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Workers' role in the 1969 Gherao Movement

PHOTO: COURTESY

In November 1968, the struggle against the dictatorial regime of Mohammad Ayub Khan began in the towns and cities of West Pakistan. At the beginning, the people of East Pakistan did not take the movement seriously except the Moscow NAP. The students—both the East Pakistan Students League and the East Pakistan Students Union protested on November 23 against police action in **the west wing**. It was followed by a public demonstration on November 24 by the Moscow NAP, starting from Baitul Mukarram in Dacca. From the end of November 1968 onwards, Maulana Bhashani, President of Peking NAP, called upon the rural poverty-stricken peasantry to '**Gherao**' (surround) the houses of the corrupt development officers and Tahsil offices. In many districts such '**Gherao**' started from December. The peasant revolt in Naxalbari, West Bengal in 1966 had an impact on the politically conscious peasant leaders of East Pakistan.

On December 6, Peking NAP announced that there would be a general strike in Dacca city on the following day in sympathy with the week-long strike by scooter-drivers. The strike was a success. The police opened fire at one or two places in the city. The government promulgated an order under Section 144 of the Code of Civil Procedure prohibiting

all assemblies and processions for two months from December 7. The general strike called by Awami League on December 13 was supported by the progressive student organisations, Moscow NAP as well as other political parties such as PDM and the Peoples Party. It was a great success.

The conspiracy case against Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and others, generally known as the Agartala conspiracy case, instituted at the instance of the Pakistani regime and the reports published daily in the newspapers of the proceedings in the tribunal agitated the minds of the majority of the people of East Pakistan.

By the third week of January the students set up committees of action throughout the province and they were getting ready for any eventuality. The students' agitation took a serious turn after Asad, a student leader, was killed by a bullet injury on the 20th January. The students declared *hartal* (general strike) on the 21st, mourning for three days.

The middle-class struggle for democratic rule under the bourgeoisie leadership was transformed into a revolutionary upsurge of the masses. The working population—the rickshaw pullers, motor drivers and all other day labourers—of the city joined hands with the students and defied law enforcers. The popular uprising

shattered the facade of the regime's stability and the administration collapsed. The shameless propaganda of the so-called "decade of progress" was going on in full swing through all available media—newspapers, meetings, pamphlets, booklets, radio and television—but collapsed like a house of cards.

The movement, initially started by Maulana Bhashani's NAP group in the form of '**Gherao**' of corrupt officers and government agencies, began to spread in the rural areas. In the first week of March, the proletariat section took it into their head to realise their demands from employers and the process started from the Tongi industrial area. '**Gherao**' by the employees became a regular feature from the first week of March 1969. The employers were shaken.

Ayub Khan and especially his governor, Monem Khan, made a last-minute effort to remain in power. An Islamic Constitution Day was observed on March 23 when the Field Marshal's Party joined hands with the village *mullahs* and some power-hungry Islamist fanatics brought out processions in the name of saving Islam from the hands of 'godless Communists'. The history of Indonesia was almost going to be repeated but the action and operation by the Ayub-Monem coterie were too late. Ayub handed over power to

the new martial law authority, Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, and retired on March 25, 1969

The '**Gherao**' movement was not unknown in East Pakistan. In 1954, there was a '**Gherao**' in Kushtia Mohini Mills. In 1964, there was a '**Gherao**' of the Peoples Jute Mills in Khulna which continued for 12 days. In April 1965, it happened in Amin Jute Mills in Chittagong. But the '**Gheraos**' in March 1969 were not only by workers of the factories and offices but by the students' committees of action and inspired by some political parties—both Moscow and Peking National Awami Parties and Awami League. The '**Gherao**' movement of 1969 has to be understood and appreciated in the new perspective. The country witnessed scenes that were unprecedented in their character, in their impact, and in their abiding sociological import.

It was clear from the very beginning that the new martial law authority will be different from that of the martial law in 1958. The employers and industrialists who welcomed the promulgation were surprised and shocked when it was announced that the employers who had signed agreements in the month of March 1969 were to honour those agreements, though almost all of them were signed

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1950

One of the largest jute mills in the world—Adamjee Jute Mill—is established at Narayanganj. It was, however, closed in 2002.

1953

Adamjee Jute Mills Union formed.



1954

Hundreds die in Adamjee Jute Mills in riots between Bengali and non-Bengali workers, followed by similar riots in Karnaphuli Paper Mills and Ispahani Match Works.