

People's Movement in Bangladesh

Sultana Kamal

Bangladesh is a country not known so much for any of the world's wonders, or bridges, structures, buildings or architectures, but instead for people's movements. This is a country, which earned its independence through a bloody liberation war, which marveled the whole world. However, history hasn't been very kind to Bangladesh. Within four years' time the country witnessed assassination of its first elected president with his entire family excepting two daughters and a large number of associates in 1975. Shortly after that four national leaders were killed in jail, and Bangladesh entered a long period of military rule, i.e. by the rule of military generals in the name of democracy. 1990 was the year for Bangladesh to return to democracy. Unfortunately the democratically elected governments also failed to rule democratically, resulting in a number of struggles in different places, where people claim their rights in agriculture and in industries.

Among the most recent examples are the movements in Kanshat in Chapai Nawabganj, Shonir Akhra and Savar in Dhaka, and Phulbari in Dinajpur.

In the lean period, meaning towards the end of 2006, the peasants of Chapai Nawabganj organized a demonstration proceeding towards the rural electrification office of the district, demanding uninterrupted supply of power to facilitate irrigation in the paddy fields. For many, paddy cultivation is the source of their whole year's income. While the participants in demonstration were moving in the direction of the office, a bomb blasted and four people died. Two of them were identified to be followers of the ruling alliance. Reacting to that, the police opened fire unprovokedly killing another four persons, including two young boys of 12 and 18.

The people burst into protests and instantly organized rallies demanding the trial of the police officers responsible for the killings. The police and the administration again reacted adversely and continued to handle the protesters in a rough manner, ultimately killing more people. Demonstrators continued to hold protests and at one point the police and the public stood in direct confrontation with each other. Struggle continued under the leadership of a local leader Golam Rabbani who was arrested by police along with some of his associates. In the absence of Rabbani his wife, brother's wife and mother assumed the responsibility for taking the struggle forward.

Ultimately, the protestors forced the administration to bow down and sign a treaty with the people saying that the arrestees will be freed unconditionally, that arrangements will be made for continued supply of power for irrigation, that case filed against the local leaders falsely accused for the death of the alliance supporters will be withdrawn, that compensation will be paid to the families of victims killed by the police, and that the illegal fees which the rural electrification board used to collect from the people would be waived. However, none of the conditions of the treaty have actually been materialized except for the release of the arrestees and withdrawal of the cases filed by the administration.

But people's determination to claim rights to resources was established and respected by the administration. When a group of human rights' activists went to visit the place, interestingly the police officer in charge of the locality gave his own version justifying the

police actions, saying that the people make the life of the police difficult by bringing out processions in the middle of the night or early morning disturbing their sleep. He also complained that they make faces at the police, throw stones and pebbles etc. Kanshat, to be noted, became an example, and inspiration for the struggling people of Bangladesh. Soon after Kanshat, residents of Shonir Akhra in Dhaka came out on the streets to demand regular supply of electricity in the time of extreme heat. The movement lasted for some time resulting in police action and in violent clashes between the police and the people, but ultimately police and the administration had to come to a compromise with the people.

Similarly in Savar, garments workers organized themselves, in protest of non-compliance by the garment industry owners of payment of wages and over-time dues to their workers. The protests by no means were non-violent, again resulting in death and destruction. The industry owners of course had to sign agreements in order to appease the workers. Concretely, the garment workers were agitating for a minimum wage and also for regular payment of wages. The workers were not being paid in time either. When the programs of the garment workers' struggles escalated, the garment owners responded through shooting by their security guards. The police also joined these guards, killing at least 2 persons. This resulted in a stronger movement, compelling the employers to agree to sign up for regular payment of wages and to a higher wage-rate. The demand was for Taka 3000 minimum, but the agreement was signed at Taka 1200. It is such a ridiculously low amount in the context of present day cost of living in Bangladesh! Moreover, the employees' small little items of daily use already cost more than Taka 3000 in most cases.

The most moving example of people's struggles in the recent past was Phulbari in Dinajpur, where inhabitants of the area joined each other to resist the handing over an extensive part of the Phulbari area to Asia Energy company for open pit mining. In the case of Phulbari, the Asia Energy company was given a lease of a vast amount of land to do open pit mining to extract coal, the mining of which would lead to the eviction of forty thousand people from that area and would also cause terrible environmental damage. The mining would destroy the source of people's safe drinking water that is one of the best in this region, not to talk of the loss of water for paddy and other crops. Moreover Asia Energy was not definitely the best bidder. The contract was for permission of unlimited quantities of export of coal lifted through open pit mining by Asia Energy. Bangladesh would get only 6% of income from the coal extraction.

The people of Phulbari led by local and national Committee for the Protection of Oil, Gas, Electricity, Port organized a rally to protest against the treaty. On the day of the rally, the protesters gathered in thousands to hold a peaceful meeting. After the meeting was over, they were proceeding towards the town to finish. The procession was attacked from behind when it was coming to a close in the evening. This was totally unprovoked. The members of the Bangladesh Rifles shot bullets from behind, killing eight persons including school boys. The people were so outraged that they rushed towards the Asia Energy office, demolished the building, and chased the Asia Energy people out of the place. The rickshaw pullers refused to take Asia Energy people, peddlers and sellers in the market refused to do business with them. It was absolutely spontaneous. Even in February of this year, the people were no less determined to maintain their stand against Asia Energy or any other company trying to dislocate them and destroy the environment in the locality. Thus, due to strong resistance from the people, Asia Energy had to leave, packing up all its offices.

It should be admitted that Bangladesh's civil society did not react aptly enough and there was a failure on their part to take the movements of Kanshat, Shonir Akhra, Savar and Phulbari to the national level. Furthermore, although all the above examples do not indicate full success of the movements, they at least demonstrate the determination on the part of the people of Bangladesh to demand their dues and fair share of the country's resources. The Phulbari struggle sends a clear message to everyone that the people believe in ownership of their resources and they are not shy to express their sense of ownership of the country's natural resources and responsibility to protect the same from appropriation by plunderers, as stated in their leaflets.□

[Source : Report of the Experts' Meeting on Democracy and Human Rights in Bangladesh. The European Parliament, October 10, 2006]