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All down to pent-up GRIEVANCES

Behind the blood feuds between Dhaka College students and shopkeepers in New Market area

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Heated arguments and brawls between the shopkeepers of New Market area and Dhaka College students are nothing new. Over the years, the city dwellers suffered their share when both the parties locked into running battles and violent clashes — most of the time over trivial matters.

Records show major clashes between the students and traders occurred in 2008, 2009 and 2015.

In 2015, violence erupted over alleged extortion while other incidents took place mostly when both parties engaged in feuds over purchase of various products.

And each time local lawmakers or public representatives had to step in — holding meetings between the embattled parties to quell the situation. Unfortunately, the Dhaka College authorities hardly played any role.

So the problem persists and the grievances of both parties never really have gone away.

The latest event, which crossed all the limits, is a glaring example.

Storekeepers and students fought pitched battles for two days starting on April 18 night, resulting in the deaths of two people and damages to properties.

Traders and shopkeepers say it was the outburst of their pent-up grievances over “rampant extortion, harassment and torture” by a section of Dhaka College students, especially the Chhatra League men, who have created an environment of fear in the area over a long time.

The shopkeepers and hawkers in the New Market area got united this time and wanted to fight it out.

There are at least 40 markets around Dhaka College, including New Market, Chandrima Super Market, Globe Shopping Centre, Nurjahan Market, Badruddoza Super Market, Chandni Chowk Shopping Complex, Dhanmondi Hawkers Market, Gausia Market, and the Nilkhet bookshops.

A large number of traders in the area claim that Dhaka College students often pay less than the actual price, and in some cases even refuse to pay anything after buying clothes and books.

They alleged that the politically influential students demand a hefty amount of money from the businesses ahead of major festivals, like Eid. The defiance resulted in clashes sometimes.

The students, on the other hand, said the misbehaviour of the traders and shopkeepers has been a longstanding issue. Besides, they charge extra for products, and often treat women indecently. The shopkeepers turn aggressive when their behaviour is met



with protests, they added.

They too claim the latest clash was the outburst of their long-standing grievances against the traders. That's why students of Dhaka University, Eden Mohila College, and Dhanmondi Ideal College came out to support the fellow students of Dhaka College.

“Whenever you go to the New Market, you would experience that they would charge more than the actual price. If you bargain at a lower price, they would pass bad comments. Sometimes, they force people to buy products. Such behaviour is common which causes brawls with the students,” said Naimul Hasan, a second-year student at Dhaka College.

Regarding the traders' allegation, the students said some “influential” student leaders might have been engaged in such activities. The general students have nothing to do with this, they said.

Sources said Dhaka College Chhatra League men have control over their dormitories and force students to take part in political activities and even in clashes. Police even think twice to take action against them.

Helal Uddin, president of Bangladesh Shop Owners Association, said they have been angry for a long time over various issues. When Dhaka College Chhatra League men interferred in the April 18-19 events, the situation went out of control.

“Besides, the brawl [that initiated the clash] was between the employees of two shops in New Market. Had the Dhaka College students not been engaged in the first place, things would not have gone this far,” he added.

He said interference, harassment and torture by Dhaka College BCL men are frequent there.

Giving an example of February 3, he said traders at Chishtia Market had an issue with the distributors of an AC company. The AC distributors claimed that they were not given the full payment. Traders said they didn't give full payment as the ACs were faulty, and they wanted a replacement.

“After a few days, the AC distributors brought some Dhaka College students who introduced themselves as Chhatra League men. They pressured traders to give the money. Traders said they would

not give full payment unless they get a replacement.

“At one point, they stabbed five traders there. When traders sought help from law enforcers, they got nothing,” Helal said.

At least six incidents of torture and harassment by Dhaka College Chhatra League men allegedly took place in the last two months at Nurjahan Super Market, opposite to Dhaka College.

One of its traders said two students of Dhaka College came last month and bargained for two shirts. They gave half price for the shirts and told them that they would take two more after two days.

“When two shop employees protested this and asked for at least the buying price, they [students] beat them up,” he claimed.

Admitting harassment of customers by some employees, Helal said there will be complaint boxes for aggrieved persons and that they would also arrange counselling for the shopkeepers after Eid.

Dewan Aminul Islam Shaheen, president of Dhaka New Market Business Owners' Association, said a core committee will be formed comprising representatives of teachers, students and traders who will resolve any complaints.

Fuad Hasan, joint convener of the Dhaka College BCL committee formed in 2016, refuted the allegations raised by the traders. He blamed the harassment by shopkeepers of the area for such regular brawls.

“The shopkeepers' behaviour sometimes triggers unwanted incidents,” he said, adding that the latest clash was the explosion of grievances brewing over the years against the traders.

ATM Mainul Hossain, acting principal of Dhaka College, said no traders came to the college authorities with any such complaints.

“To avoid such incidents in future, we have asked the teachers to motivate the students. After the college reopens, we would motivate them about integrity and morality,” he said.

Police role questioned

SIRAJUL ISLAM RUBEL

The clash in the New Market area began around 11:30pm on April 18 following an argument between staffers of two fast food shops. It ended around 3:45am the next day after hours of massive police intervention that left a student badly injured.

The clash resumed around 11:00am, when the students tried to stop the shopkeepers from opening their shops. This time there was no police presence, witnesses told The Daily Star.

In the next two hours, the clash spread to Chandrima Super Market area amid hardly any police move. The students and shopkeepers got locked into pitched battles using local weapons like sticks, iron rods and machetes.

Around 12:54pm, Nahid, a courier service deliveryman came under a brutal attack in front of Nur Jahan Super Market, and passed away at night. Morsalin, an injured shop employee, died two days later.

Police came back to the New Market intersection after 1:00pm on April 19. A team took position near New Market and another at Chandrima Super Market.

For the next two hours, police first tried to disperse the students firing tear shells. But the situation did not improve as the shopkeepers standing beside police were throwing brick chips at students.

Finally, after 2:45pm, police shifted their target to shopkeepers and dispersed them from the scene by charging batons, locals and eyewitnesses said.

The whole area, from Chandrima Super Market to New Market intersection, went under police control after 4:00pm and the clash came to an end.

The witnesses said had police discharged duties properly and professionally, the situation might not have turned so violent. The cops most of the time tried to stop the students, not the shopkeepers, they added.

Asked about the allegation, a high official of Ramna Division of police said they sent two patrol teams

with around seven to eight policemen within 15 minutes on information that some students attacked the gate No 4 of New Market around 11:30pm on April 18.

They managed to control the situation but some shopkeepers threw bricks at the students inside the market. Then

hundreds of students started coming out of the college and some of them attacked the gold market, officials told The Daily Star.

It was around 12:45am on April 18 when police first fired tear shells to stop the students from attacking the gold market. It was actually the beginning of a bigger clash, they added.

“We were tough and dispersed students by firing tear shells at night. In the morning [of April 19], we first observed the situation and then took action. Students across the country could join the protest if we had tried to stop Dhaka college students in the morning,” one official explained.

Contacted, Sazzadur Rahman, deputy commissioner of Raman division of police, said they first observed the situation and took action “as per our strategy”.

Police “strategy” for crime or violence in the area is however frequently questioned, with a very influential ruling party leader being singled out as patron of culprits in off the record discussions with traders, students and police.



‘What kind of monsters are we nurturing?’

Prof Dr Wahiduddin Mahmud wrote a Facebook post on April 25, touching upon the memories of his student life and the clashes between the shopkeepers of New Market area and Dhaka College students.

Recalling his college days, he said, “The brightest of the students who passed the secondary exams from outside Dhaka would stay in the hostel of Dhaka College. I shudder when I think about those who are now living in the rooms with weapons. It's needless to say that most of the students are helpless victims of the situation.”

On the new market clash, he said, “We're supposed to get used to it. It's not long ago when Buet student Abrar was brutally beaten to death inside the dormitory by the activists of a political party's student wing.”

The noted economist questioned, “What kind of monsters are we nurturing among the students with whom we dream of building a bright future of the country?”

