MASS UPRISING DAY

Dhaka 1969

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IN this essay, I offer a reading of the set of events now known as *Gana Abhyutthan* (Mass Uprising) by attending to Dhaka, the city. Focusing on the physical locus of this urban uprising moves us beyond the tropes of inevitability and loss. In the numerous processions that serpentined the roads and alleys of Dhaka throughout the 1960s, one comes across moments when Bengali nationalism exceeded its own expectations. *Michhil* was where the telos of historical materialism stumbled on effects and accidents.

Nested within the rise and fall of class politics is also a story of changing urbanity. The culture and politics of erstwhile East Pakistan found a contested, if also hospitable, home in Dhaka. All through the 1960s, the streets, parks, mosques, tea shops, windows, and attics of Dhaka, both *puran* and new, witnessed a symbolic and literal coming together of *chhatra-janata*, a compound word that captures the collective agency of *chhatra* (students) and *janata* (the public). It is a figuration of popular political will that appears repeatedly in contemporary commentaries on oppositional politics.

The students amplified their demands directly through the platform Chhatra Sangram Parishad (Students Committee of Action). The alliance of student organisations took on a unified role towards the end of the decade. The other half of the compound, *janata*, and its relationship to the city were less straightforward. Its presence was felt more in contemporary literature than in history books. Akhtaruzzaman Elias' *"Chilekothar Sepai"* (1986) is a brilliant rumination on the city and the masses who lived and worked here. In this and other literary work of the time, the changing city became an important backdrop and a formative force behind new social relations.

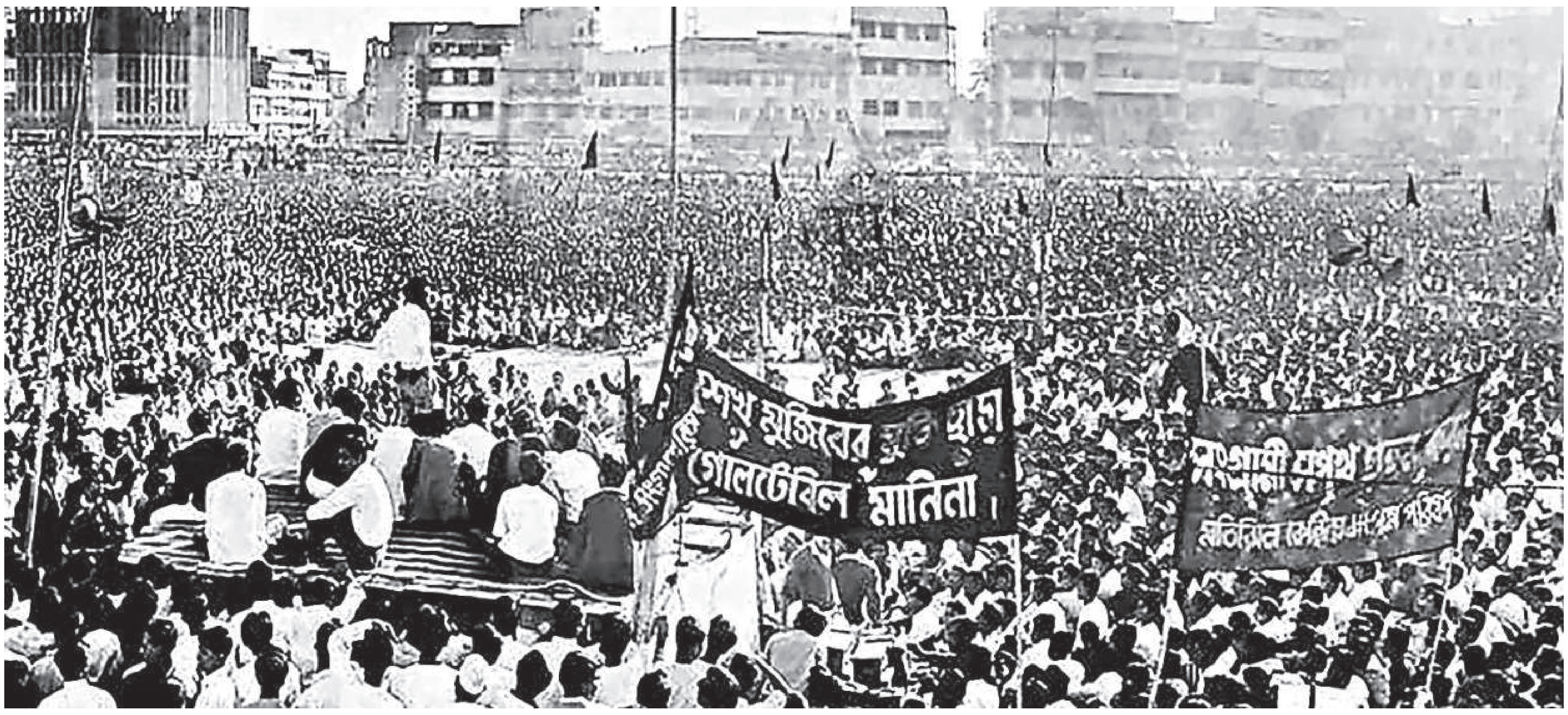

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PHOTO: **RASHID TALUKDER**

A city of *michhil*

For many Bangladeshis, 1969 readily brings to mind Rashid Talukder's well-known photograph of a little boy leading a *michhil*. The visual artefact congeals the mass appeal of the decade's political strife: a shirtless boy in a *lungi* walks a few paces ahead of a procession. He leads a group of adults with his mouth wide open—chanting, no doubt, one of the many popular slogans of the time. It is now a fixture in the corpus of visual retellings of national history, and a familiar index of the broad reach of East Pakistan's grievances and the dispensability of its people.

The photo spells out the scope of mass politics that overcame recalcitrant class barriers—if only episodically. Harnessing the energy of factory workers, street children, slum dwellers, and rickshaw pullers still posed organisational problems. The ambivalence was better captured in "*Chilekothar Sepai,"* in which the poor children of Dhaka show up as they become regulars in street agitations. The boys play cricket in narrow alleys, throw stones at riot cars, and find themselves in rallies which face barricades and armed police at the other end.

In one vivid scene, a procession interrupts a heated *adda* of a group of university students and other young men, including the main character, Osman. A section of the *michhil* enters Amjadia, a restaurant close to the stadium near Baitul Mukarram. Some demand drinks of water. The owner barks off hurried orders for water and tea for the student types, and dismisses the same request from the street kids, also members of the *michhil*. Suddenly, a portrait of Field Marshal Ayub Khan catches their eye. The crowd gets even angrier and focuses its energy on taking it down. Stones and bricks pelt the framed picture of the disgraced sovereign. The nail finally gives in and the photo comes smashing down. The noise of the shattering glass ramps up the sound of a cursing crowd:

The *pichchi* (the little one) who had hurled a couple of ashtrays and pieces of brick still had a few more stones and bricks in the fold of his lungi. He walked forward, wiping the dried-up snot hanging off his nose with an elbow. The disappointment of missing out on hitting Ayub Khan was overcome by the eventual success. The feat added the gravitas of age and experience to his face and voice. "There! I pulled down the son of a bitch!" He kicked the forehead and head of the upside-down president a few times, with feet covered in the dust and spit of the streets. (Elias 1986: 27)

Despite the implications of working-class rage for the success of 1969, hesitations about the ideological investment of the urban poor were deep and persistent. As Kamruddin Ahmed observes of 1969, the masses were generally happy in February and March, because they witnessed the all-powerful Governor Monem Khan and other devotees of Ayub Khan hiding from public wrath. But the new rich who amassed fortunes overnight got nervous and spread rumours, which were mostly "half-truths." The disdain was equally palpable in political decision-making. Many characters in Elias' novel voice the same. On the day of a strike, when Osman, a petty officer in a company, goes to work, he finds a half-empty office floor. The lift doesn't work because the liftman is absent; the telephone operator also seems to have skipped work. Osman's colleagues are upset:

Someone said, "Why are you just blaming the peons? What about the rickshaw pullers, the bus conductors, the drivers, the coolies? Have you seen their insolence? *Arre*, what will you gain if Ayub Khan leaves? Will you become ministers? Or will you come to the office and sit at a desk and chair? (1986: 17)

Michhil, martyrdom, madness

Most *bhadralok* and students left the scene after a hit or two of the *lathi* or a little roughing up from the police. Of those left were: 1. People in dirty clothes, and 2. Innumerable *pichchi*. The police began beating them up to their hearts' content. (Elias 1986: 25)

In modern political contexts, the mass consists of that part of the population that cannot be given social, political or cultural form. These "non-Peoples," per philosopher, author and Holocaust survivor Hannah Arendt, include the mob, the mass, the tribe, and the starving multitude. Sociologically and symbolically, then, the mass seems to have long escaped both biopolitical pressures and analytical coherency. Elias' genius partly lies in capturing this very ambivalence. This Freudo-Marxist retelling of 1969 is physically located in Old Dhaka where the main protagonist, the 28-year-old Osman, lives in a rented attic in a three-storey building. Osman descends into madness just as Ayub Khan's days as president seem numbered. The outward expression of Osman's insanity is mediated through the ghost of Khijir—the bony, tragic, eccentric, and intrepid rickshaw puller. His home in the neighbouring slum stands on open drains, with a flowing sewer that hits the senses each time he returns home. In the dark, the air reeking of faeces and urine guides his path to the shack that he shares with his wife. She is a maid and a mistress of *mahajan*, the owner of a rickshaw garage and Khijir's boss. Haddi Khijir, as the epithet "*haddi*" would suggest, is the gaunt, gutsy, gullible subaltern who is both a proxy and a foil for Osman's precariously petty-bourgeois existence and psyche.

In Bangladeshi official culture, 1969 lives in sepia tone. As a place to live and thrive, Dhaka, however, barely invokes hope or nostalgia. The intimacies, encounters, and transgressions that the political culture of the 1960s still made possible are testament to the tenacity of this seemingly unruly cityscape.

Haddi Khijir and Osman, I argue, ventriloquise the hyphenated subject *chhatra-janata* that became the agent of politics in the late 1960s. Khijir is much more than a representative of the urban proletariat as some otherwise competent analyses of Elias' famous novel would have it. The breadth, complexity, and seeming paradoxes of his character bring the category into crisis. His political consciousness, if one can call it that, is fragmented. Khijir rarely questions *mahajan* Rahmatullah's presence in every corner of his life, whom he hates but against whom he barely revolts. Khijir knowingly ignores (despite minor outbursts) his wife's status as his boss's mistress, yet feels deep affection for her unborn child whose paternity he clearly cannot claim. He suffers through class injustice, but becomes a nationalist overnight. The fact that Karachi is being developed at the cost of Dhaka enrages him. He makes a middle-class audience laugh with an impromptu speech in his authentic and inadvertent *Dhakaiya* dialect, when he briefly takes over the microphone at a political meeting. Holding on to the pliers and screwdriver stolen from *mahajan*'s garage for dear life, Khijir would still rush to join the next *michhil* to free SheikhMujib from jail.

Osman's leftist friend Altaf is obviously not sure about the "rickshaw-wala type":

You can't trust them. What do they know about movements? Or politics? Who knows what catches their fancy while cleaning up the garages of Ayub Khan's lackeys. You can't have resistance without them, but once the movement actually goes under their control, it becomes a problem. (1986: 166)

On a fateful day, Khijir takes to the street with a small group of workers from Gawsul Azam Shoe Factory that is housed on the ground floor of Osman's building. It immediately meets the rush of people pouring out of every lane and alley. Rickshaw-*walas* leave the garages and the employees of a bread factory sacrifice the warmth of the *tandoor* to join in. Khijir feels an uncanny presence; the neighbourhood dead must have also come out. Khijir walks fast as if manoeuvring his rickshaw on a busy Dhaka road. There is no time to heed the red light now. "The armoury will be shattered into pieces by the force of this colossal gathering," Khijir thinks to himself. "Snatching a few weapons won't be that big a deal. Today, he will hose away the military" (1986: 252-53).

Soon, two solid balls of fire enter Khijir's chest and stomach. He is dumbfounded: which son-of-a-bitch truck hit his rickshaw? He mouths off a few choice words, but no sound comes out. He keels over by the footpath. What happened? Did his body's chassis break down? The red writings on the white wall across from him sway in the yellow light. When the military truck comes out next morning, his is the last corpse piled on top of the others.

Khijir does return to Osman, though only phantasmically. This revenant is no usual haunting. It is an invitation or, even better, a provocation. Khijir visits Osman's roof-top abode hovering a few feet above ground, close yet beyond reach. The ghost does not invoke dread. Instead, it lures Osman into a maddening spiral of guilt. It is, in most part, the guilt of middle-class caution. Making generous use of his *Dhakaiya* lexicon, Khijir's ghost tempts and taunts Osman to get down from the attic to the street. His constant berating and barbs aimed at Osman's sloth or masculinity irk Osman: "*Nah*, Khijir has no sense. But then, why should Khijir care? He has no house, home, door, latch, lock, table, bell, clock, hour, minute. He can go out whenever he wants. How can I do that?" (1986: 300). While slowly losing touch with the world of the living, Osman becomes fixated with the idea of walking with the ghosts of Khijir and many others. All through the novel, Osman is in, around, or outside of processions. Yet, he is rarely confident or consistent in offering himself to the cause. Only with Khijir's death, his narcissism is overcome by the obsession to lose himself in a *michhil*. The ghost pushes Osman into the depth of folly, but it also strings him along to ride the waves of people in the streets that defined 1969 and perhaps the rest of the decade.

"Chilekothar Sepai" is a magnificent reflection on the effective pull of political events. It is also an ode to a city. The characters experience Dhaka by walking in a *michhil*, hearing it from afar, or watching it from the rooftop. The city creates the conditions under which Osman, Altaf or Anwar shares space with Khijir and others like him. A deeply classed backdrop, 1960s Dhaka is also the condition of possibility of unforeseen transgressions and intimacies. For Elias, the city is not a site of ruin or nostalgia; it is as much a setting as a looking glass, through which to find a refracted version of oneself. At the beginning of the novel, when Osman gets the news of the death of a neighbour killed in police violence, he cannot remember the young man's face who lived just below him in the same building. Urban living might jeopardise old socialities, but it also introduces new familiarities. The face of the stranger activates a sense of *deja vu*—a true uncanny. Osman is convinced that:

He has seen the scrawny man with hollowed cheeks many times before. But where? At the stadium? Maybe. While looking at movie posters in Gulistan? It's likely. At a meeting in Paltan Maidan? Perhaps. Victoria Park? By the field in Armanitola? While enjoying seekh kabab by the footpath in Thatari Bazar? It's possible. While urinating side by side at Balaka Cinema? Conceivably... He has known that face for a very long time. (1986: 7)

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Still, cities are notorious for invoking contradictory and unpredictable feelings. As the signs and objects of "progressive urbanism" shift, so do people's affective ties to them, says anthropologist Lotte Hoek. The relationships are rarely straightforward. For many of Dhaka's residents, the "surplus consumption" of otherwise decrepit state-funded structures or even the somewhat morally suspect tree-covered nooks of public parks and mausoleums show that cities, even one like Dhaka, carry possibilities that are impossible to preempt. New forms of political assembly will be sure to reinhabit the city as and when it finds itself on the brink of another mass uprising. Literature is probably one place where we will sense these reverberations.

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