

# Student politics: Story of glory and degeneration

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FOR quite some time, student politics has been giving a strong negative connotation in Bangladesh. This has not always been the case and the history of students' struggle and sacrifice for the country and democracy is a golden one. From the Language Movement of 1952 to the establishment of Parliamentary Democracy in 1991, students have been the vanguards in protecting the freedom and upholding the democratic aspirations of people of Bangladesh. Unfortunately, in recent times the trend has been so negative that there have been calls

from different quarters to ban student politics itself.

Youth under the age of 25 years make up more than half of the population in Bangladesh. The country is yet to tap into the potential of its youth segment with most becoming averse to student politics. A recent study reveals that more than 80% of the youth disapprove of student politics. The plight of student politics cannot be treated in isolation from the looming broader crisis of weak governance, unhealthy political culture, and poor leadership.

What is interesting is that it was the

colonial British government which established modern educational institutions in our subcontinent. At that time, student organizations had a more cultural-literary bent. During the early nineteenth century, Henry Derozio's Academic Association was a literary and debating club. It was only with the infusion of nationalist politics in the late 19th century Bengal that students became politically active. It took a violent turn in the early 20th century as in the case of Dhaka-based Anushilan Samity which was an anti-British militant student organization. With the onset of Congress and Muslim League leadership in subcontinent's politics, the students of the then East Bengal actively participated in both organizational as well as agitational politics.

While the deepening fault lines of communalism in the first half of 1940s pitted students from different communities against one another, in late '40s and over the '50s the trend was more towards affirming non-communal overarching Bengali identity against the dominance of Urdu in the Pakistan state. The glorious Language Movement in early '50s demonstrated the important role of students in politics. When Muhammad Ali Jinnah came to Dhaka to address the Bengalis, apart from his infamous declaration regarding Urdu, he also warned students against engaging in any form of politics. The students not only protested his proclamation regarding exclusion of Bangla as a national language, but also resoundingly demonstrated the positive potential of student politics in spearheading the language movement that peaked in 1952.

Some of the key student leaders of

those time were Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (one of the principal organizers of East Pakistan Muslim Students League in 1948), Syed Nazrul Islam (President of Salimullah Muslim Hall Students Union in 1940s), Tajuddin Ahmad (one of the founders of East Bengal Chhatra League in 1948) who would subsequently lead the national liberation struggle of Bangladesh. Many of the prominent political leaders of today started their journey through active participation in politics during their campus days. Some of these leaders not only played a patriotic role during critical junctures of the nation but also were meritorious students while in the university. There was a healthy culture of positive evolution of national leaders from their student days through acts of patriotism, penchant for knowledge, pursuit of academic excellence, and healthy co-existence with their political rivals.

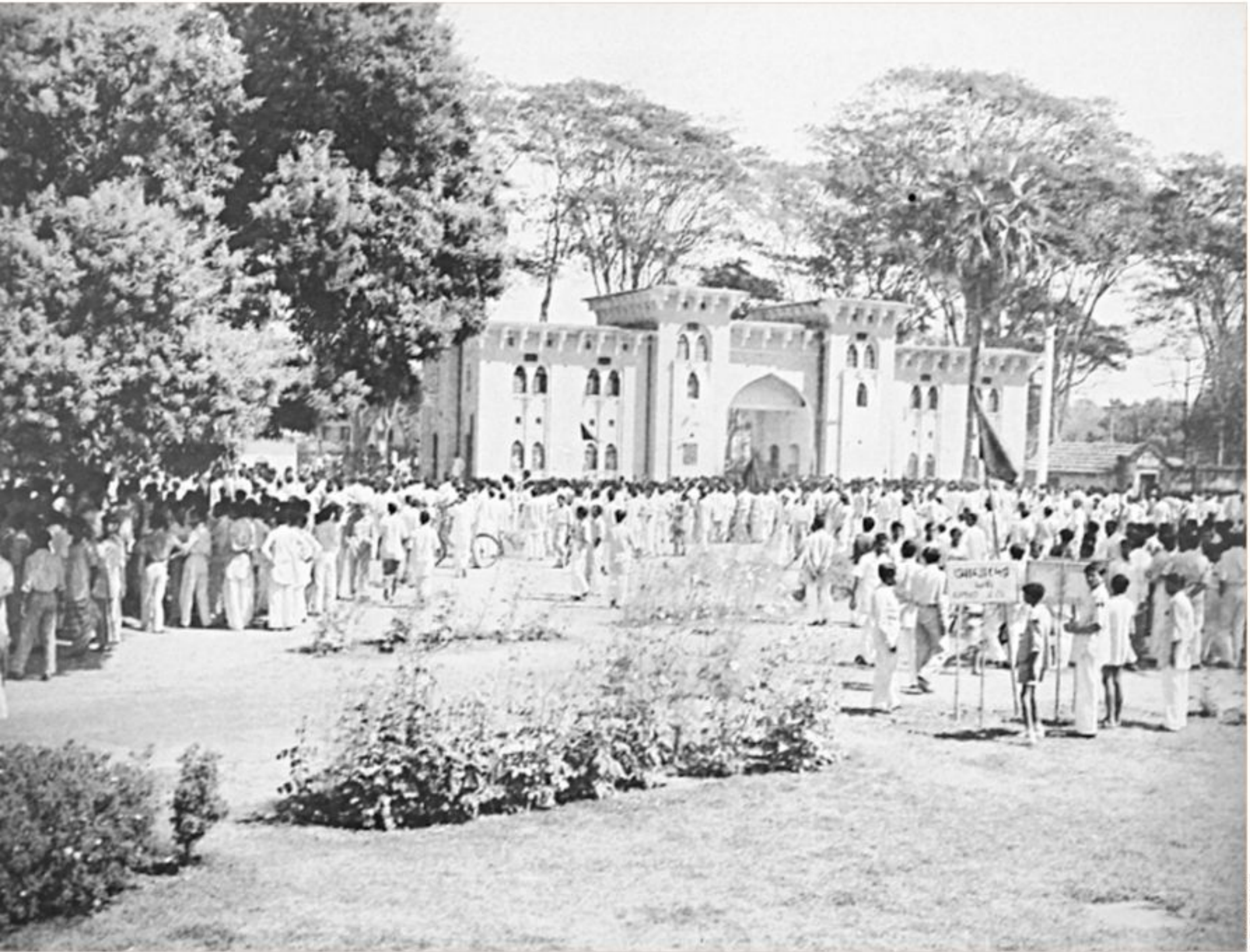
In the 1960s, student politics assumed an even stronger role, linked with the overall cultural revolution flourishing in the then East Pakistan. The Ayub Regime created a student organ called National Students Federation (NSF) that sought to terrorize and repress democratic aspirations of the student community. NSF did not enjoy broad support in the wider community of students. Organizations like the Chhatra League, Students' Union, etc. were the mainstream student organizations active in that era. The 1962 movement against the Hamoodur Rahman Education Commission Report was a jumpstart of the anti-Ayub movement marking the vanguard role of students.

When vested interests sought to fan communal flames, the progressive students bravely resisted the spread of

communal violence. In 1966, the six-point movement and in 1969, the popular upsurge saw students playing a very prominent role by leading the masses. Some of the student leaders of that era subsequently became leaders in the independent Bangladesh not only in politics but also in other spheres as well, e.g. Tofail Ahmed, Matia Chowdhury, Obaidul Quader, Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan (Late), Shahjahan Siraj, Matiur Rahman (editor, Prothom Alo) and there were many other prominent personalities. The student organizations had the ability to clearly articulate broad-based political programs that would reflect the general interest of the people. For example, in the 1969 mass upsurge, the student groups formulated an eleven-point demand on which they based their movement. Student leaders like Shaheed (martyred) Asad laid down their lives selflessly for the interest of the Bengali nation. Not only university students but also students from colleges (e.g. Notre Dame College) joined rallies protesting the Ayub regime. One of the first victim groups of the Operation Searchlight in March 25, 1971 were the students of Dhaka University. The students joined the liberation war in 1971 and their sacrifices, both of student leaders and ordinary students, have been outstanding.

In 1970s, high degree of idealism permeated the students community in their zeal to build the new country which included programs like supporting farmers in the famine-stricken country. The following years were marked by violent incidents and political instability on the campus as the political leadership itself faced

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ARCHIVE

## The unremembered friends of '71

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MANY foreigners fought directly or indirectly during the liberation war of Bangladesh, but very few know about the contribution of the Tibetans and the Special Frontier Forces (SFF) in that war. The government of Bangladesh has recognized and awarded a lot of foreigners for their contribution, but the Tibetans were forgotten. Their best military unit fought alongside our muktibahini (freedom fighters). The story of the formation of this unit is a very curious one and a testament to the changing nature of international politics and alliances.

At the end of the 1962 Indo-China war, the then Indian Intelligence Bureau (IIB) chief took initiative to form a special guerrilla force from the Tibetans sheltered in India. Kenneth Conboy in his book on CIA operations relating to Tibet, informs us that former Orissa Chief Minister Biju Patnaik wanted to create a rebel force with the Tibetans.

Following the green signal from the government, IIB formed the Special Frontier Force (SFF) with the help of Chu Shi Gangdruk (CSG), the main organization of the Khampa rebels, and CIA, on November 14, 1962. According to the plan the Khampa rebels were brought from CIA-run Mustang base in Nepal. They were trained by the IIB at a base near Dehra Dun. CIA promised all supports for their training. It trained several batches of Khampa rebels in Saipan in 1957 and then in Camp Hale, Colorado for guerrilla warfare and sabotage against the Chinese.

A formation agreement was signed in 1962 among three parties: IIB, CIA

and CSG. General Tashi and Jago Dorjee signed this agreement on behalf of Chushi Gangdruk. 12,000 men, mostly Khampas, were recruited at Chakrata base, Dehra-dun, India.

Maj. Gen. Sujan Singh Uban was assigned to command the covert guerrilla force as its Inspector General. The SFF ultimately came to be known as 'Establishment 22' because Maj. Gen. Uban had previously commanded 22 Mountain brigade.

Till 1968 the CIA officials kept relation with the SFF at various levels, but after Nixon started Ping-Pong diplomacy, CIA's connections with the Tibetan guerrillas in Nepal and India dwindled. CIA link with India based Tibetans completely died out in 1970s. The US under Nixon tilted towards Pakistan and also developed secret negotiations with China as Indo-Pakistan war seemed imminent.

When SFF was established, there was a mutual agreement that the regiment would fight the Chinese. Since the RAW (research and analysis wing) was created on 21 September 1968, headed by R. N. Kau, it took the responsibility of SFF. But their chief Maj. Gen. Uban was worried that the trained commandos of as many as 64 companies were out of action since their inception and that the absence of field operations might reduce their morale and capabilities.

It was at that time Bangladesh went up in flames as Pakistan army resorted to large scale massacre on March 25, 1971 known as 'Operation Searchlight'. By this time muktibahini started launching guerrilla wars inside Bangladesh. Incidentally, Maj. Gen. Uban was entrusted with the task of training Bengali forces like the muktibahini and

Mujib Bahini.

Maj. Gen. Uban did not miss the chance and motivated New Delhi to send his Tibetan forces to Bangladesh, who, according to Gen. Uban were already better trained and itching for an operation. In 1971, a special army meeting was held in New Delhi; where General Uban volunteered to lead the SFF in the liberation war. At first there was some confusion regarding SFF, since it was not part of the Indian army and also it needed consent from the Central Tibetan Administration. However, it was decided that upon getting a formal order from the Indian government SFF will join the war.

Ultimately, Indira Gandhi gave a message to the Tibetan fighters, through their Indian commander: "We cannot compel you to fight a war for us," she wrote, "but the fact is that General A A K Niazi [the Pakistan Army commander in East Pakistan] is treating the people of East Pakistan very badly. India has to do something about it. In a way, it is similar to the way the Chinese are treating the Tibetans in Tibet, we are facing a similar situation. It would be appreciated if you could help us fight the war for liberating the people of Bangladesh."

After the letter, the senior commanders of the SFF agreed to fight for Bangladesh, with the consent of the Buddhist religious guru Dalai Lama. The operation was named The Operation Mountain Eagle and was supervised directly by RAW.

In the 3rd week of October, 1971 Operation Mountain Eagle was launched under strict secrecy. More than 3000 Tibetan commandos from SFF were dropped at an obscure border village of Demagiri in Mizoram, located across the river Karnafuli and

Chittagong Hill Tracts. At that time Demagiri was crowded with refugees. The Tibetans made small hit-and-run raids in Chittagong, crossing the river, striking Pakistani forces and returning to Demagiri. On the second week of November, 1971, the Tibetan guerrillas led by Dapon (brigadier) Dhondup Gyatotsang crossed the river by nine canoes and went inside East Pakistan to launch a decisive guerrilla campaign. To hide their identity and to deny any association with Indian authorities, they were equipped with Bulgarian AK 47s instead of Russian ones. On the very first night they took over a Pakistani post and within next morning captured another. In this operation Dapon Dhondup Gyatotsang was killed.

The tasks of Establishment 22 were clear: Destroy the bridges, military infrastructures, and damage the Pakistani military positions and kill as many Pakistani soldiers as possible. Divided in three columns they were ordered to create a situation that would allow Indian army to march towards Chittagong from the hills without much resistance from the Pakistanis in case of open war.

At that time Pakistani 97th Independent Brigade and 2nd commando battalion of SSG were positioned strategically in Chittagong. The guerrillas successfully restrained them in their respective positions and also cut off all the routes towards Burma. Within one month of their operations, the Tibetan guerrillas virtually paralyzed Pak army in Chittagong and when the Indian army moved in they did not face much resistance at all.

Dapon Ratuk Ngawang, one of the 3 Dapons, recently published his mem-

oirs, in which he recalls the Tibetan participation and the role of SSF in Bangladesh's liberation war. In his words "After the decision to participate in the Operations was taken, Dapon Dhondup Gyatotsang [killed in 1971 war], Dapon Pekar Thinley and myself divided the regiment into three units. Each unit had one Tibetan Dapon and one Indian Colonel, all under Maj. Gen. Uban."

He wrote, "Within 10 days, we captured almost all the enemy bases except for two. Most of the enemy bases had only 50 soldiers or so and when we attacked them, they were hugely outnumbered and surrendered within an hour of fighting. On December 16, when news of the Indian army's conquest of Dhaka became known, most of the remaining isolated units surrendered."

Though the Tibetan guerrillas played a key role in Chittagong during the war, they could not be officially awarded. They lost 49 soldiers, including one of their top leaders, and 190 got injured. In 1972, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman personally called the SFF leaders to thank them. But this operation, officially, still has not been recognized. It's indeed time we recognized the Tibetans and expressed our deepest gratitude for fighting a war which was not their own but ours.

The writer is a development worker and adjunct faculty on leave at the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh.

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3. Dapon Ratuk Ngawang's interview to a Tibetan blog Volume XI of the Foreign Relations of the United States devoted to the 'South Asia Crisis, 1971