

Days of Precarity

Once shaping our nation's emergence, hartal is now a byword for doom and disaster. How has this tool of establishing one's rights been turned into a political weapon?

MD SHAHNAWAZ KHAN CHANDAN



Sometimes empty streets during hartal allow us to enjoy fun ride like this father and the son.

PHOTO: ANURUP KANTI DAS

Armed law enforcers guard buildings, elite security forces in black uniform with assault rifles are in position, armoured vehicles parked in the street and several patrol cars patrols are the deserted streets. While these people are on their serious duty, some youngsters have occupied the street with a very special business of their own. They have turned one of the busiest streets of Paltan area, the heart of Dhaka into a cricket pitch. Batsmen, bowlers, fielders, umpires are busy playing an exciting match. On any weekday, this street is crammed with thousands of vehicles and tens of thousands of pedestrians. But a very particular occasion has driven out all the businesses and invited these two very unlikely guests: the armed men and the playful kids. This occasion is nothing but hartal, an indispensable part of Bangladeshi politics.

Hartal, our regional term for general strike has been one of the most popular weapons for our people to claim their rights and demands for hundreds

of years. The word is actually of Gujrati origin which means "locking the door." In fact a very renowned leader of the same origin has made this word a political jargon in the entire Indian sub-continent. It is Mahatma Gandhi who first effectively launched this version of political protest against the British colonial rulers. His hartals and non-cooperation movements eventually drove out the British Raj from the sub-continent.

So, our leaders have successfully inherited this idea of harassing the government. The first hartal was called in this part of the world on the very next year of the creation of Pakistan. On March 11, 1948 Tamaddun Majlish jointly with East Pakistan Muslim Students' league called on hartal demanding the recognition of Bengali as the state language of Pakistan. After many more hartals and violent protests Pakistani rulers yielded to the demand and finally recognised Bengali as one of the state languages of Pakistan.



PHOTO: ANURUP KANTI DAS

More often violence and political conflicts cause immense human sufferings.

After Bangladesh's independence, hartal got a sacred status and our politicians, when in opposition, love to claim it as their constitutional right. But they carefully omit the constitutional conditions mentioned in article 31 that any assembly or public event must be peaceful and the participants will not bear arms. So hartals, which were supposed to be peaceful protests, have become an excuse for destruction and intimidation.

After 1979, the political parties started street agitation all over the country against the corruption and autocracy of the Ershad government. Repeated hartals and mass movements shook the country and brought a deadlock. Towhidul Huq, a student of Rajshahi University at that time recalls, "We used to have 15 days and sometimes more than that without any class and work during the anti-dictatorship movement. As a result it took me eight years to complete my graduation course."

But democracy did not give the ordinary Bangladeshi hartal-free politics. As our politicians took it as one of their sacred democratic rights, they came up with hartals at an unprecedented rate. From 1991 to 1996 the then opposition Awami League observed hartal for 266 days against the ruling BNP government. On one occasion in 1996 they called hartal sine die. In the next term, the opposition BNP government raced against Awami League led government by observing 215 days in hartal from the year 1996 to 2001. In recent years we have seen the violent

The first strike recorded in the history was called by the Egyptian artisans under the rule of Pharaoh Ramesis III in 1152 BC. They quit their job en masse in protest of poor payment. Later the pharaoh increased their wages.

Gandhi first staged hartal in South Africa in 1906 to protest the infamous The Black Act.

From 1947 to 1971 only 29 hartals were observed in the then East Pakistan. However in democratic Bangladesh there were 827 hartals between 1991 and 2002.

incidents continuously claiming human lives.

In a statement in 2013 the International Chamber of Commerce, Bangladesh has estimated that Bangladesh loses around \$200 million on every hartal day. Educational institutions all over the country remain closed and academic activities suffer. Countrywide blockade with hartal adds to more sufferings to human lives. The government's intolerance to its rival makes the situation even more complicated. On several occasions, we have seen that the government itself has detached Dhaka from the rest of the country to thwart the rally of its rival political party.

Gandhi's days of non violent hartals are now a distant past. In fact hartal has become synonymous with violence and destruction. In fact pro-hartal activists start their vandalism on the very eve of the hartal. Then the government deploys tens of thousands of law enforcers and para military forces and starts mass arrest. In response, those 'activists' adopt the hit and run method throwing bombs from secret hideouts leaving our common people in the lurch.

When will this anarchy and intolerance end? Perhaps our future generation like the youngsters playing cricket in the busy street will make the best out of this disastrous situation. But if it continues like this our country will perish. ■