

Violent strikes in 2013 and how it affected the seasonal migration project

In 2013, we implemented interventions to encourage seasonal migration similar to those described in Bryan, Chowdhury and Mobarak, *Econometrica* 2014. However, beneficiaries did not react much to the migration subsidy offers in 2013, which is very unlike the responses we observed in 2008, 2011 and 2014, or even 2009 and 2015 (which were longer run responses to the subsidies offered in 2008 and 2014 respectively). The lack of a “first stage” effect on migration means that the research project failed, in that we couldn’t study the effects of migration on other outcomes, as we were not successful in generating any random variation in migration that year.

Given these unexpected and counter-intuitive results, we conducted several rounds of discussions in 2016 with the field staff of IPA (our research management partner), and of RDRS (the implementation partner) to explore both implementation problems and external events that may have contributed to this failure. We found that the most plausible explanation of low migration rate in 2013 is the unprecedented political strikes (called *hartals* in Bangladesh) and strike-induced violence in late 2013, which deterred economic activity, and likely deterred migration due to the safety risks associated with movement during that period. Ahsan and Iqbal (2015) reports systematic data on *hartals* and violence between 2005 and 2013, and it’s clear from their data that the 2013 monga season was a massive outlier with respect to the incidence of strikes, and deaths caused by strike-induced violence. Figure 1 from their paper is reproduced below. There were over twice as many political strikes in 2013 compared to the single worst year in the previous 8 year period (2006). The number of strikes in 2013 is comparable to the combined total of the previous 8 year period.

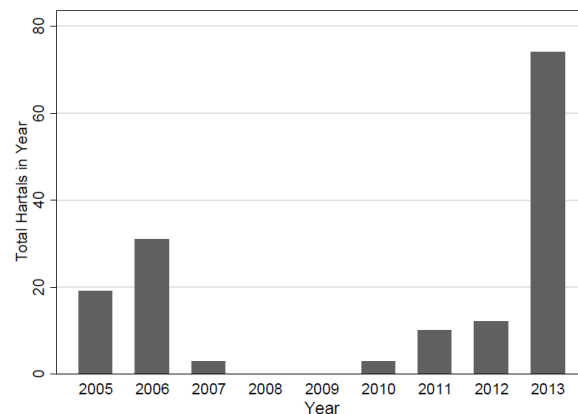


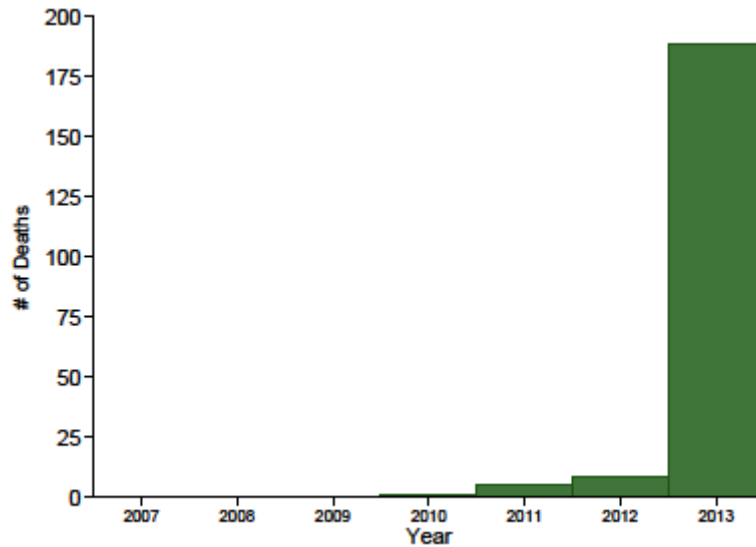
Figure 1: Annual trend in *hartals*.

Hartals are often organized by political parties and are used to coercively shut down roads, buses, railways, and all other forms of public transportation, as well as all private and public institutions. The parties calling the strike use the threat of violence to coerce businesses into not operating on those days, and transportation companies into not providing regular service. Ahsan and Iqbal (2015) calculate that the cost of transportation rises as much as 69% on *hartal* days.

While *hartals* have been part of political protests and people’s lives in Bangladesh for a long time, the violence accompanying *hartals* in 2013 was extraordinary. Figure 2 reports the number of deaths due to *hartal*-induced violence across years. Deaths increased many-fold in 2013, and probably exceeded the combined death toll from all previous *hartals* called during the entire history

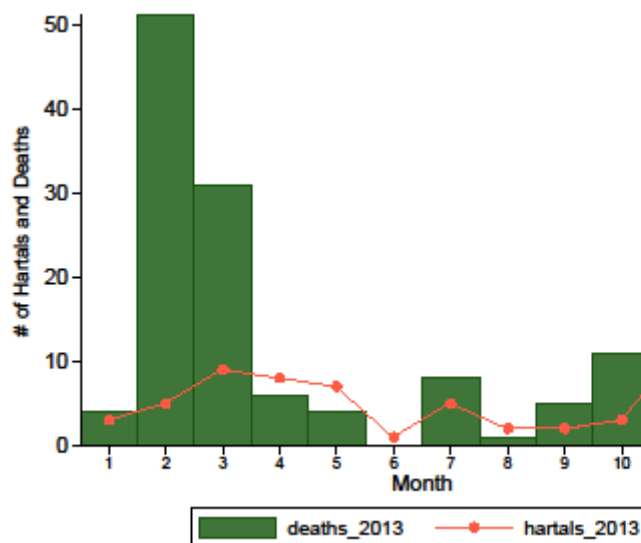
of Bangladesh. *Hartal* combined with extreme violence was most likely was a strong deterrent to travel by road in 2013. From newspaper reports, it is clear that such violence not only takes place on *hartal* days, but also the days before and after a *hartal* is called.

Figure 2: Number of Deaths due to *Hartal*-induced Violence, 2007-2013



Ahsan and Iqbal (2015) constructed the *hartal* data from newspaper reports, and are therefore also able to report the incidence of strikes by week or month of occurrence. We reproduce a figure from the 2015 version of their paper using monthly data to see whether the 2013 strikes and violence corresponded to the *monga* and migration periods that year. Unfortunately for us, *hartals* and *hartal*-induced violence were most prevalent in late 2013, which corresponds to the period right after our migration subsidies were disbursed. Our interventions in other years suggest that November and December are among the two most popular months for people to seasonally migrate from Rangpur.

Figure 3: Number of *Hartals* and Deaths due to *Hartal*-induced Violence in 2013



Reference:

Ahsan, R., and K. Iqbal. 2015. Political strikes and its impact on trade. International Growth Centre Working Paper.

Updated:

Ahsan, R., and K. Iqbal. 2016. "How Do Exporters Cope With Violence? Evidence from Political Strikes in Bangladesh," Working Paper, September 2016.