

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

FROM PROTESTS TO POWER: The journey to Bangladesh’s July Uprising

Review of ‘Bidroho Theke Biplob: Nirapod Shorok Andolon O July Obhbhutthan’ (Oitijhya Publication, 2025) by Anupam Debashish Roy



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

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Over the past couple of decades, Bangladesh has witnessed three significant social and political movements that have shaped the course of its history. From the uproar over VAT on education to the Quota Reform Movement, culminating in the July Uprising of 2024, these movements have not only spanned a broad spectrum of issues—ranging from education reform to legislative changes but have also seen the active participation of people from all walks of life. Predominantly led by students, these upheavals against perceived injustices and authoritarianism are vividly captured in *Bidroho Theke Biplob*, a compelling narrative that seeks to connect the dots between past activism and the monumental July Uprising of 2024.

In *Bidroho Theke Biplob*, the author delves into a profound analysis of the pivotal political movements in Bangladesh, specifically comparing the Road Safety Movement of 2018

and the monumental July Uprising of 2024. The text seeks to uncover why the 2018 movement, despite its intensity and widespread support, was more readily suppressed by the authoritarian regime of the time, which employed extensive measures to quell the protests. In contrast, the July Uprising not only sustained its momentum but also achieved its monumental goal: the overthrow of an entrenched government that had dominated for roughly 16 years.

The author ingeniously captures and juxtaposes the essence of both movements, providing readers with a vivid retrospective that highlights what was effective and what faltered. This comparative study not only brings to light the continuous struggle and evolution of the student-led activism in Bangladesh but also emphasises the political maturation of the participants over the intervening years. Most of them were the same students from 2018 who carried with them not just the scars of past suppression but a sophisticated

understanding of political oppression, legislative injustices, and the dynamics of mobilisation. It articulates how the July Uprising differed fundamentally from its predecessor in its organisation and political backing. Unlike the leaderless Road Safety Movement, the July Uprising was characterised by its political drive and leadership, partly orchestrated by the Gonoratrik Chhatra Shakti and various other political entities. This strategic evolution in leadership and political collaboration is what fortified the movement, enabling it to adapt and persist, ultimately leading to a successful overthrow of the regime.

Bidroho Theke Biplob goes beyond mere chronicling of events to provide a critical analysis of the strategies employed during the Road Safety Movement of 2018 and the July Uprising of 2024. A significant part of the book is dedicated to analysing the impact of rhetoric used by political leaders during these periods. Notably, the author examines how the former

prime minister’s inflammatory remarks about “razakars” in mid-July of 2024 spurred a substantial number of students, previously hesitant, to join the protests. This analysis is presented not just as a recount of events but as a critical examination of how specific words can act as catalysts in volatile political climates. Furthermore, during the Road Safety Movement of 2018, the satirical expressions and dismissive comments about student deaths by the then-Minister of Road and Transport, Shajahan Khan, also played a crucial role. His controversial statements, which seemed to trivialise the tragedies affecting young lives, significantly inflamed the student body and broadened the scope of the protests.

The narrative also credits social media as a formidable tool in orchestrating these movements. The author explores how digital platforms were used to amplify the protests’ reach and engage a broader audience, which was crucial in maintaining the momentum of both movements. The strategic use of memes, viral content, and videos is highlighted as a key component in energising and sustaining participant involvement, transforming social media from a mere communication tool into a powerful agent of change.

Further enriching the narrative, the book includes interviews with six activists who participated in these movements. These interviews offer a window into the emotional and intellectual landscape of the participants, providing insights into what drove them to take action, their reflections on the effectiveness of their strategies, and their perceptions of the movements’ successes and shortcomings. From this academic and personal vantage point, the author presents a multifaceted picture of modern activism. Readers gain not just a historical understanding of these significant events but also a profound appreciation of the complex interplay between strategy, leadership, and the power of collective action. This dual approach of combining detailed narrative with personal accounts makes *Bidroho Theke Biplob* an invaluable resource for understanding the nuances of political resistance and the evolution of student-led movements in Bangladesh.

While it provides a comprehensive analysis of the July Uprising of 2024

and its roots in the Road Safety Movement of 2018, the book is not without its potential criticisms. One notable omission noted by readers, however, is the limited depiction of the broader cross-section of society that participated in the July Uprising. Post-July 18 and 19, as the movement gained unprecedented momentum, it wasn’t just the students at the frontlines; masses from various walks of life joined in, many laying down their lives in the quest for justice and the ousting of the authoritarian regime. But the book primarily focuses on the student activism aspect, which, while central, does not fully encapsulate the widespread national involvement that characterised this historical period. The book concludes with probing questions that aim to unearth deeper insights into the movement’s dynamics. The author posits a poignant inquiry about the true orchestrators of the July Uprising, a topic of much debate and speculation. He suggests that the masterminds were not just a few individuals but rather the collective effort of all those involved—whether directly or indirectly. This includes numerous student leaders from politically active backgrounds who emerged as pivotal figures during the protests. By framing the uprising as a collective endeavour, the author emphasises the decentralised and inclusive nature of the leadership that contributed to its success.

As a work of academic significance, *Bidroho Theke Biplob* stands out not only as a narrative recount of significant historical events but also as a piece of scholarly research. Authored by a researcher, activist, and journalist currently pursuing a PhD at the University of Oxford, this book serves as part of his thesis and is a valuable contribution to the academic study of political movements. For those in academia or anyone looking to analyse the nuances of the July Uprising from a scholarly viewpoint, this book offers a compelling and insightful read, making it a noteworthy addition to the literature on contemporary social movements in Bangladesh.

Mahmuda Emdad is a women and gender studies major with an endless interest in feminist writings, historical fiction, and pretty much everything else; all while questioning the world in the process. Feel free to reach out at mahmudaemdad123@gmail.com.

THE SHELF

Literature thrives beyond the centre too

SHAHRIAR SHAAMS

“All literature is regional; or conversely, no literature is regional”—is a common sentiment to have today, but I had first read those lines from Joyce Carol Oates, in her preface to a book of stories by one of Canada’s most gifted storytellers, Alistair MacLeod. In MacLeod’s short stories, his Cape Breton Island was a refrain through which the momentous lives of his ordinary characters came through. I vividly remember how I wept after reading the short story “The Boat” and each time I went back to it, I knew how special this place had to be, beyond the familiarity of the city and amidst desires borne out of relative insignificance.

It is due to the urge that we must give our due to the poetry and prose written outside the capital, for literature thrives beyond the centre too, that I had decided to highlight the following books. I had found something of that fervour that is missing in the works of writers based here in Dhaka.

UTHOLLO
Sadia Sultana
Oitijhya, 2025

Sadia Sultana’s seventh novel *Uthollo* is perhaps one of the most underrated novels to be published this year. “Uthollo” refers to the peripatetic and the nomadic, and in Sultana’s novel they are the biharis, the stranded Pakistanis, who must make a living in a land increasingly hostile towards them. The characters in *Uthollo* are all too real. Sultana mentions her countless moments of research, navigating through the camps in Saidpur, Rangpur, and unable to document the stories conventionally, opting finally to novelise these lives. A



ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

judge by profession and based in Dinajpur, Sultana’s knack for striking prose is worth a read, especially in this novel.

GUPTO GAAN
Shekhar Dev
Shakh, 2025

Shekhar Dev is a prominent poet based in the port city. In his latest book of poems, *Gupto Gaan*, he takes on the beginnings of the *Mahabharata*—a skillful tribute that does not resort to banal devotion. The

poet, an adept translator and novelist as well, manages to blend faith and desire with considerable ease. As he narrates the events of an epic, contemporary anxieties creep in, so does the fear of failure and succumbing to petty, material comforts. One set of verses end with, “Adventures of the instinct is half-hearted...at times, failure itself proves impossible”, cautioning for more level-headedness during trying times. Another poem talks about the religion of “survival” and how “[w]ithout self-knowledge, how can one live?” *Gupto Gaan* is a short, yet

notable book that illustrates the power of poetry and an interesting, modern take of a universal tale.

SONAR KHATAI CHORANO
JIBON
Mamun Rashid
Behula Bangla, 2024

Mamun Rashid, a poet and journalist, brings to his prose a liveliness seeped in the appreciation of the past. *Sonar Khatai Chorano Jibon* is a series of sketches

of the poet’s life. In it one finds Rashid candidly discussing his writerly life, his dismal performances in school, and of lost friendships. One brief yet longing chapter begins with lyrics to a forgotten song: “Bidesh giye bondhu tumi amay bhuilo na/chithi dio, potro dio, janayo thikana”, followed by accounts of drifting friendships in Bogra. Mamun Rashid’s prose, much like his poetry, has the tendency to move the reader through the simplest of words.

JANMANDHO GHORA
Bango Rakhai
Anupraman Prokashon, 2023

The young poet Bango Rakhai (from Jhenaidah who runs a library in his village on weekends) first came to my attention through an anthology of writing about Pagla Kanai—the Bangali mystic and folk singer—which he had edited. Over the years, he had written a lot of poetry, heavily influenced by folk traditions of Bangladesh. Indeed, in *Janmandho Ghora*, we see the poet at his strongest, with verses that try to emulate the devotional and hypnotic aspects of baul. “The body is merely a casting, a quest till death/A poem is a soul—and the soul is poetry”, he says. In poems like “Khuda” (hunger), he talks of the incurable blindness of a society full of individuals and their unfulfilled desires. “Everyday I go to the Shopping Mall, dreaming like Aladdin/I see storms...Now only a little food is needed.” While Rakhai has come out recently with more books of essays, it is this collection of poems which readers might find more suitable to enjoy.

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