

# Beyond martyrdom and momentum

## The matrix of the 1969 mass movement



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January 24 marked the Mass Uprising Day in Bangladesh, a commemoration of the 1969 movement that—energised by the radical and revolutionary spirit of the global 60s—brought down the decade-long dictatorship of Pakistani military ruler Ayub Khan. This day remembers the movement's martyrs, most notably the teenage activist Matiur Rahman Mallik. In his pocket was found a heartbreak letter to his mother: "Mother, I am going to the procession; if I don't return, I'm afraid that I have become a martyr." And I witnessed new Matiurs rise in the July uprising itself—forever inscribed in people's collective memory is Abu Sayeed, shot dead by the police on July 16, 2024. Indeed, the significance of the 1969 mass uprising ranges far beyond the orchestrated violence of Ayub Khan's military-bureaucratic regime and his eventual downfall.

Indeed, can an image—a visual image—capture an entire history of a mass movement written in blood? Can the political and the historical converge and constellate within the micro-space of a radiantly singular poetic image? One might turn to German Marxist cultural theorist Walter Benjamin's notion of the "dialectical image"—an image as "dialectics at a standstill"—wherein "what has been" fuses with "the now" in a flash to form a constellation. I think one can locate such an image in Shamsur Rahman's iconic poem *"Asader Shirt"* ("Asad's Shirt"). It offers a vivid visual image of Asad's blood-soaked shirt, a haunting emblem that ignites indignation and incites outrage. Asad's brutal killing on January 20, 1969 was instrumental in morphing an entire student movement into a mass uprising. The poem portrays Asad's shirt as persistently fluttering across the sun scorched landscapes of parched hearts, gatherings of awakened people, and crossroads of united consciousness. It even transformed into the flag of the people's souls. Every mass uprising births a symbol—or a constellation of symbols—configured from shared rage and discontent, bound by a singular purpose, and mobilised by the many voices and hands of a unified people.

In fact, in the history of Bangladesh's formation and its Liberation War against the neocolonial, military-bureaucratic regime of Pakistan, the mass uprising of 1969 is a significant milestone. Similarly, the mass uprising of 2024—unprecedented and the largest in the country's history—is now reckoned as a milestone, shaped by its own conjunctural specificities. While these two movements are distinct—one opposing a foreign military tyrant and neocolonial domination, the other challenging a native tyrant and the historically determinate form of fascism within the country—they are not entirely disconnected. I concur



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

with Italian philosopher and social theorist Alberto Toscano's crucial contention in his book *Late Fascism* (2023) that fascism is mutable and that "fascism, like other political phenomena, varies according to its socioeconomic context." But I do not posit a pure disjunction between 1969 and 2024, just as by no means do I draw a sharp disjunction between 1971 and 2024. I submit that they are all profoundly connected. I will return to this issue later; for now, let me trace some of the crucial thematic and politico-ideological trajectories of the 1969 mass uprising, an event rendered intelligible by what I call its "dialectical temporality," marked by converging connections in motion—ones that move back and forth in historical time.

Every mass uprising is a process, not a one-off product. The 1969 mass uprising was the culmination of a protracted process of resistance, rooted in the structural inequalities and class contradictions generated by what I would call a neocolonial mode of production, organically linked, of course, to the uneven development of capitalism itself. East Pakistan, systematically

exploited as a colonial periphery, generated significant wealth through agriculture and trade, yet endured staggering disparities compared to West Pakistan. The working class and peasantry endured the harshest burdens of this neocolonial exploitation, grappling with acute poverty, food shortages, and relentless price hikes. Furthermore, the One Unit policy and the Agartala Conspiracy Case of 1968—targeting the prominent

regime in 1969. Here, I must underscore a point often overlooked in standard and partisan narratives: in 1968, Maoist revolutionary Siraj Sikder was the first to have theorised East Pakistan as "a colony of West Pakistan," calling for armed struggle to establish an independent and socialist East Bengal. I submit that the political, theoretical, and conceptual history of the 1969 mass uprising remains unjustly incomplete without recognising the contributions of left revolutionary figures like Maulana Bhashani and Siraj Sikder. Again, I underline this point simply because fascist Awami League narratives have routinely overlooked their roles, just as they have marginalised the centrality of peasants and working class people—without whom this mass uprising holds no real meaning.

But why is January 24 commemorated as Mass Uprising Day in Bangladesh? As I mentioned earlier, on January 20, the tragic death of leftist student leader Amanullah Mohammad Asaduzzaman (now known as just Asad) ignited tremendous public outrage, while his blood-soaked body shirt turned out to be a powerful symbol of resistance—even a "material force" in the Marxist sense—producing a paradigmatic conjunction of grief and fury across the region. Just three days later, on January 24, the police killing of young Matiur Rahman Mallik, along with students like Mokbul, Rustam and Alamgir, galvanised mass indignation and anger on a scale hitherto unknown. Of course, this was the culmination of a movement sparked earlier by Maulana Bhashani, who had called for strikes beginning on December 6, 1968 and resulting in deaths and intensifying resistance. On December 29, Bhashani called for a nationwide strike and marketplace closures, reviving public momentum. Students soon introduced the 11-Point Programme demanding full autonomy for East Pakistan, with the movement gaining traction by January 17, 1969. On January 24, as many as 500,000 people gathered at Paltan Maidan, determined yet restrained, choosing to march to Iqbal Hall after Matiur's funeral prayers, instead of attacking the Governor's House. This united front of students, workers, and political parties pushed the struggle beyond the state's control.

But it is also true that ruling class narratives characteristically leave out those martyrs who were already neglected. Erasures and exclusions are obviously matters of class politics. For instance, Hasanuzzaman and Janu Mia—workers killed in then Chittagong on January 24, 1969—and even Anwara Begum—a martyr for whom a near-forgotten park in Farmgate, Dhaka is named—continue to remain marginalised in mainstream historiography. Anwara was shot by police while breastfeeding her four-month-old daughter Nargis at her Nakhalpara home on January 25, 1969. The 1969 Mass Uprising witnessed the sacrifices of many other peasants and workers, whose exhaustive list couldn't be compiled by any government so far. And I find it significant to invoke at least a few names. Among them was Abu, a bicycle mechanic, who was killed in December 1968. Musa Mia, a labourer from Faujdarhat, and

farmers Mia Chan, Hasan Ali and Cherag Ali from Hatir Diya also sacrificed their lives. In January 1969, workers like Sorol Khan, Anwar Ali and Julhas Sikder were killed in Dhaka, Shimulia and Siddhiganj, respectively. February saw further sacrifices, including worker Abdul Ali in Dhaka, press worker Ishqa in Nazirabazar, and workers Lokman, Mujibur Rahman, Hafizur Rahman, and Abdur Rahman across various regions. Other martyrs included tailor Atahar Khan, carpenter Abul Hashem, and hotel worker Shamsu, who died alongside many others. These names represent the labouring masses whose sacrifices fuelled the struggle against the military-bureaucratic regime of Ayub Khan.

But the uprising—although revolutionary in aspirations—lacked a solidly unifying revolutionary party or platform as such to steer it towards lasting change. The leadership of figures like Maulana Bhashani and the pivotal role of students notwithstanding, the fragmented left and other status quo-oriented political forces undermined or even destroyed its radical potential. Thus, Ayub Khan's dictatorship was replaced by another military regime under Gen Yahya Khan, which soon rattled on the people's will, later culminating in genocide in East Pakistan. Yet, the mass uprising achieved significant milestones. It compelled the Pakistan government to release Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and all accused in the Agartala Conspiracy Case, marking a major victory for the movement. It also brought the Six-Point Demand to the fore, cementing them as a call for East Pakistan's autonomy. And the uprising facilitated the emergence of class consciousness and advanced class struggles in both rural and urban areas. Furthermore, it considerably heightened the aspiration for an independent state among the people of East Pakistan, carving out the path for Bangalee nationalism to play a pioneering role in the Liberation War of 1971.

East Pakistan and Bangladesh have hitherto experienced five pivotal uprisings, beginning with the 1952 Language Movement, which prompted East Bengal's political awakening and led to the 1954 fall of the Muslim League. The 1969 mass uprising ousted Ayub Khan, though military rule persisted under Yahya Khan. In 1971, relentless mass movements paralysed the government, paving the way for the Liberation War. The 1990s saw another uprising against Ershad's regime, and the most recent, the quota reform movement, began as student protests against job quotas and campus oppression, evolving into a broader, even an unprecedented, mass movement known as the July uprising.

But no uprising, movement or even revolution is ever a total success or a total failure. The great African writer and activist—my good comrade—Ngūgi wa Thiong'o rightly distinguishes between "independence" and "liberation." We gained independence, but true liberation still remains radically unresolved question in our history. That's why 1969 and 2024 are interconnected—the unfinished struggle for equality, social justice, and human dignity continued. But we have miles to go, to say the least.

## Public health must prioritise disease prevention



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There is a common confusion around the subject of health. Too many people confound it with healthcare, with discussions focused on a shortage of hospitals, doctors, nurses, and medical supplies. But health is not just healthcare. There is no question of the importance of being able to treat disease, and there is plenty of room for improvement here. But while expending money and effort on treatment, it would be unwise to neglect the issue of preventing illness and injury. Such efforts prevent unnecessary misery and pain, as well as additional spending on healthcare.

Rather than simply treat disease, we should, to the extent possible, prevent it by identifying and addressing the root causes of ill health. In the case of contagious disease, one problem is inadequate housing; helping ensure that people have decent housing is not only a humane but also a public health (and cost-cutting) measure. As for injuries, various measures are needed. Dangling electric wires cause electrocution; this should not be impossible to remedy.

As to the many injured on our roads, reducing speeds, limiting the use of cars, improving public transport, and creating safer conditions for walking and cycling would all contribute to healthier outcomes.

The biggest source of disease is now non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as heart disease, stroke, cancer, and diabetes. How are we to address those? The medical approach includes vital steps such as early screening and medical treatment, but can we also reduce the incidence of NCDs and help people live longer, healthier lives? Certainly.

One of the main causes of NCDs as well as communicable diseases, such as tuberculosis, is tobacco use. Back in 2005, thanks in part to intense pressure from civil society, the Bangladesh government passed a comprehensive tobacco control law, which has been amended and strengthened since then. Taxes still need to be further increased, but gone are the ubiquitous cigarette billboards and newspaper ads; most places are now smoke-free (although

the recent surge of smoking zones in cafes and restaurants is a concern), and strong warnings are now on cigarette packets. All of these have contributed to control the tobacco epidemic, though much more needs to be done.

The tobacco industry has fought tooth and nail against tobacco control laws and enforcement, but a strong and united civil society effort was able to work closely with the government to counter their lobbying and opposition. That collaboration should serve as an example in other areas.

To further reduce NCD risk factors, we need to make it easier for people to eat a healthy diet, get enough physical activity, and avoid pollution. A medical approach, in addition to looking for warning signs and treating disease, includes counselling individual patients. This approach is important but cumbersome, expensive, and of limited utility especially when it comes to pollution. The burden on health providers and hospitals would decrease if we implemented broader efforts aimed at keeping people healthy.

Looking for cues from tobacco control and beyond, those efforts could include banning or greatly limiting advertisements for unhealthy food and ensuring that people have access to affordable healthy food, preferably locally grown, through subsidies and support of farmers' markets; making it easier and more attractive to use active transport

(walking and cycling) while curbing car use; and taking strict measures to reduce the extremely unhealthy and dangerous levels of air pollution in our cities. One crucial pollution control measure is to have car-free days when air pollution rises above a certain level, as is done in many European cities.

The alternative would be to allow industry to act freely to produce, promote, and sell unhealthy products, and to heavily influence our government, at the expense of our physical environment and the health of our people.

Doctors have an essential role to play in creating a healthier society, but they also have a strong focus on individuals and treatment. Those trained in public health, whose broad perspective encompasses entire populations and who address root causes and not just effects, are more important than ever if we are to salvage our troubled healthcare system by reducing the need for treatment and hospitalisation. It is time that we prioritised public health and ensure adequate funding for it.

While we're at it, we could learn from countries like Thailand about the possibility of establishing a Health Promotion Foundation, whose purpose would be to help ensure that public health takes precedence over industry profits, leading us to a stronger and healthier Bangladeshi population.

## CROSSWORD

BY THOMAS JOSEPH

### ACROSS

1 Coffee additive

6 Banquet

11 Reddish dye

12 Unoccupied

13 Use, as advice

14 Car count

15 Eye part

17 Summer sign

18 Leave quickly

19 Signing, for short

22 Pub staple

23 Small drum

24 Like some online

25 Draw closer to

27 Hotel feature

30 Central American

### capital

31 Clumsy one

32 Tick off

33 Soviet tyrant

35 Border

38 Key

39 Wild

40 Flower girl, often

41 Blunt

42 Like some communities

### DOWN

1 Rhythmic dance

2 React with horror

3 Main dish

4 Erelong

5 Like ogres, in folklore

6 Nourished

7 Moody music

8 Twin of Artemis

9 Flow

10 Holyfield rival

16 Ready for romance

20 Issuing from a source

21 Cardinal cap letters

24 Through

25 Top story

26 Turkey's capital

27 Pavlova's field

28 For each

29 Leased

30 Ticks off

34 Nepal setting

36 Ruin

37 Moose's kin

## SATURDAY'S ANSWERS



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