforcing agents.

Realistically speaking, the later situation is unlikely to occur. To quote one news report, in Chittagong alone there are "60 top terrorists" who are under the protection of "12 godfathers", of whom some are politicians from both ruling and opposition parties. The fall-out of such nexus is the emergence of a political culture that is increasingly incorporating mastan-power into mainstream politics. Election-rigging, hartals, political vengeance etc., whether carried out by ruling or opposition party, have one common denominator: dependence on mastans. While the short-term interest may be well-served, in the longer run, the impact of such interdependence not only breeds more violence but also legitimizes violence.

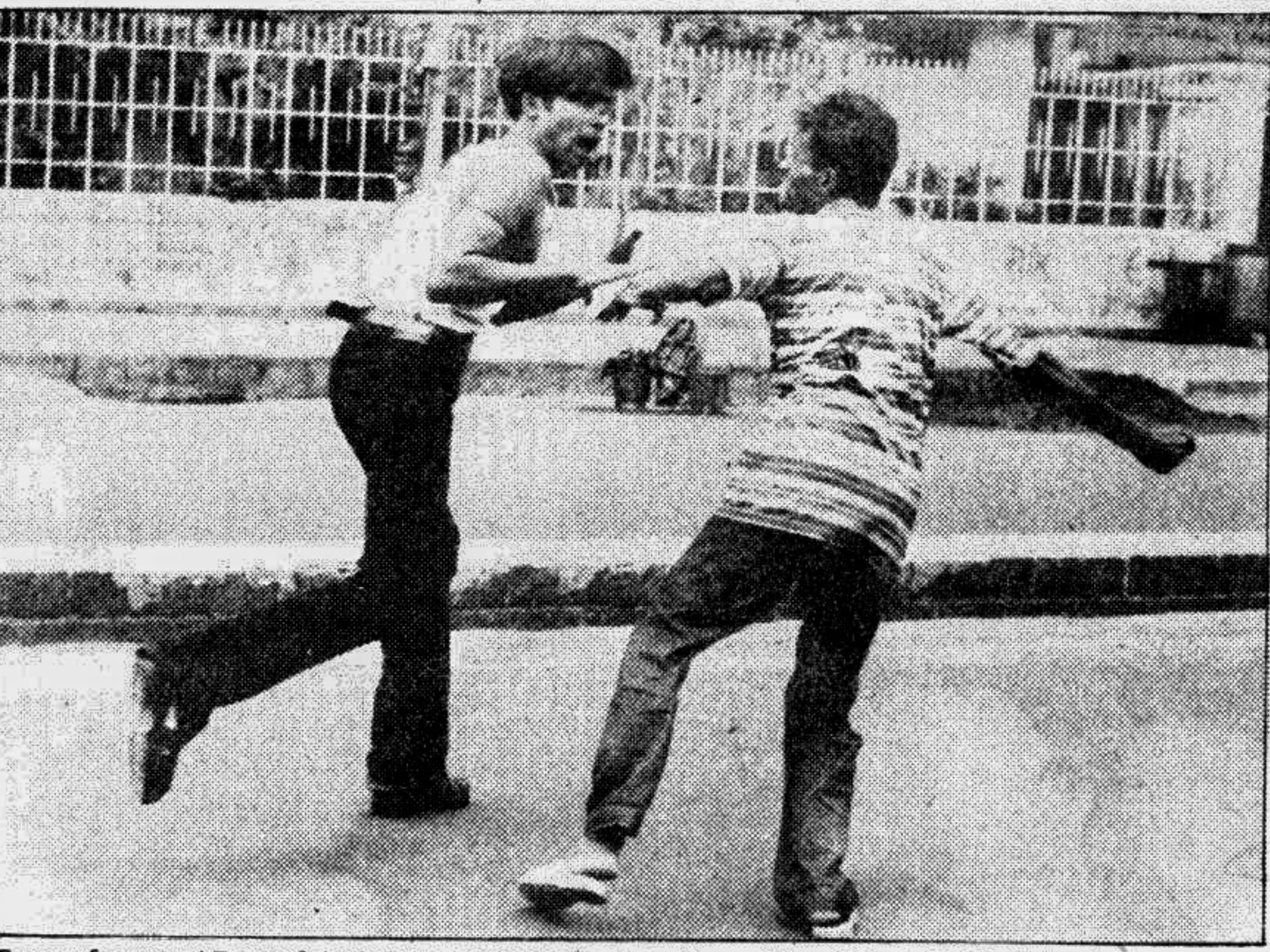
Hence, dismantling the mastans calls for exposing the 'godfathers', and for that political will is essential. The role of the civil society here is significant but dangerous. Without any protection from the State of one's life and property, it would be only wishful thinking to expect the unarmed citizen to fight against the armed terrorist. Hence, it is only when the initiative comes from the State that further efforts to "demastanify" the society can be undertaken. Some of the immediate steps that the Government should do to build its peoples' trust are to (1) depoliticize State functionary organs so the law enforcing agencies can act independently; (2) delink its nexus with professional thugs and goons (3) disassociate with party stalwarts who continue to harbour mastans. But above all, and that applies to all political

parties, (4) re-build a political base that is not dependent on mastan-power.

After undertaking the immediate steps of confidence-building measures, the next effort should be to disarm the mastans. Given our socio-economic realities, the state can not create a society free of mastans overnight. Nor can it do so without the cooperation of others. What it should try to achieve is to make the mastans less harmful by taking away their weapons. With cooperation from all political parties, the civil society, law enforcing agencies, media and so forth, recovery of illegal arms is possible. One must keep in mind, that a global network is behind the illegal arms proliferation. They are powerful and financially strong. In order to counter them, it requires more than paying lip service. In addition to mobilizing internal sources, external cooperation with neighbouring countries is essential for the control of illegal proliferation of small arms and light weapons.

As we enter the new millennium, the state is no longer considered only a physical entity with international boundaries, no longer is security understood exclusively in military terms, and finally, no longer does the existence of the state wither away with direct external aggression or internal aggression. Rather, the security of the state depends on the non-traditional forces which are very active today in the global and regional scenario. The intervention of these sometimes "invisible" forces at the national level results in the gradual destabilization of socio-economic and political cohesion. International crime syndicates, mafia groups, arms traffickers are constantly on the look-out for new markets which they have already found in South Asia with its fragile social, political and economic structures. Unless there is strong resistance against these trans-national forces, a time may come when the thriving underworld overpowers and minimizes the role of the State, holding millions of people hostage to their mercy.

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Faces of mastani! Bout of rivals have spread beyond confines of localities to hold of streets. — Star photo

MASTANS do not earn their livelihood by selling their labour or following any legal way. Rather they swoop on others. That is why they are regarded as a social parasite. Businessmen, service holders, professionals, people from all walks of life are affected by the evils of mastans. If we go through the daily newspapers, there will be hardly any day when the printed words do not speak of the sufferings caused to the common people by them.

But at the same time one should remember that a person is not born a mastan. The environment and surroundings make them anti social elements. To stop one from transforming from a normal person to a ruthless mastan, we must try to find out the real picture of their world. In order to find about their world, their roots, their patrons and their life styles, we interviewed a few mastans. Among them two are now well established in their social lives; but earlier they were the top terrorists in their university days. One of them is now a member of parliament while the other is a service holder. The rest are still involved in anti social activities.

## Family Background

Proper education, sound family life and financial solvency are the three most important prerequisites of a healthy social life. Proper education gives a person the ability to distinguish between right and wrong. A sound family life makes a person more inclined towards his family which prevents him from making any bad name for the family. Financial solvency will help a person to fulfil his bare necessities in a proper way. Thus it is widely believed that most of the mastans come from family backgrounds — devoid of proper education, having loose family ties or struck by poverty.

But the reality is different. It is true that some of the mastans come from down trodden families, but surprisingly it has also been observed that some of the mastans are from educated and solvent families. One of them opined that high family background even helped them in some respect, as they did not have any obligation of taking responsibility of their families. Having firearms, being feared by others, involvement in gang wars, all these offered them a sort of adventure, a sense of power. Once an adventure eventually turned into the life style.

MASTANS were always social outcasts, and will remain so in the future. What has changed about them, however, is the degree of fear they create in one's mind. A decade or two ago, mastans were associated with street urchins who had nothing better to do than to hang around the corner tea stalls and idle away their time eve-teasing and sipping tea without bothering to pay. The fear they could exert was more fictitious than real. If a fight would erupt, it was mostly intra- or inter-mastan groups, and the tool for fighting was their fists. Over the years, the fist has been replaced first by daggers and air guns, and later by sophisticated arms and ammunition. Today, possession of small arms and patronization of 'godfathers' have turned the local mastan into a formidable "terrorist" whom the society and the State can not or do not want to reckon with.

Interestingly, the dictionary meaning of the Bengali term mastan means one who is in the state of intoxication, i.e. a drunkard. In the olden days, when a fakir or 'darbesh' would get drunk, he would be called a mastan. However, the Bengali dictionary also provides a contemporary definition which is by all means more familiar to the readers: A mastan is an armed individual who uses force or terror to obtain something. The possession of arms is his source of strength. The question is, how does he get access to arms which are obviously illegal?

There are different sources whereby the mastan can get hold of a gun. Available arms range from highly sophisticated foreign-made arms to locally produced cheap ones. Of

measures may be taken:

- The political parties mainly support and back the mastans. All political parties should be responsible enough not to support them.
- The general people should build up pressure upon the political parties and demand mastan free politics and political parties.

- Family environment and education is necessary for the growth of a healthy child. The family must take utmost care in this respect. We must remember family is the first school for the child.
- Though the mastans are anti-socials, they live in our society. So social awareness is very important for uprooting

them. Social awareness and social movement should be organised in every area of the country. If all the people are united, few mastans cannot do any harm to the society.

- Law enforcement agencies should take effective steps to remove these mastans from society. The judiciary also has to be more effective in punishing the anti-socials.

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.

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## Mastan: A Social Disease

Continued from page 6

the family. Neighbours informed the police. The police did not take any step, though the thana was very near the house.

When the mastans left the place, the police came and took the wounded members of the family to the hospital. After this incident, the family became so scared that they sent their two sons to different places.

These incidents tell us why every body from every sphere of life, though having only hatred for the mastans, do not have the courage to take any step against them. The "mastan" problem is now like a social disease and it needs to be uprooted urgently. In this context the following

The topic of our next issue is: **Globalisation, Security and Civil Society**. Creative suggestions are invited from our esteemed readers. Please send your materials to: Dr Imtiaz Ahmed, Executive Director, Center For Alternatives, Room No 431, Lecture Theatre, Arts Building, Dhaka University, Dhaka-1000. Tel: 9661900-19, Ext. 4550; Fax: (8802) 836769; E-mail: imtiaz@bangla.net.