

# 1969 MASS UPRISING IN EAST PAKISTAN

Global Sixties in Bangladesh: Praetorian Guards and Subaltern Resistance



A student procession at Dhaka University campus during the mass uprising of 1969.

**East Pakistan witnessed a transformation in poems, novels, and short stories' themes, content, and writing styles throughout the sixties. The most notable shift was in the genre of poetic literature. A new crop of poets emerged who employed different imageries, metaphors, and poetic language.**

SUBHO BASU

Like bunches of blood-red Oleander, Like flaming clouds at sunset  
Asad's shirt flutters  
In the gusty wind, in the limitless blue.

[Asad's Shirt (Asader shirt) Translated by Syed Najmuddin Hashim]

Poet Shamsur Rahman wrote these immortal lines on the martyrdom of Asad, a young left-leaning student activist who died in a police firing on January 20, 1969. His death triggered a mass uprising that transformed Dhaka into one of the sites of the global sixties. Like Paris, Mexico City, Beijing, Prague, Hanoi, Rawalpindi or nearby Kolkata, Dhaka also became a city of procession, anger and revolution. This outpouring of public grievance against a pro-western supposedly modernising military dictator had a long history in the making.

The most pertinent aspect of Pakistan's rule in Bangladesh was political-economic exploitation. Despite constituting a demographic majority in Pakistan, Bengalis constituted a minority in terms of representation in the army, bureaucracy and industrial houses. In the early 1960s, under praetorian guards, Pakistan was pursuing a process of capitalist modernisation in alliance with the United States. With massive aid from Western donors and encouragement from the US administration and Harvard-based American advisors, military rulers adopted a growth-oriented economic policy between 1958 and 1969. Yet such growth-oriented strategies were not accompanied by an attention to social equity.

In the fifteen years between 1949-50 and 1964-65, the manufacturing sector of Pakistani industries increased by nearly 15 percent per year. However, the rate of increase in real per capita income in Pakistan was less than one percent per year. At the same time, it was observed that the level of per capita income was at least 30 percent higher in West Pakistan than in East Pakistan in 1964-65, though this difference had been only 10 percent in 1949-50. Consequently, in the twenty-three years of United Pakistan's existence, the per capita income of East Pakistan rose by only two dollars.

Politically, Ayub Khan tried to pepper over these contradictions by introducing a system of basic democracy in Pakistan.

Majority of basic democrats were recruited from surplus farmers who could be classified as rich peasants. This coalition of rich peasants and monopoly industrial houses, presided over by the upper echelon of army and bureaucracy, established a process of internal colonial exploitation in East Pakistan.

Added to this was an absurd notion that the Bengali language was not a proper vehicle for articulating Muslim identity. Though after the student movement of 1952, the government of Pakistan recognised Bengali as a national language in 1956, the government did not promote the language equally with Urdu.

Throughout the sixties, contrapuntal literary and cultural efforts manifested in organised cultural activities and literary conventions. The decade of the sixties opened with a cultural introspection of Tagore's legacy in East Pakistan. Three public committees had been formed to celebrate Tagore's birth centenary, and they coordinated their activities under the leadership of Justice Syed Mahub Morshed. Justice Murshed was not dissuaded from heading the centenary celebration despite pressure from the government. Tagore's legacy in East Pakistan entered into crisis again in the wake of the India-Pakistan War.

Radio Pakistan and television broadcasts stopped airing Tagore's songs during the war because of their 'Indian' origin. In 1967, the government decided to ban the airing of Tagore's songs on Radio Pakistan,

since his ideas were perceived to be contrary to Pakistan, on the order of the information and broadcasting minister Khwaja Shahabuddin. Intellectuals organised a signature campaign on this statement. Under pressure from public opinion, Minister Khwaja Shahabuddin announced that he did not consider Tagore's songs to be opposed to the spirit of Pakistan but also qualified his statement by saying that he would consider restricting only those songs which directly contradicted the spirit of Pakistan. This was regarded as a victory by Tagore enthusiasts in East Pakistan.

In the 1960s, Dhaka city became a fertile ground for avant-garde cultural activities that questioned the framework of exclusivist religious nationalism. Communist cultural activists played a crucial role in such events. Srijoni Sahityo Gosthi, Kranti, Unmesh Sahityo o Sanskriti Samsad, and Udichi performed the role of pioneering cultural organisations in pushing the frontier of cultural resistance. Chhayanaut popularised Tagore and Nazrul's work among the educated youth.

East Pakistan witnessed a transformation in poems, novels, and short stories' themes, content, and writing styles throughout the sixties. The most notable shift was in the genre of poetic literature. In many East Pakistani Bengali poems of the 1960s, critics

roving folk operas, called *Jatra*, proved to be an instant box office success. The return to folk narratives in the film was a reflection of what Fanon noted about the discovery of the roots of indigenous cultures in a colonised nation. These variously conjoined and conflicting cultural discourses have in common those processes by which the meaning of resistance is produced, grounded, and heightened.

Indeed, the global sixties manifested in East Pakistan through mass protests. The decade started with massive student protests in 1962 against the reports of the national education commission of Pakistan. The student movement in 1962 was followed by strikes among jute mill workers in 1964 and 1965. In February and March 1965, there were strikes among post and telegraph workers in both East and West Pakistan. In March 1965, workers in Chattogram and Chalna Port went on strike. These working-class struggles gave meaning to the student protests. However, it would be wrong to view the protests against the praetorian rule in a unilinear triumphal march. Indeed, the war between Pakistan and India brought a temporary halt to such protest movements.

After the war, on February 5, 1966, Bangabandhu

started protests against the government by declaring a total strike. On December 6, he started a blockade of the Governor's house after a successful public meeting. On December 10, 1968, opposition political parties observed an anti-autocracy day. Bhashani moved further on December 14 by organising a *gherao* movement. The idea was to paralyse the administration by surrounding the offices with political workers. On January 4, 1969, student organisations formed an 11-point programme. On January 8, 1969, eight political parties, including Awami League and NAP (Muzaffar), formed the Democratic Action Committee (DAC). All these forces demanded a federal form of government, election based on universal adult franchise, and release of all political detainees. On January 17, DAC organised a procession from Baitul Mukarram mosque. Students organised more militant processions and clashed with police forces. Consequently, there took place massive student meetings at Bottola in the Arts complex of Dhaka University, and students organised processions and clashed with police. Students decided to observe strikes against police atrocities throughout the province on January 18.

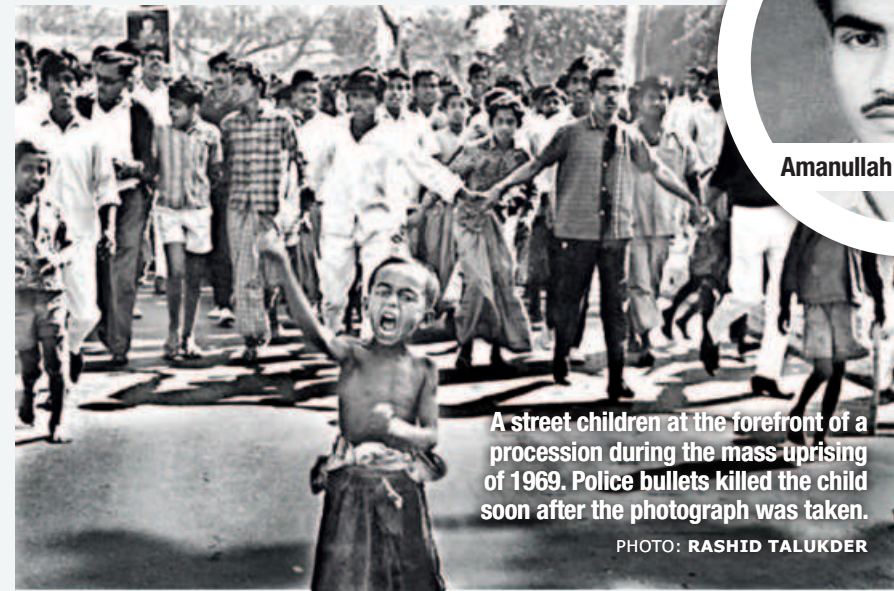
On January 20, 1969, Asaduzaman, a student union activist (Menon fraction), was shot from very close range by a police officer during a procession. His death transformed the political circumstances. Subaltern social classes, students, cultural activists and political workers observed spontaneous strikes, held massive meetings and organised processions from January 24

onwards. Movement for democracy, regional autonomy and a linguistically free nation produced more martyrs. The military even killed Sergeant Zahrul Huq, an under-trial prisoner in the Agartala Conspiracy Case, on February 15, 1969. On February 18, 1969, Dr Mohammad Shamsuzzoha, the Proctor of Rajshahi University, was killed. This increased the resolve of the people. Faced with mass political unrest, the government dropped the charges against Agartala conspiracy case detainees on February 22, 1969, and unconditionally released Sheikh Mujib the next day. Unnerved by mass unrest, army top brass became restive, and finally, on March 25, 1969, Ayub Khan resigned from the position of President of Pakistan.

The martyrdom of Asaduzaman symbolised the culminating point of the global sixties. It was a decade of protests for democracy, social transformation and national emancipation from colonial rule. In Bangladesh, workers, students, writers, and cultural activists undermined a shambolic praetorian democracy and ended the internal colonisation in the name of development.

Subho Basu is an Associate Professor at the Department of History and Classical Studies at McGill University. He is currently completing his book on the emergence of independent Bangladesh.

READ THE FULL ARTICLE ONLINE



A street children at the forefront of a procession during the mass uprising of 1969. Police bullets killed the child soon after the photograph was taken.

PHOTO: RASHID TALUKDER

discern the influence of the French 19th-century poet Charles Baudelaire. Many poets shared a manifesto of sadness, and some of them believed that, like Baudelaire, there existed constant tussle between God and Satan, and humans had an indeterminate existence.

Bengali novels, too, underwent a similar transformation in terms of themes and structure. Syed Waliullah's *Chander Amaboshay* (Etiolating Moon) (1964) and Zahir Raihan's *Hajar Bochor Dhore* explain the anatomy of rural life, poverty, class repression and the frustrations of the educated youth. Communist novelist Satyen Sen's *Podochihno* (Footprint) (1968) explains life's insecurity and slow transformation from prosperity to misery in a Hindu village in rural Bengal. These landmark novels depict social transformation, class struggle, patriarchal dominance and the sad consequences of the partition.

A transformation took place in the world of movies. Movies that combined a folkloric mode with tales of rural lives in the 1960s made instant box office hits. Abdul Jabbar Khan's movie *Joar Elo* (Tide Came) depicted a bucolic Islam, focusing on the mixture between supernatural and natural. Following Khan's box office success, Salahuddin, who earlier made movies on urban life, turned to fairy-folk tales and made a movie called *Rupban*. A simple narrative based on the tradition of

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman placed his six-point programme in the Lahore conference of opposition parties. Despite his frequent arrests, Sheikh Mujib was able to draw attention to this demand charter in East Pakistan. On June 7, workers in Tejgaon and Narayanganj revolted against the clamping of Section 144 by the government and faced police firing. Nearly ten workers lost lives.

Throughout 1967, different trade unions and segments of working classes announced their industrial action and challenged the hold of praetorian capitalism. By the end of the year, NAP witnessed a split, and a group of dissidents also left Awami League. Political protests against the military-bureaucratic regime started losing their dynamism. In such circumstances, on January 7, 1968, the government brought charges of treason against eight concerned personalities. On January 18, 1968, the government included Sheikh Mujib and 34 other concerned individuals within the purview of this act.

On November 26, 1968, students revolted in Rawalpindi against the Ayub Khan regime.

In the December of 1968, Maulana Bhashani



Deepa Sen, leading the procession by Dhaka University students after Asad was killed.

COURTESY: DR NAILA KHAN