

Institutional Capacity and the State

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Introduction

Since the independence of the country in 1971, many mutinies by the Army, Airforce, BDR and Ansar have taken place resulting in huge losses of lives, including those of two presidents – Bangabandhu and General Zia ur Rahman. A tally of how many mutinies have taken place and how many lives have been lost in those mutinies have never been kept but **without doubt some of the best, the bravest, the brightest and most worthy sons of the soil met their untimely deaths in these mutinies and in their aftermaths**. I have spent 25 years in the Army and have lived with revolutions, revolts and mutinies half of that time. That does not in any way make me an expert on the subject but it does give me an insight or two into mutinies/revolts, as it equally does to soldiers of my and earlier generations.

Of revolutions, revolts and mutinies

Revolutions change histories of peoples, societies and nations as we have seen by the birth of Bangladesh but mutinies/revolts merely destroy. Once the destruction is done, individually and collectively, mutinies/revolts lose their steam unless suffused with overriding political or ideological intent, in which case mutinies/revolts are part of the greater social and political upheavals called revolutions. Sometimes revolutions degenerate into the aberrations of mutinies/revolts as we have seen in 1975-76.

The BDR mutiny of 25 and 26 February was perhaps the most destructive of its kind being solely moored on material aspects and entirely devoid of any greater social or political underpinnings. No wonder it was so destructive to human lives and property, in the 33 hours that it raged on. Final tallies are in confirming the death of over 60 Army officers and their families alongwith injuries to many others; this is besides the “collateral damage” to civilian lives and property. **The human tragedy of this mutiny in particular is incalculable and in many respects inconceivable.**

The tragedy of the mutineers

Mutinies are by nature conspiratorial and by definition unlawful under the prevailing laws of the land and so, mutineers, by choice are out on a limb, desperate and brutal. Torn asunder from a life-time of psychological and physical conditioning, institutional, structural and environmental bindings, mutineers are devoid of most “human” feelings as we understand them. **Mutiny, is foremost of the mind, the body follows later.** To mutineers, every institution, every structure (even physical ones) and every representation of authority is a symbol of perceived oppression, whether real or not and the sole urge is therefore, to destroy through murder, rape, looting and burning.

The moment the mutiny is conceived, mutineers are outcasts – dead or alive - outside the pale of their families, friends, society, law and the Nation whose honour, dignity and independence they had sworn to defend but all of which they have defiled not by the act of mutiny/revolt but by the attendant acts of murder, rape,

looting and arson – this is the tragedy of the mutineers but the greater tragedy is that of the victims.

The tragedy of the victims

The greatest tragedy of the victims is that they do not know why they are dying. Sworn to a life-time of absolute obedience, service and sacrifice, soldiers voluntarily choose a way of life whose very justification is extreme violence, organized by the State, for the State and of the State. **It is therefore, only and only within the parameters of the “State” that violence is unleashed calling for the sacrifice of life. When lives are sacrificed or lost outside the parameters of the State, they become meaningless.** Whether in peace or in war, in life, soldiers are just cogs in the vast machinery of the State, often ignored, often reviled; it is only in death that soldiers are heroes.

In mutinies/revolts, soldiers “outside the pale” target those other soldiers who represent the status quo, who are symbols of authority, initiating a chain of action-reaction which is predatory, brutal and merciless. The parameters of the State within which violence is supposed to be organized, do not hold good anymore and so the deaths become meaningless – that is the tragedy of the victims of mutinies/revolts.

Of institutions and structures

As has been mentioned above, mutinies occur because institutions and structures fail, in one way or the other, to fulfill the “perceived” psychological and physical needs of some, or atleast the most aware people who work and live, perhaps spending their entire lives within those institutions and structures. The BDR mutiny has not only destroyed lives, it has also destroyed the institution and structure of the BDR. **While lives are irreplaceable, institutions and structures are not.** So, an entire new structure of BDR has to be made and new institution-building started, if recurrences of such gruesome and tragic incidents are to be prevented. **Mere change of personnel or “reform” as the latest buzzword is, is not going to workout – that would be like pouring new wine in old bottles; the wine would ferment and burst asunder the bottles. That is something governments have to understand not just with the BDR but with all institutions and structures which are commonly referred to as “core institutions of the state”.**

While there is no denying the fact that a “change” in personnel may be called for, even necessary, to bring about efficiency and dynamism in various aspects of government, governance and administration but a mere replacing of one group of personnel with another is in no way going to bring about the “changes” desired by this or any other government. As a matter of fact such mass-scale personnel changes are going to counter-productive even in the short term and may incite allegations of politicization and deprivation. Such a back-lash is likely to increase if removal and replacement of personnel are taken to extremes and may in fact lead to friction, conflict, litigation and finally to a complete break-down of administration, government and governance.

What is needed is not “change” in personnel but in structures, processes and procedures of the 4 core state institutions – **Judiciary and the system of justice, Bureaucracy and the system of governance and public administration, Police and the system of law-enforcement and finally the Military and the system of national security and defence.** The structures of these institutions were set up by the British colonial power with the sole aim of smooth exploitation of economic resources. These structures implicitly & explicitly obstructed, mostly violently, any attempt at nation building not only in what is geographically Bangladesh today but also throughout India. When in 1947, Pakistan was created, the ruling elite found it convenient to keep these structures and enhance their effectiveness in East Pakistan for the very same aims as the British.

To the people, however, lives were sacrificed in the Liberation War because the state of Pakistan along with all its institutions lost its legitimacy. It was totally unacceptable that the very same de-legitimized institutional structures be superimposed on a geographically and politically independent Bangladesh; attempts at doing so have led to repeated & violent conflicts within the socio-political space of Bangladesh; the BDR incident is but the latest in these series of conflicts. From 1971 to 2009, in 38 years, all social, political & economic structures have broken down under repeated assaults by the people of this land. And yet the paradigms and metaphors of the ruling elites have not changed from one of ruling to one of leadership and nation building.

Of investigations into mutinies

Additionally, embedded within the 4 core state institutions are other structures which are equally ineffective, inefficient and incompetent. So besides investigations into the BDR mutiny, inquiries into the functioning of these “other structures” have to be gone into.

A high level investigation committee, is investigating into the 25-26 February BDR mutiny. **No doubt the investigation committee will go through the motions but whether they would actually be able to penetrate the fog of conspiracy which led to the mutiny, is quite another matter because uptill now, no investigation could ever get to the depth of the matter in the dozens of mutinies that took place in Bangladesh since 1975.** True, many Army officers directly involved with some of those mutinies were prosecuted and some hanged but many of those mutinies still remained unresolved including the murder of Bangabandhu and the November 75 jail killings. Also, the investigation reports of past mutinies were never made public and so the “public” never really knew what happened although they were as much affected by those mutinies as anyone else. So, one doesn’t hope for much from this investigation committee either.

Coming back to the “embedded other structures” I would like to pick up 4 issues. **The first of these issues is: how did the government react during and after the mutiny?** This is important because after the mutiny occurred, much of what happened depended very largely on the chain of action-reaction between the mutineers and government and this chain of action-reaction either went to mitigate the more violent aspects of the mutiny or went on to escalate the violence. There is little doubt that between 0930hours (9:30 AM) on 25 February when the mutiny started and 2000 hours (8 PM) on 27

February when the mutiny ended, the mutineers had sufficient time, opportunities and space to carry out all the massacres, looting, burning and raping; to “spread the message” to other BDR formations, units and headquarters throughout Bangladesh; to further organize and consolidate the mutiny; to communicate with the public and the media, garnering their initial support; to maintain communications with and receive directions and intelligence from “instigators” inside and outside the country and finally to plan the escape of the “hard-core” mutineers. An investigation into government actions will provide valuable lessons for the future on setting up **crises management mechanisms** so as to rapidly contain, mitigate and then end such man-made disasters with the least amount of damage to life and property.

The second issue is why and how did all the intelligence agencies miss out on the early warnings, the so-called “battle indicators” of this mutiny. Without doubt, the preparations for the mutiny were going on for days, if not for weeks because the main agenda or at least the most publicly discussed one, of the mutineers was the Dal-Bhat programme which ended a couple of months before the election and much before the AL government took office. There had to be much and frequent communications, both direct and indirect, between individuals and groups; movements to and fro; view exchange and coordination meetings; mutterings, rumours and speculations; covert and overt changes of attitudes and behaviour patterns; points put up in Durbars at various levels and finally the night of 24/25 February when mutineers had to physically move in large numbers to secure arms, weapons and ammunitions. **An investigation into intelligence or lack thereof will provide valuable lessons on how to redirect and reorganize intelligence agencies so as to cater for “internal security” in all its aspects.**

The third issue is the action and reaction of Army forces and other law-enforcing agencies. This is important because it is on these that the government has to rely on to contain the violence; get the on-ground picture; secure the “public” from “collateral damage” and finally, if necessary, overcome with force the insurrection, mutiny or revolt. That Army forces and other law-enforcing agencies were ineffective can be gauged from the simple fact that no “cordon sanitaire” was thrown around the Peelkhana area despite presence of large and well-armed numbers of Army forces, who all took refuge behind the built-up areas of Dhanmandi, Azimpur, Newmarket and Haziribagh. Neither was any attempt made to evacuate civilians from the immediate vicinity of Peelkhana or to control the thousands upon thousands of civilians crowding around Peelkhana throughout the 48 hours of the mutiny. This lapse allowed most of the mutineers to escape undetected with their loot, some weapons, arms and ammunition although the police and RAB managed to nab about a 100 or so of the fleeing mutineers from in and around Dhaka. Right now not even a tally of how many mutineers were there and how many escaped with what arms and ammunition is available with the authorities. An investigation into Army activities will provide valuable lessons from which appropriate Standing Operating Procedures could be evolved, leading to training to handle such situations.

The last but equally important issue is the handling of the media and information out-flow to the public. No controls are necessary but directions and advice are. A true picture of the situation is necessary but not a biased one. Consider for example that

throughout the 48 hours of mutiny and still continuing the government made no attempt to keep the public in picture of what has really happened; the Home Minister even expressing annoyance when the media asked questions about the missing officers. All that the public got was all that the media got resulting in public mood swings first one way and then entirely the other way. Consider, for example the fact that the media coverage of the mutiny initially brought public opinion in favor of the mutineers and then after the mutiny was over and all the dead bodies were coming out, public opinion went against the mutineers and for the dead and injured Army officers. In crisis situations, such public mood swings can be dangerous because the public might stymie any attempts of the government to mitigate the situation, if the public does not see eye-to-eye with the government. So an investigation into the handling of the media and information will provide valuable lessons on how to mould public opinion and keep it in favor of the government as the government attempts to tackle the crisis.

Conclusion

Thus we see that corruption, inefficiency, incompetence, lack of governance and public administration, injustice and inequity are not the causes but the results of much more deep-rooted malice & contradictions in the body politic of Bangladesh. **The answer for Bangladesh lies in restructuring and not merely changing personnel in the 4 core state institutions in such a way that they reflect a stated minimum of social, political and economic equality for its entire people.** Metaphors such as power, rule, govern must be replaced by service, cooperate, support & create. **Unless politicians and governments are willing and able to see “change” in this perspective, nothing will change and nothing is likely to change. The “people” will remain as deprived and as unempowered as they ever were and violent conflicts of various types and magnitudes will continue to prevail and take their toll.**