

Lest we forget Bhola's notorious electoral past



highest. Only it was second to Faridpur in the number of centres with false votes.

Administrative acquiescence to false voting in Faridpur and Bhola were especially evident. Gaps in counting process, putting indelible ink on voters' thumbs, especially women, and not letting them vote are administrative failures. A major administrative irregularity was watching officials and police together stamping ballot papers.

The biggest impact of irregularity is on violence itself. It facilitates an environment of permissiveness and the subsequent failure to contain it. It goes without saying that the purpose of all irregularity is to favour a particular person.

When administrative officials and police are involved in false voting, voters are disenfranchised and the elected candidate is not truly representative of the people. Such malpractice can only be initiated by the party in power, since it controls the officials and the police.

On the other hand, cases of good practice illustrate how easily a strong administration with conscientious officials can take positive control and steer the process to a well-held election!

Will we see a different electoral administration this time? Will the police work to protect voters and not obstruct them? Will the EC this time take robust action against those who commit such crimes?

In Tojumuddin Thana in 2003, our monitors found 30 out of 36 centres empty of voters by 2 p.m. 300 voters waiting to vote were interviewed. Presiding officers were interviewed. A three-hour lunch break led the waiting voters to leave. Yet at the end of the day Tojumuddin had 79 per cent votes cast. The large number of women left without voting. Someone kindly voted for them.

Bhola's electoral process is a story of political confrontation. It is a story where irregularity and violence meet well. Where voting stops by midday, yet the votes cast are nearly 80 per cent! Where long lunch breaks dispel women voters. Where political cadres/shontrashis, in their great enthusiasm to cast false vote, end up casting 200 more votes than the actual number of voters.

In your support centre, push the pedal for an accelerated high rate of casting and in your opponent's support centre, pull the pedal and decrease the casting rate to less than half of normal rate -- and you can win the election.

On the eve of Bhola-3 by-election 2010, what is happening?

As election day draws near, the heat between the two major political parties is on the rise. There is constant charge and counter-charge of "conspiracy" and "engineering." The ruling AL feels the BNP is preparing for chaos in case it does not win and have accused BNP-Jamaat of planning sabotage.

BNP accuses the EC of partisan behaviour and government influence when it refused to deploy the army to maintain law and order. It has failed to fulfill its constitutional responsibility, the opposition argues.

The party in power says the situation in Bhola is peaceful and there is no tension or violence. The party in opposition says the situation is extremely bad, their workers are under attack by ruling cadres, the environment is not conducive for a fair election, and therefore the army must be brought in.

So it goes on. And so it helps no one. The wheel keeps on turning and the opposition keeps complaining "all is bad" and the government keeps saying "all is good." But truth is always somewhere else.

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SHARMEEN MURSHID

BHOLA has a notorious tradition of holding violent and irregular elections. In 1997, hundreds of political workers were forced to leave their homes by ruling party cadres because of their allegiance to the party in opposition. In 2003, Brotee (a non-partisan election monitoring organisation) recorded 117 incidences of attack on workers and supporters of the party in opposition by the cadres of the ruling party. The people of Bhola live through this trauma during every election.

I recall the tearful comments of a shopkeeper during our study of the Bhola Union elections in 2003: "Manusher lasher upor diya khomotay jaoner jonno ei elekshaner kono darker nai. Here, election means the sure death of eight to ten people, the dishonour of helpless girls and hundreds of people fleeing from their homes. We don't need this election -- an election where you have to climb over our dead bodies to get to power! Please stop these elections."

In the perception of a common man living through violent electoral experiences, this was Bhola.

Bhola is the largest island in the country, situated in the remotest southern coast encircled by the Bay of Bengal. Bhola has a distinct political character, with four out of the five top political leaders, who were ministers in various governments, origi-

nating from this district, subjecting it to the dynamics and conflicts of national politics.

Every election seems to cast a dark shadow of violence over the lives of the people of Bhola. This was true in the 2001 national elections. It was true in the 2003 union parishad elections. Will it be different today in 2010? Dare we hope for a change?

As one of the most violence-prone and politically confrontational constituencies in the country, the smooth running and efficient management of an election here would have profound national significance for elections elsewhere and democracy in the country.

Today the stakes in Bhola, for both the party in power and the party in opposition, appear to be very high, and this makes Bhola even more volatile.

Lest we forget, in the 2001 national election, there was large-scale violence against minorities, especially women. Inconceivable abuse and disenfranchisement of marginal voters was recorded.

For example, non-Muslim minority voters of Bhola Town school centre who were waiting outside the polling centre had to return home without voting at 10 p.m. due to disturbances and political clashes and there were many who just did not turn up at all out of fear. (Ref. Brotee 2001 National Election Observation Report). The pre-election environment was anything but peaceful.

Lest we forget, here are some examples

of a Bhola election.

On election day in 2001 voting stopped at Forkania Madrasa Centre of Lalmohan Upozila in Bhola-3 after clashes broke out between supporters of two main political parties.

At Azharuddin primary school centre, again in Bhola-3, one person was seriously injured when fierce clashes broke out between the two major rival parties and voting had to be stopped.

Vote counting was disrupted in most of Bhola either because the ballot box was hijacked or bombs were blasted at voting centres to frighten people. Observers were obstructed both by political activists and security officials.

There were, at the time, more than 40,000 minority voters out of 78,000 in Tojumuddin of Bhola-3. There was a very high sense of fear and insecurity as indicated by the behaviour of the non-Muslim voters who took shelter elsewhere with their relatives, leaving their homes before elections due to rampant "shontrash."

Minority participation was greatly affected. Especially, growing and young girls were shifted to other places. Young girls from families supporting the opposition had to flee out of fear.

This face of the 2001 elections was not limited to Bhola and eventually it marred the image of the elections and, till today, whatever the outcome, it is referred to as one of the worst examples of electoral abuse of minority voters.

At the time, the electoral environment in Bhola was tense and politically heated up long before elections. An opposition party worker was killed, voting was postponed in several centres after 12 noon, and a large number of fake votes was cast and some vote forgers were caught.

Where the ruling party was strong, their supporters cast 15-20 votes each (96 per cent votes were cast), and where the oppo-

sition party was strong their supporters did the same, resulting in similar voting pattern. This was Bhola in 2001.

Again let us recall what happened in Bhola during the 2003 union parishad elections. We studied and monitored electoral violence and irregularities in 10 districts. We found Bhola was the most notorious.

Our observation study show Bhola, Barisal, and Bagura were the most violent, with Bhola having the highest score in bomb blasts, gunfire, arson (more than 82 cases), clashes between rival parties (140 cases), and in forcing voters to vote, to leave centres against their will, and occupying booths by force (144 cases). (Ref. Brotee 2003 Union Parishad Report).

Of all the districts studied, Bhola rated the highest in the number of incidences of electoral violence (40 per cent of all violence or 376 incidences) that occurred.

Bhola had the highest number of persons injured (383), seriously injured (59), and killed (6). Yet nobody was called on to explain why these people had to die. No politician apologised or regretted these losses. Yet, they and an inefficient administration caused these to happen.

It is not the number of incidences of violence that is in question here but its impact on voters and communities: how many people are affected by it and how many are de-motivated, disenfranchised and do not go to vote, how many communities suffer from chronic electoral fear and insecurity, and which communities suffer this the most on the eve of elections are, for me, the critical questions.

Irregularity indicators show that in 2003, Bhola had 129 cases of administrative and security lapses, 7 cases where candidates were forced to withdraw nomination, 21 cases where campaigners were obstructed, and 60 cases where MPs were found present during the campaigns. In all these indicators, Bhola's score was the

Contentious issues between the two major political parties

To the Awami League the evolution of Bengali nationalism has been the product of centuries of input by members of different faiths without a religious content. BNP, on the other hand, has tried to define Bangladeshi nationalism with a religious content -- thereby making it a contentious issue which is dominating the political debate of the nation.

NURUL ISLAM ANU

Asociety with a democratic commitment evolves around the dynamics of a multi party system. It is a compelling necessity without which the system simply does not operate. Political parties evolve the programme of social reconstruction and the conduct of the state craft based on certain fundamental political beliefs. A complex process goes into play in firming up their political programmes and a consummate skill of social political engineering to bring it to the people whom it is supposed to serve.

These programmes are the result of differing perceptions about the political and economic reality of a country and the beauty of the system lies in the ability of these parties in articulating these differing views into specific programmes and present these to their main constituents -- the people.

democracy and it has its experience of glory and derailment in its march to achieve democratic perfection. In this march the principal practitioners have been the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party -- BNP. It would be interesting to evaluate some of the differing political and ideological positions of these two major parties and examine their impact on the political evolution of Bangladesh.

The differences in the conceptual design of their political programmes can be traced back to their birth. Awami League was born out of a deep realism that the welfare of the common man was a marginal concern of the Muslim League. Their politics was designed to take care of the samontobadi (feudal) groups and to protect and advance the interest of the rich; in that system the common man was used as an object of emotional exploitation. It assumed a dangerously reactionary form with the infusion of a communal element into it -- Islam as its defence

became the principal political slogan. While it failed to inspire the minority to the core values of common nationhood it also failed to touch the aspiration of the common man and appeal to his economic interests.

Awami League read this vacuum in the political psyche of the people; the common man, so far an object of exploitation and political neglect, emerged as a glorified sovereign -- his economic interest is a matter of continuous political pursuit of the Awami League. The abolition of the Zamindari (land-holder domination) system and ceiling on land ownership are prominent examples of Awami League's pro-people politics. The people, jonogon, became the core focus of Awami League politics. Economic disparity between the two parts of Pakistan was dear issue to the heart of every East Pakistani which Awami League championed with consummate political skill -- Bangabandhu and his charisma adding a passionate flair to the advancement of this image.

BNP does not owe its birth to any broad based political urge inspired by a cohesive ideological commitment; it was the brainchild of an army man -- not the product of the indigenous political process, inhibited by a lack of insight into the dynamics of politics. It was born behind the smokescreen created by an irresponsible armed adventurism -- events following August 15th of 1975, a patch of mismanaged phase of post independent derailment. It grew and thrived under an

unprincipled manipulative endeavour with an explicit appeal to the Right and the extreme Right. It appealed to the opportunistic instinct of a discredited group or the fanatical instinct of the right. That explains its strange heterogeneous character-assembly sustained by indiscriminate use of the instruments of cohesion. An ill conceived desire to use Islam as a political tool, invitation to a confused appeal of Bangladeshi nationalism, led BNP to the inevitable goal of a discriminatory political creed. The sight of a S Q Chowdhury coexisting with a revisionist Moshir Rahman, Mannan Bhuiyan or Khandoker Delower Hossain appeared as a spectacle of political expedience not dedicated to a common ideology. BNP's perceived association with the armed forces characterised also its image -- not felt to be so pro-people.

In comparison Awami League stands committed to a non-discriminating secular politics, its championing the liberation war makes it conspicuously different from the BNP's attempt to project as a really pro-people party got confused in its pursuit for support to anti-liberation forces. This conceptual antagonism led to a serious constitutional crisis in the subsequent political evolution of Bangladesh which is well known.

In the field of economic management both parties, apparently committed to a free market economy, had those differences in the application and micro man-

agement of their economic programmes. Awami League believed in the broader participation by the common man and the small business in the overall development process. Targeted poverty alleviation, for example, became one of the focal points of Awami League's economic programme. Introduction of "Old Age Pension Scheme," emphasis on the participation of women to ensure their economic independence, provision for credit from the traditional banking channel are some of the features in Awami League's poverty sensitivity in economic policy. Emphasis on the extension of inputs of production -- credit, fertiliser, fuel and electricity -- to the farming group is a distinctive difference that one can perceive.

The struggle for independence in any society has been characterised by a long and arduous process of social and political engineering. Bangladesh was no exception. The language movement, the declaration of the six-point programme, the Agartola Conspiracy Case, the political movement of 1969 -- are all illustrations to this long drawn political engineering. Bangabandhu stands out as a monumental figure in this colourful episode, his historic speech on 7th March 1971 and the declaration of independence have been the glorious phase of our struggle for independence.

BNP's role in projecting Ziaur Rahman's broadcast from Kalurghat -- magnifying it to a level of glorification at

This never changes. In this merry-go-round the only thing that changes is the occupant of the seat of opposition and the seat of government! Since everyone is in opposition and everyone is in government, they have their fair share of muscle and money. It is not surprising that out of 56 "shontrashis" listed, 40 are from the opposition itself (Prothom Alo: Apr 22)!

In the last couple of days, a series of attacks and clashes have been reported from the field and by the media. At least 10 persons were reportedly injured. Some local people have expressed their sense of insecurity, expecting violence on the way to the polling centres, and some fear post-electoral backlash.

The stage is well set for another election and, indeed, Bhola is doing well in living up to its tradition! And the politicians are doing even better in living up to their tiresome legacy.

I, for one, do not want innocent people to be hurt or to have to die because some people want to come to power. For me no election is worth it if it kills a single person. We want to move forward. We want zero tolerance. We want to force politicians and governments to come to their senses, take responsibility and stop creating chaos.

The government must remember if things go bad it will always be its fault. If people are hurt, it will always be because the government did not take sufficient measures to protect them.

Even if EC fails it will be the government's fault. That is the public perception. No matter whose fault, there is no getting away for the government. The present government must go out of its way to show and prove its good will -- even if it costs the Bhola seat!

The EC has taken some appreciable measures, which we wait to see how effective it will be. To keep itself fully informed and ready for instant action it has deployed "silent observers" to contain rigging, its own EC staff for instant reporting from centres, neutral observers, 24 to 30 member security force in each of the 86 centres, continuous video recording of campaign activities of major candidates and mobile court of executive and judicial magistrates. A team of five police and a magistrate has also been deployed with each candidate.

To add to this, the EC has taken stringent measures to keep Bhola off-limits to all outsiders. For the first time in our electoral history, MPs, ministers, and central leaders will not be allowed to stay in Bhola from Thursday (22/04) night.

These measures are new and if the EC means business and does actually stop elections where disturbances have occurred and punish culprits, then it will have made history again.

By the right given by the constitution, the EC has unlimited powers when it comes to holding elections. Please use it and robustly. People will always side with the right. History has shown it.

When I think of Bhola's notorious past I cannot but wonder -- will the EC be able to live up to our expectations? Will the measures suffice to contain a volatile constituency? Will these measures bring security to voters, especially the women and the non-Muslim voters? Is the EC taking a risk by not calling in the army?

The truth is that the army gives confidence and a sense of safety to people, whether we like it or not. My only appeal is please leave nothing to chance and no stone unturned -- if it gives security to our people and a fair election to our nation.

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