University student Nahin says, "I have four siblings who all study and my father bears the cost of the youngest ones and if he keeps his business closed, he won't be able to maintain them." Her day off work is later in the week but Nahin is at her university to collect results in case a hartal is called in the following days. "We can't use our weekdays properly. I have to prepare papers for my scholarship that can't wait."

Atia Rahman Shuchi agrees and says travel is difficult for students. "It's especially difficult for the girls who live in places like Puran Dhaka, Kiranigonj or Tongi to get to Bashundhara – they have to start very early." She explains that students are also penalised for failing to attend classes regardless of whether the transport situation is out of their hands, "There have been instances where students have missed tests and failed their classes."



"Hartal is the worst thing that can happen and it hurts the country."

Aminul Islam, rickshaw puller



"Damaging my business means I'm damaging my family."

Mustafa Kamal, vegetable seller

Everyone *the Star* spoke to also strongly believes calling a hartal is not in the country's interests. Nahin says, "People who are involved have to come up with a solution because hartals are damaging our country and causing us personal harm. It's not improving our country and you can never expect success out of hartal."

"Hartal has never been a solution," believes Akter. "It's normal to have two parties who disagree on certain things but they can sit down in one place and have a discussion. In order to run a country, there has to be politics and people doing politics, but the terror we're seeing in politics is being watched by our kids who are learning it." She says firmly, "Whatever is happening in our country right now is nowhere near to politics. They concentrate on who to kill, who to beat up, and what to vandalise." She adds finally, "Is that politics? Violence, nothing else."

Hanif says that hartals, as they are performed now, are neither safe nor effective. "Since the political leaders are citizens of the country, they have the right to call a hartal but the main damage we face is when they break cars – and because of these recent hartals, people are also dying. Some are being shot at, some are being beaten up." Chowdhury agrees that this form of political protest is to be expected. "Hartals may be given, but not so frequently or violently."

Hanif shares how more than 20 years ago he participated in hartals and insists back then, vandalism was not involved. "The leaders would tell us we march and protest and not break any cars. Either turn them around or ask them to park their cars somewhere. It used to be a rule but right now they're not following any. Sometimes cars get burned and people inside get beaten up and seeing these things, people are horrified. People used to follow or support hartals because they were based on certain big issues, everybody used to surrender. Back then, things used to be less violent.

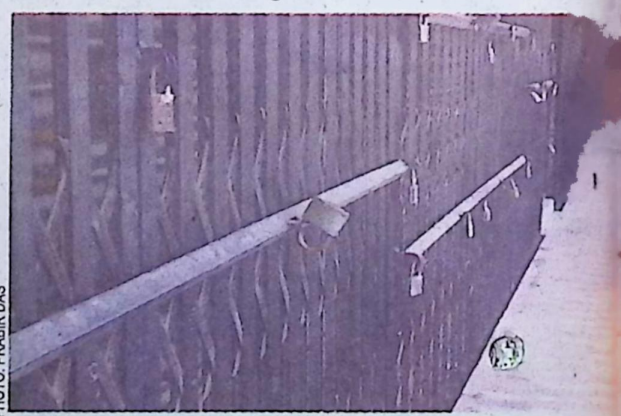


PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

Hartals cost the economy $200 million a day, which small businesses feel more acutely.

Rickshaws and vans used to be on the street, now you will see them on the streets but with extreme risk, only because they have to feed their families."

Hanif concludes, "By giving hartals, politicians are successfully stopping people from going about their day, stopping schools, businesses. It doesn't actually fall as any kind of success but politicians use it as a weapon. And I don't think it's a good weapon. If they could choose something else to do instead of calling hartals that would be better."

Rahman suggests, "What's happening in Shahbag I think is much better than hartals as a way to express protest." She agrees that hartals are boycotts of normal life that political parties expect people to follow but currently people have no choice, "They are being forced to strike."