



Between Class and Nation: Dhaka University and the Emergence of a National Liberation Movement

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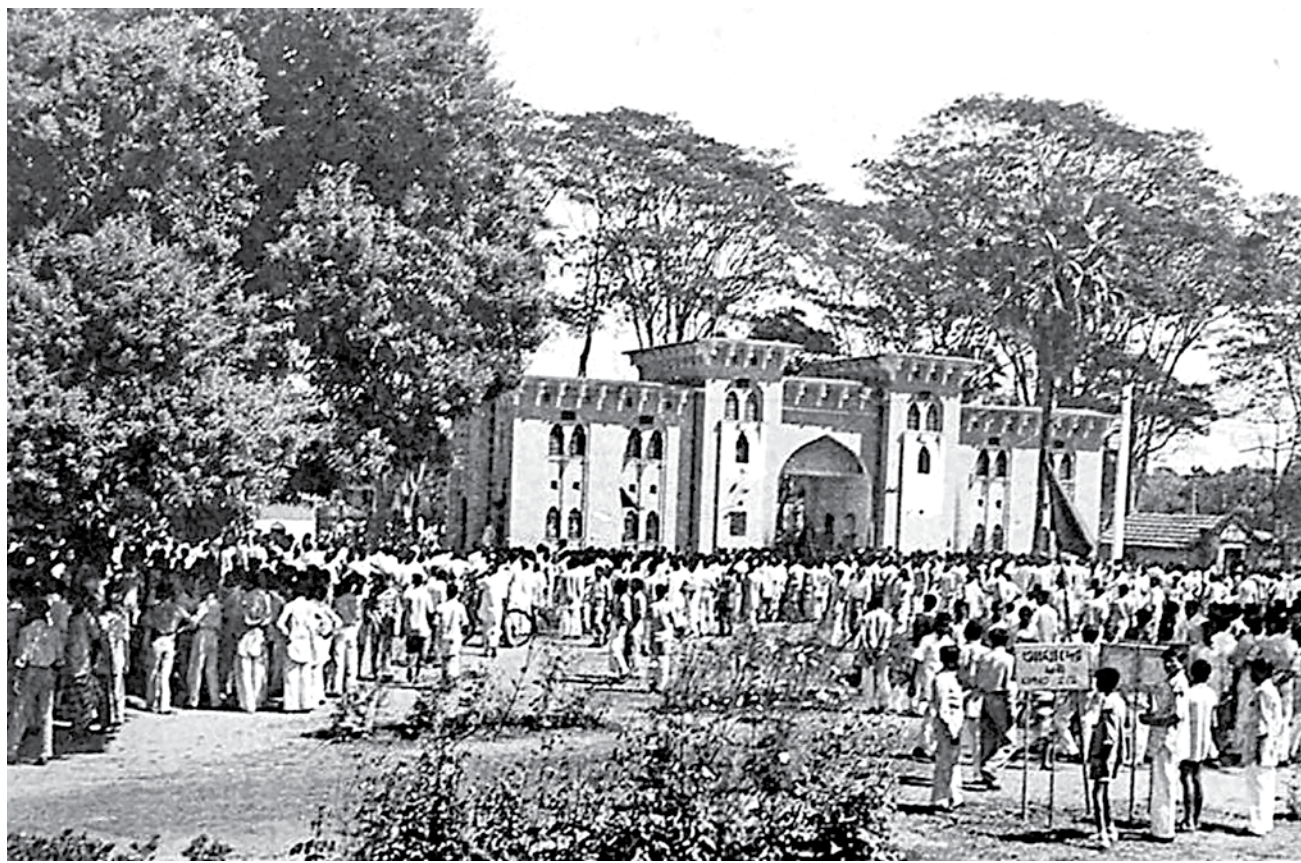
The first phase of politics in the Dhaka University – established in 1921 after much lobbying by a Muslim aristocracy among other factors – involved anti-British movements by the Bengali Hindu militant nationalists using quasi-terroristic tactics. Dhaka with its Hindu-demography was a key site of operation for organizations like Anushilan Samity, Jugantar group, Sri-sangha and so on. The Bengali Muslim students of the university were “entirely unconcerned” about that movement, as testified Professor Abdur Razzak and when the city became communally riven with intermittent Hindu-Muslim riots since 1926, the Bengali Muslim students remained just as aloof from the clashes until the 1940s. What was up with them?

Between 1921 and 1971, the University enabled the formation of a Bengali Muslim middle class, which in turn gave the impetus for the creation of Bangladesh as a nation-state. The supposed coincidence between formation of a class and nation captures the complexity of the university’s mediatory role.

By 1940s, as Kamruddin Ahmed attests, the educated Bengali Muslim political activists centered on Dhaka had almost defeated the aristocracy of the

by locating language as the political differentia specifica of the people of East Bengal. After the police shootings killed a number, the whole city was astir and people around the country took to the streets. When teachers of Dhaka University moved a motion condemning the murderous violence, the government responded in a heavy-handed manner: arresting university teachers like Munier Chowdhury and Muzaffar Ahmad Chowdhury. The university administration covered so low before the regime that they suspended or fired the arrested teachers. This event set the tone of the relationship the Pak government and its various apparatuses would have with Bengali intelligentsia. The first phase of student movement was climaxed with the enshrinement of Bengali as a state language.

Ayub Khan’s 1958 coup enforced a lull in public political life, but his attempts to deepen his political roots required his regime to open up some space for popular participation in politics, which opened the Pandora’s box of the second phase of student politics. When the regime arrested Husayn Shahid Suhrawardy in January 1962, the Chhatra League and East Pakistan Students’ Union (EPSU) jumpstarted student politics by forging a joint strike. The protests against the



The historic Amlata, where the Language Movement heroes defied Section 144 to demand Bangla as state language in 1952

spaces ranging from Asad Gate to Iqbal Hall. The accumulating martyrology in the series of national movements invested the national cause with a growing sanctity.

The confabulation of a differential identity centered on language necessitated a bigger role for the Bengali intelligentsia, as exemplified by the Bengali Department of the University. Bengali scholars spearheaded the reclamation of Rabindranath Tagore against the attempts of Ayub regime in 1961 and 1965-67 to ban or discourage evoking the works of the poet. On May 14, 1968, Dhaka Bishwabidyalay Bangla Samiti organized a program on Bengali poetry of a thousand years. The wholesale embrace by Dhaka’s bhadraloks of the longer legacy of Bengali culture is well captured in how Munier Chowdhury, an English lecturer, went on to study Bengali and fabulously learned about Bengali literature from Ajit Guha while incarcerated for involvement in the language movement. The scholars and alumni of Dhaka University played a key role in articulating the logic of Bengali movement for autonomy. Professor Abdur Razzak, Nurul Islam, Rehman Sobhan, among others helped gauge the disparity between the two wings of Pakistan. In the Special Conference of Economists of East Pakistan on the draft first Five Year Plan of Pakistan (1956-1960) held at Dhaka in 1956, Pakistani economy was shown to consist of two economic units that lacked movement of labor and capital between them while inequitable distribution was widening the gulf in comparative economic development. This paved the way for the “two economies” theory which served as the basis for the six-points movement. Ahmad Sharif, the able successor of Abdul Karim Sahityavisarad, published a series of medieval Bengali Muslim poetry which placed the Bengali Muslim identity in the larger horizon of perennial Bengali culture.

The exacerbating contradictions of national politics in the sixties deepened and sharpened the rifts in student politics in Dhaka University. Chhatra League, East Pakistan Students’ Union, National Students Federation, and Chhatra Shakti (Khelefate Rabbani) were among the main student organizations. The residential halls were at the core of the collective life of students. The three early dormitories of the university – the Dhaka Hall, SM Hall, and Jagannath Hall – were joined by Fazlul Haq Hall (1940), Iqbal Hall (1957), Jinnah Hall (1964), Mohsin Hall (1967) and so on. Halls would be places where students would enact, simulate and cultivate their politico-cultural subjectivities through day-to-day socializations, elections of student unions (chhatra sangsad), cultural programs, and so forth. The political competition of the student organizations revolved around sway in the different halls.

DUCSU was at the heart of this network of hall-based political organizing. Before partition, the Vice President and the General Secretary of DUCSU had a consociational structure: usually a Hindu and a Muslim would be selected to serve as Vice President and General Secretary for a year. Selection was replaced by rotation of central union positions among elected hall representatives. Still later, direct elections to DUCSU were introduced.

The EPSU had wide popularity in early sixties in the campus and beyond. Mohammad Farhad, Rashed Khan Menon, Matia Chowdhury and so on emerged as popular, dynamic leftist

leaders from EPSU. Young leaders like Menon, Haidar Akbar Khan Rono, and Kazi Zafar helped link the student activism with the movement of workers in industrial areas like Tongi or Narayanganj. In 1965, the Communists were divided into pro-Russian and pro-Chinese camps, spelling the beginning of the end of leftist hegemony in East Bengal politics. The dereliction of politics in 1970 elections, the influence of Charu Majumdar’s annihilationism, and the subsumption of the class question in the complex political conjuncture would eventually divide and disorient the left between loyalists of the dominant nationalist forces and renegade radicals who were out of tune with the people’s cause.

The National Students Federation (NSF) emerged as a domineering organization in campus under Ayub. The cadres of NSF would intimidate rival student activists and even teachers with their rogue politics. These cadres were also notorious for sexual transgressions: harassment of women students was not uncommon. NSF dominance was decisively punctuated in October 1968, when Saidur Rahman aka Paspantu – one of the most notorious cadres – was killed in a confrontation. As Ayub regime increasingly lost its hold, sections of the NSF turned their coats and pledged support to the anti-regime alliance.

It was Chhatra League which emerged as the most powerful organization in the campus especially from 1968 onwards, buoyed by 1969 insurrection followed by 1970 elections. Around the charismatic national leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, a host of young student leaders emerged from the political groundswell of the sixties: Sheikh Moni, Sirajul Alam Khan, Tofail Ahmed, ASM Abdur Rab, Shajahan Siraj, and so on. The young turks of Chhatra League were pivotal to the movements leading up to the liberation war as they would often strategize and push for maximalist programs, although competition and ideological fuzziness would make them as divisible as the young Turks of Turkey. Chhatra League had leftist and rightist factions from early on, which were not conspiratorial sub-groups, but diffuse ideological tendencies. The ideological fuzziness in Chhatra League would become explicit after the liberation war with formation of National Socialist Party aka Jasad.

The Bengali nationalism in late sixties was primarily a multi-class movement against the ruthless oppression and exploitation. Peasants, workers, and ordinary masses of East Bengal had clear grievances of both economic and national nature. The nationalism of the middle-classes however was aimed at what we may call “imperial immediacy”. The proto-bourgeoisie resented the oppressive and exploitative military-bureaucratic-capitalist clique based in Punjab as the mediator in the relationship between East Bengal and the imperialistic world economy. The evolution of various political tendencies in student politics in Dhaka University cannot be linked to a coherent theorization or ideological indoctrination. A situational empiricism of opportunities, affiliations, and allegiance to leaders would matter more than theories and ideologies when it came to a person’s political stance.

Dhaka University created a space of politico-cultural sublimation where women students could assume an honorable public role. Women students took part in the language movement and began acting in drama organized by students – rendering an unprecedented

visibility and salience to them. Yet the scope for women students’ participation in politics and culture was limited. The Rokeya Hall, built with US support to replace the earlier Chummary House and Women’s Hostel in 1964, would enforce a sunset law for its inmates by shutting its gate at 6pm and keeping a register to record the entry and exit of women students. No less central to political activism was Eden College whose alumni ranged from Leela Nag to Matia Chowdhury. Women students constituted both the target and the limit for the power of the authoritarian regime, just as their presence and praxis were crucial to the formation of an axis of resistance.

It would be necessary not to suffer from a Dhaka-universitarian megalomania that exaggerates the role of the University and the proto-bourgeoisie it cultivated in the national movement. The University space was key to the movements thanks to its cross-linking with a broader network of actors. It was more often than not the “outsiders” who took the bullets in the confrontations. Most of the martyrs of the language movement were ordinary people: a clerk, a rickshaw puller, a young boy – quite non-descript human beings. According to contemporary records, the foundation stone of Shahid Minar was laid at the hands of the daughter of the martyred Rickshaw puller.

Dhaka University was like the central node in a network of political mobilization. Educational institutions in Dhaka like Qaed-e Azam College (later Suhrawardy College) and Jagannath College became bastions of Chhatra League and EPSU, waging militant student movements in the late sixties. The students of these colleges would be a critical component in the rallies and programs held at the University.

Cultural organizations like Chhayana, Udichi, Kranti, DU Sanskriti sangsad laid out a new cultural space in the city, forging novel forms and practices for performing the national identity. Magazines and journals would be brought out by residential halls, colleges, political organizations, mofussil towns, and so on. These formed the mediums of self-expression with idioms borrowed from the fuzzy ideological articulations of a nascent Bengali nationalism. New institutions like the emerging media houses would provide the literati with a stable base. To give an example, the Dainik Pakistan employed most of the leading poets of Dhaka: Shamsur Rahman, Ahsan Habib, Hasan Hafizur Rahman, and so on. Sikandar Abu Zafar, Santosh Gupta, and Ranesh Dasgupta worked in Sangbad. Young aspirants for poetic fame would frequent these powerful cultural mediatory institutions to make a name for themselves. In a largely oral bhadralok culture, a person could be distinguished by articulateness in Bengali and English, comportment, or “taste”. But in the space of mass politics, ability to connect to the masses and mustering symbolic and political capital would be more critical. By late 1960s, it became common-sensical that the Bengali national movement was the reigning ideological cause in the University space. When the militant student leaders delivered impassioned speeches, the faculties would listen to those from the verandah of the first floor of the Arts Building. The new Bengali nationalism stressed on an ethno-linguistic identity “irrespective



Women marching in the streets of Dhaka. 1971. Photographer: Rashid Talukder

Knights and Nawabs and established proto-bourgeois dominance in Muslim League. It was only after the defeat of this aristocracy as well as partition of Bengal that the Bengali Muslim proto-bourgeoisie could expand its outlook and moor its identity into the vacated locus of Bengali nationalism. When Dhaka’s communal riots infringed on the university space leading to direct clashes involving student activists like Nazir Ahmed, in that very moment, a counter-tendency surfaced in the form of a non-communal Bengali Muslim intelligentsia in Dhaka. Of course, the long shadow of communal violence was never quite at a far remove in the Pakistan era. Even during the 1964 riots, Hindu students of Jagannath Hall hurriedly evacuated the hall fearing attacks. It was this riot that prevented Nirmalendu Goon from becoming a pharmacy student in DU.

In the aftermath of the Partition, Muslim League turned from a minoritarian Indian party into the ruling platform in Pakistan. After some false starts in the forms of Gana Azadi League, Democratic Youth League and so on, the Chhatra League was formed in 1948 bringing together former student activists of Muslim League and other tendencies into an oppositional and democratic student movement, preceding the formation of Awami League and NAP and thus epitomizing students’ role as political vanguards. Under the repressive atmosphere of Pakistan, the leftists adopted various tactics including infiltrating mainstream organizations, orbiting around the figure of Maulana Bhasani, and so forth.

The University was the central locus of the Language Movement from 1948 to 1956. The 1952 Language Movement decisively transformed Bengal politics

Sharif Commission Report in 1962, the campaign for 1965 elections, the six-points movement in 1966, the popular insurrection in 1969 and finally the war of national liberation were only self-recapitulating and self-transcending iterative escalations of this second phase of student politics.

The “post-colonial colonialism” of Pakistan held up a chimera of an ever-receding promise for the Bengali proto-bourgeoisie. The authoritarian developmentalist Pak regimes as well as private investors sought to create a new city in Dhaka with a series of architectural and institutional projects, setting up a public library, a new railway station, new residential halls and university buildings, and so on. For ideological articulation, institutions like the Bureau of National Reconstruction, Pakistan Writers’ Union (Lekhak sangha) and so on were propped up. While such spaces and institutions were intended to contribute to the development of Pakistani nationalism and economy, a completely different “reading” or “use” was made of those by the Bengalis, precisely because the state didn’t treat East Pakistan with equity and inclusiveness. Expansion of public spaces and public property enabled a certain freeing of the spirit from the fetters of petty-bourgeois loyalty and subservience. Moreover, the series of national movements created a new political geography for the university and the city. The mango-shade of the Arts Building, the banyan shade, the Shahid Minar, the Race Course Ground, and so on that were witness to the movements of the emerging political community created a new set of coordinates and spatial semantics for the nation. The movements appropriated and expanded this spatial semantics by renaming of places, as students changed names of