

# BENGALI AND NON-BENGALI RIOTS at Karnaphuli Paper Mills

## State, Class, and Ethnicity in East Pakistan

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From the mid-1950s, the relationship between Bengali and non-Bengali workers began to deteriorate to such an extent that the East Bengal mills witnessed two serious riots in the same year. The first riot between Bengali and non-Bengali workers occurred at Karnaphuli Paper Mills, Chandraghona, on March 22, 1954. In less than two months, Adamjee Jute Mills, then one of the largest jute mills in the world, experienced violent riots between Bengali and non-Bengali workers, resulting in the deaths of more than 600 people.

This essay attempts to understand why, within a few years of the creation of Pakistan, serious riots occurred between workers of two linguistic groups: the Bengalis (almost all of whom were Muslims) and the Urdu-speaking Muslims. The Urdu-speaking groups, who migrated to East Pakistan, are commonly perceived as Biharis. Although an overwhelming number of them were Biharis, not all Urdu-speaking Muslim refugees to East Pakistan were Biharis. In official papers, they are treated as upcountry Muslims, non-Bengali Muslims, and Mohajirs or holy migrants. This essay examines whether they were able to forge significant labour solidarities and whether Bengali and non-Bengali industrial workers in East Pakistan were able to produce powerful concerted industrial actions. If the workers failed to produce such solidarity and concerted industrial action, what hindered them from doing so? Was it because of the workers' ethnic and linguistic differences? Some historians suggest that the riots between Bengali and non-Bengali workers in East Pakistan, which occurred shortly after the general election in 1954, were provoked by the central government to undermine the victory of the newly formed United Front's coalition government in East Pakistan. Layli Uddin, however, argues that the riots were mainly the outcome of a severe crisis in labour-management relations.

To explain the relationship between class, ethnicity, and the role of the state, this essay explores the riots between Bengali and non-Bengali workers at the Karnaphuli Paper Mills. The morning of March 22, 1954, was a busy day as usual for the Karnaphuli Paper Mills. However, discontent and grievances permeated the air of the mills and the working-class neighbourhood of Dobashi Bazar, where most Bengali workers gathered for leisure time adda and daily groceries. M.H. Shah, the deputy commissioner of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, mentioned in his letter to the commissioner of the Chittagong Division, that he received news of the 'disturbance' at Chandraghona at about 1 PM while he was busy counting votes for the Chittagong Hill Tracts Buddhist constituency.

S.M. Hasan, C.S.P., the commissioner of the Chittagong Division, arrived at Chandraghona camp on March 23, a day after the horrific riots occurred. His letter to the chief secretary of the government of East Bengal provided a detailed description of how the riots at Karnaphuli Paper Mills began. Hasan met with S.S. Nohri, a senior technical assistant in charge of the process section of the mills, who narrated to him how the riots started. Nohri informed him that initially, the riots began over a simple matter. On March 18, Nohri sent some workers to M. Ekhlash, the Bengali senior technical assistant (chemical). However, unhappy with the management's treatment of him, Ekhlash sent the workers back, stating that he was not aware of his position in the mills. Upon learning of this, Khurshid Ali, the non-Bengali

chief operating director of the mills, summoned Ekhlash to his office. Khurshid and Ekhlash had a heated debate there, during which Ali asked Ekhlash to return to his former government job. This concluded the events for that day, and Ekhlash returned to work. However, news of the heated debate between Khurshid Ali and M. Ekhlash spread throughout the mills.

According to Nohri, the Bengali workers of the mills organised a meeting at Dobashi Bazar, Chandraghona, on March 21. Some members of the Majdur Union were also present at the meeting. Following the meeting, the Bengali workers, along with the members of the Majdur Union, held a procession and paraded at the Dobashi Bazar and the workers' colony. They were heard chanting slogans such as "Hindustani chai na [we don't want Hindustani], Khurshed Ali murdabad [Down with Khurshed Ali], Majdur dabi mantey hobe [workers' demands have to be met], Ekhlash Saheb zindabad" [long live Ekhlash Saheb], etc.

On March 22, the fateful day, Khurshed Ali went to the 1st floor of the Soda Recovery Bailer House of the mills, the working station of Ekhlash. There, Khurshid Ali and Ekhlash again had a heated debate. Agitated, Khurshid asked Ekhlash to leave the building, which Ekhlash quietly observed, and he went back home. The news had already spread around the mills and the workers' colony. Soon, the agitated Bengali workers gathered adjacent to the turbine house. To his misfortune, Khurshid Ali went there to calm the aggrieved workers. Ali was subsequently mobbed by the workers, resulting in injuries and bleeding. However, with the help of some workers and officers, Khurshid Ali was able to escape major injuries

and non-Bengali workers, which occurred shortly after the victory of the United Front in East Bengal, were instigated by the central government mainly to sabotage the provincial government formed by the Front. Some scholars assert that the riots were, to some extent, a manifestation of the excitement created by the victory and the formation of the government by the United Front. For them, these new developments signalled a new promise.

the workers killed and injured were lower-echelon workers. Among the 10 workers killed in the riots were watchmen, contractors, camp jamaders, foremen, and an orderly. Only three of them were high-ranking officers. In the Adamjee riots in May 1954, most of the rioting workers were lower-grade workers.

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story of provincialism, jobbery, nepotism, and corruption. The outstanding feature of the entire administration has been a systematic policy of persecuting the poor local employees."

In the memorandum, Zahur Ahmed Chowdhury highlighted the wage discrimination between Bengali and non-Bengali workers. Chowdhury stated,



The March 24, 1954 issue of The Azad containing news about the riot at Chandraghona.

**The Bengali workers were indeed aggrieved with the management and the labour policies. However, I argue that the mill authority and the state systematically used these grievances to fragment class solidarities between Bengali and non-Bengali workers. As the Pakistani state frantically sought capitalist industrial development, it aimed to thwart any powerful concerted labour action in the industrial spaces.**



at that time. Unfortunately, luck was not on his side, as a mob of 800 people chased him again at the main gate of the mills. After a while, Ali was found missing. The agitated workers also chased H.M. Shirazee, a labour officer, who jumped into the river. Eleven injured workers, of whom 5 were Bengali and 6 were non-Bengali, were admitted to the hospital.

So, why did the Bengali workers become so aggrieved, leading them to engage in serious riots at the Karnaphuli Paper Mills? Scholars argue that the riots between Bengali

However, Layli Uddin recently refuted these assumptions in her excellent essay. For her, although the riots in East Bengal were 'ostensibly' between Bengalis and non-Bengalis, they mainly stemmed from an inner tension

However, I argue that the mill authority and the state systematically used these grievances to fragment class solidarities between Bengali and non-Bengali workers. As the Pakistani state frantically sought capitalist industrial development, it aimed to thwart any powerful concerted labour action in the industrial spaces. The state's concern to thwart any concerted powerful industrial action by the labourers is evident in official correspondences. Labour commissioners were instructed to observe daily labour situations and report on developments to the concerned state agencies.

From the Pakistan government's secret documents and statistical publications, it appears that the government rigorously and elaborately maintained statistical data on the population regarding ethnicity, race, gender, and class. In its labour policy, the state clearly showed a bias towards non-Bengali Muslim refugees. They were given preference in the employment of industrial workers. However, there were multiple complex reasons behind this. Indeed, among the non-Bengali refugees, there were more skilled individuals. The state implemented various support programmes to assist these refugees. Consequently, the state's labour policy created a kind of labour aristocracy in East Bengal's mills, where non-Bengali workers enjoyed more benefits than Bengali workers. This conscious government policy, over time, created an inviolable rift between Bengali and non-Bengali workers in the factory spaces.

A memorandum by Zahur Ahmed Chowdhury, then assistant secretary of the East Pakistan Federation of Labour, dated April 21, 1953, just around a year before the Chandraghona riots, details the discrimination in wages and benefits between Bengali and non-Bengali workers at the Karnaphuli Paper Mills. The memorandum also expressed the grievances of the Bengali workers. Chowdhury highlighted the grievances of the Bengali labourers of the mills. In his letter to the commissioner of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, he pointed out, in his words, the 'nepotism' and 'provincialism' of the non-Bengali top-ranking officers, whom he referred to as outsiders. As he wrote, "the history of the Chandraghona Paper Mills Projects under Khurshid Ali, operative director for the last three years, has been a dismal

"the disparity of pay and service conditions between the local workers and workers (non-Bengali workers, he forgot to use the word) must shock the conscience of every civilized man. Not to speak of the upper hierarchy of officers, the ratio of pay between a section of clerks and another section of clerks is 2:1. With microscopic exception, the pay of a Bengali clerk ranges from Rs 90/- to Rs 150/- whereas that of an outsider clerk ranges from Rs 150/- to 300/-."

Historians Raj Narayan Chandavarkar, Nandini Gooptu, and Subho Basu have emphasized the importance of the neighbourhood in working-class culture, politics, and everyday life. Workers' consciousness, politics, and activism are not only shaped in the shop floors, but the neighbourhood also plays a crucial role. For the workers of the Karnaphuli Paper Mills, Dobashi Bazar served this crucial function. As we have seen, prior to the Chandraghona riots, workers gathered at Dobashi Bazar, held meetings, paraded, and chanted slogans. Dobashi Bazar was where Bengali workers encountered emerging Bengali nationalist leaders, such as Zahur Ahmed Chowdhury, and nationalist ideas and rhetoric.

Subaltern historians highlight the autonomy of subaltern domain. However, I argue that the consciousness of subaltern people, whether peasants or workers, is not always immune to ideas from the outside world. At Dobashi Bazar or in the neighbourhoods of other mills in East Bengal, Bengali workers were exposed to the teachings and excitement of newly emerging nationalist enthusiasm and the idea of autonomy. The growing distance and strained relationship between Bengali and non-Bengali workers were, in many ways, engineered by the state. This vitriolic relationship hindered their ability to organise powerful concerted labour action. Consequently, in the 1960s, Bengali workers gravitated towards the flourishing democratic and nationalist mobilizations in East Bengal led by middle-class leadership. In turn, Bengali nationalist leaders pledged support for various labour actions organised by Bengali workers and promised to incorporate workers' demands into their agendas. Thus, throughout the 1950s and 1960s, solidarity between Bengali and non-Bengali workers was marked by a significant rift.

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