BEYOND LIBERATION: STUDENTS, SPACE, AND THE STATE IN EAST PAKISTAN/BANGLADESH 1952-1990

A dissertation presented
by

Samantha M. R. Christiansen

to
The Department of History

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in the field of

History

Northeastern University
Boston, Massachusetts
September, 2012
BEYOND LIBERATION: STUDENTS, SPACE, AND THE STATE IN EAST PAKISTAN/BANGLADESH 1952-1990

by

Samantha M. R. Christiansen

ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in History in the Graduate School of Northeastern University September, 2012
ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the history of East Pakistan/Bangladesh’s student movements in the postcolonial period. The principal argument is that the major student mobilizations of Dhaka University are evidence of an active student engagement with shared symbols and rituals across time and that the campus space itself has served as the linchpin of this movement culture. The category of “student” developed into a distinct political class that was deeply tied to a concept of local place in the campus; however, the idea of “student” as a collective identity also provided a means of ideological engagement with a globally imagined community of “students.” Thus, this manuscript examines the case study of student mobilizations at Dhaka University in various geographic scales, demonstrating the levels of local, national and global as complementary and interdependent components of social movement culture. The project contributes to understandings of Pakistan and Bangladesh’s political and social history in the united and divided period, as well as provides a platform for analyzing the historical relationship between social movements and geography that is informative to a wide range of disciplines.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are so many people without whom this dissertation would not have been possible; I have benefited from the guidance, mentorship, insight and kindness of not only my committee of official advisors but also many others who were under no obligation to help, but did so anyway in small and large ways. Throughout my time at Northeastern, Dr. Timothy S. Brown has served as my first sounding board for ideas, aspirations and anxieties regarding this and other research projects, the profession, my career, and a host of other topics. His willingness to listen and honest advice has encouraged me to reach beyond my own sense of my limitations. He has been a valuable mentor and I have benefitted enormously from his help. I think for the rest of my life, every time I write I will be importantly reminded in his voice that “It does not go without saying.” Dr. Christopher V. Hill has also been a source of constant and unfaltering encouragement throughout virtually my entire academic life. Dr. Hill’s wealth of knowledge, generosity, and dedication as an educator has inspired me and sustained me from my first glimpses into South Asia and throughout this entire dissertation. I have been fortunate to have him as an advisor and a friend. Dr. Heather Streets-Salter came to my committee in a moment of tragedy and crisis, and her flexibility, frankness and understanding was a comfort and relief in a difficult time.

Dr. Christina K. Gilmartin also served as an advisor to this project, but did not see its completion. Her death so close to the end of the project was heartbreaking. If I could have only one more ride home or one last late night washing dishes with her, I would tell her thank you for everything, although I am sure even then the words would feel as woefully inadequate to express the depth of my gratitude as they do here.

In addition to my “official” committee members, I have been the fortunate recipient of
support from many others in the History department at Northeastern University. In particular, support from Dr. Tom Havens, Dr. Laura Frader, Dr. Uta Poiger, and Dr. Katherine Luongo has come along in just the right moment during the long process of this project. I am also quite confident that I would be lost in some sort of bureaucratic labyrinth if not for the repeated help of Nancy Borromey and Jennifer Mocarski, both of whom were always somehow able to sort out the paperwork and offer welcome conversation breaks in either my doorway or theirs.

The fieldwork for this dissertation and associated research was funded by grants from the United States Department of State, the American Institute of Bangladesh Studies, and the American Institute of Pakistan Studies, which allowed me to travel to Dhaka repeatedly for language study and research. I was supported by Independent University Bangladesh and the Liberation War Museum of Bangladesh with institutional affiliation. In the course of living and researching in Dhaka between 2007 and 2010, I encountered more warmth and sincere goodwill than I could have ever anticipated. Dr. Shelley Feldman, of AIBS, is an inspiration to me in her dedication to advancing scholarship on Bangladesh and her genuine love for the place. At IUB, Dr. Nazrul Islam provided kind support by welcoming me into the local academic circle with wonderful conversation and friendship. At Dhaka University, Gopal Das provided archival access to the University collection and welcomed me to share his beloved campus and home with him. Mofidul Haque of the Liberation War Museum was instrumental in making my research possible while I was in Dhaka, and his tireless efforts to preserve the cultural history of Bengal is a gift to us all. Also while in Bangladesh, I am happy to have had a well-timed, although too short, visit from George Katsiaficas, who journeyed with me on a whirlwind of interviews, traffic jams, and evening chats at my dining room table. That visit was perfectly timed and it reignited a spark of excitement and reminded me of my love for this project and for oral history.
Back in Boston, I have been sustained by my fellow graduate students at Northeastern. In the classroom, hallways, and especially in the extremely long (but helpful) meetings of the dissertation writing group, I have had the benefit of comments from many great minds as I developed the frameworks and chapters of this dissertation. Personal thanks are due especially to Zach, Stephanie, James, Burleigh, and Rachel, all of whom have been excellent work colleagues, but more importantly, have been an amazing little group of friends that has done well in recognizing when to raise critical points and questions, when to wait and listen while I sort it all out, and when to just go to Punter’s.

At the heart of it all though has been my family. I owe them my deepest gratitude and admiration. My mom has never once doubted my ability to do anything I wanted and has unfailingly supported me in every way. I know wholeheartedly that I can count on her and the comfort of that knowledge has made me who I am. Thanks also to my sister, who just knows exactly when to make a (possibly inappropriate) joke that will get me to lighten up, relax a little, and get back to a productive place. I was also very lucky to marry into a wonderfully supportive family, and I have relied on, and appreciate greatly, the massive network of people and surnames are too many for me to keep track of, but that have welcomed me lovingly into the family.

At the end of the day though, it always comes down to two boys that matter more than anything else. My son Atticus has been watching me work on this topic for virtually his entire life. I’ve dragged him across the country and across the world and I am grateful for his adaptability, worldliness, and courage. I say it him to all the time, but it deserves repeating here: Atticus you’re the best thing that ever happened to me. My husband, Jonathan Christiansen, has been a singularly critical figure in the project, and without him it would never have been possible. I’m thankful to him for giving me the space, respect and support necessary to get this
done. He has played single parent while I was away for months on end; he has dropped everything and moved to the other side of the world to be with me, and he has continually informed and helped shape my own understanding of the project and its various manifestations. I could not have asked for a more true partner in this project and in life.

Finally, I dedicate this dissertation to the countless, nameless student activists all over the world that have risked their lives, security, and comfort to come together in an effort to make the world better for us all. The optimism of youth is a power that sustains the world.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract 2

Acknowledgements 3

Table of Contents 7

Introduction 8

Chapter 1: The Language of Student Power and Space: Dhaka University, the *Bhasha Andolan* and the *Shaheed Minar* 32


Chapter 3: New Battles, Tested Rituals: Political Organizing on the Campus in Ayub’s Martial Law 87

Chapter 4: The Campus in Context: “Mass Upsurge” at a Local, Regional, and International Scales 112

Chapter 5: From Political Activists to *Muktibahini*: Students and the Bangladesh Liberation War 141

Chapter 6: Ritual and Resurrection: Students and the Campaign Against General Ershad 166

Conclusion 197

References 202
INTRODUCTION

Sitting at a table in a tea shop on the Dhaka University campus, Ashraful⁠¹ says “This tea, from this canteen, all the movements start here. Every leader has begun his plans at this place and drank this tea.”² In this statement, Ashraful captures the sense of connectedness to a historical legacy that he feels as a student leader. He also connects it, concretely, to the physical space of the Dhaka University campus. The Modhur Canteen to which he refers has indeed been the meeting place for student political movements since the 1960s. Explaining the historical political importance of the students at Dhaka University, Ashraful summarizes sixty years of student movements as, “We have always been the ones to stand up for democracy. Whenever there has been a suspension of democratic rights, we are the first in the street.”³ While this sentiment reflects the pride he feels with regard to the legacy of students, it also reflects a simplicity in the characterization students as a political category and their relationship with the state.

Dhaka University students have figured prominently in the history of Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan). Major student mobilizations have been key components to virtually every major shift in the political development of the nation. In addition, chatro, or student, is widely popularly recognized as a distinct social and political identity, and there are literally

---

¹ This dissertation will use pseudonyms for all personal interviews in order to protect the interview participants from personal identification. All recorded interviews have signed Disclosure and Release Consent forms which are in my personal possession. Non-recorded interviews have provided verbal consent to be included in print and presentation materials. The same pseudonyms will be used consistently for the same interviewee throughout the dissertation, but the selection of names has been random and does not indicate any personal identifying factors. Of particular note: in terms of religious affiliation, names are often an indicator of religious tradition (and thus an indicator of a larger social identification), in the case of this dissertation, I have not aligned the pseudonym with any affiliation of the actual interviewee, and thus the names should not be taken as an indicator of any such identity.


³ Ashraful himself was arrested and jailed for four and a half months in 2007 alongside several other student demonstrators for protesting against a state of Emergency that delayed national elections and extended power to an un-elected government.³ On his arrest Ashraful declares, “It was difficult, but it was my duty.”
hundreds of public monuments across the country celebrating the accomplishments and sacrifices made by student activists. Yet the history of student mass mobilization in Bangladesh has also been largely reduced to a simple, linear, nationalist narrative, in which students are the builders, or representatives, of the contemporary state of Bangladesh. In the vast majority of work on Bangladesh’s history, as well as popular depictions of history in film and television, there is a common theme of teleological development toward the inevitable creation of the nation of Bangladesh in 1971. In this notion of history-toward-the-nation, the major student mobilization of 1952-54, known as the Bhasha Andolan, or Bengali Language Movement, has been depicted as proto-nationalist, the entire 1960s has been painted as precursor to the 1971 war of Liberation, and the common historical narrative virtually stops at Bangladeshi independence. Students are the heroes of Bangladesh’s national mythology, with their patriotism and dedication to the nation a source of pride and reverence. Thus, while the role of students is well-known in understandings of the past in Bangladesh, the movements themselves, and the actors within them, are often flat and one-dimensional. Further, in the development of a nationally focused narrative of student politics, there has been a resultant de-internationalization of the movements; student movements in Bangladesh appear as globally isolated movements with particularly nationalist goals. Yet, on closer consideration, the orientation of the mobilizations and the focus of the movements has frequently been international in vision and identification, and certainly ideologically nuanced. Indeed, in the case of Bangladesh, internationalism and nationalism appear as co-existent subjectivities, rather than in binary opposition.

---

4 *Bhasha Andolan* literally translates to Language Movement, but the translation tends to be Bangla Language Movement, presumably for clarity. Unless marked in some way, *Bhasha Andolan* is referring to the Bangla Language Movement of East Pakistan c. 1952-1954.

5 Examples of the character of revolutionary students can be found in numerous television series and movies. Of particular critical acclaim and widespread admiration is the film *Mukthi Gaan*, (Song of Freedom) (1995), directed by Tareq and Katherine Masud, which depicts a band of students during the Liberation War.
This dissertation argues that by re-examining the history of Bangladesh’s student movements, beginning with the Language Movement of 1952-53, and extending the analysis through the movement of 1982-1990 against the autocratic Ershad regime, we can see beyond a singularly nationalist sentiment, and in fact, trace a culture of contentious politics that is rooted in the space of Dhaka University campus itself. My principal argument is that rather than marking individual stones along an evolutionary path toward the independent nation of Bangladesh, the major student mobilizations of Dhaka University demonstrate engagement with a movement culture that has manifested in shared symbols and rituals across time. The campus space itself has served as the linchpin of this movement culture. In addition, in the context of Dhaka University, students forged a collective cultural identity that was deeply tied to a concept of place in the campus, but the idea of “student” as a collective identity also opened a window, and means of ideological engagement with a globally imagined community of “students.” Thus, this dissertation examines the student mobilizations at Dhaka University in various geographic scales and demonstrates these as complimentary, rather competitive, sites of collective culture and identity.

This examination contributes to understandings of South Asian history, Bangladeshi history specifically, by providing an in depth analysis of Bangladesh’s student movement history, an area that has received little focused academic attention and very sparse treatment in English language work in the regional history. The dissertation also provides a useful avenue to explore the nature of social movement analysis in a historical perspective and the ways in which collective movement cultures develop over time and in a geographic context that includes

---

6 Indeed, this is perhaps best demonstrated by the fact that in many cases, “student” leaders of the campus movements, remained on the campus (or returned to the campus) after graduation, during periods of mobilization.
7 For geographic scale I rely on the work of Alberto Melucci and Byron A. Miller, on which I will elaborate later in this discussion.
physical spaces and imagined places - locally and globally. In a wider consideration, by providing an examination of the multiple subjectivities and scales of the student movements in the context of both united and divided Pakistan, a nation that struggled to find cohesion in both imagined and political terms, this dissertation hopes to contribute to a body of work on the theoretic problem of nation-states as the subjects of histories, and the ways that privileging the nation-state as the subject of history obscures our understandings of the past.

**Strategic Narrative(s) and the Shrinking of Scale**

The placement of certain historical actors into a nationalized historical mythology is not unique to Bangladesh, but the way in students have appeared as a category in the historiography of the nation provides an illustrative case study for the way such nationalist depictions are reified through time both purposefully and through less conscious processes. Homi Bhabha provides an important starting point on the construction of national narratives. Building on the basic ideas of Hayden White with regard to the ways in which events are selected and sequenced into narrative form, Bhabha has argued that nations exist in a discursive formation, and has pointed out that the concept of nation is a wholly abstract idea that is constructed via language and narration.⁸ Bhabha points out that when the story of the nation is told, even by those claiming to recount “just the facts” there is a “smuggling in” of ideas about origin (since the story has to begin somewhere) and of an endpoint (since the story has to lead somewhere). In some cases, the nation’s tale begins with the creation of the nation and moves to the present, while in others a long list of events culminate in the nation; in all of the narrations though there is a reification of

---

the nation that takes place. In the case of Bangladesh, student politics has been crafted solidly into a deterministic narrative as leading toward the nation. The goals of the student mobilizations have been placed into a timeline leading directly toward the war of 1971 and the subsequent nation of Bangladesh. This nationalization of student movement history of Bangladesh is a particularly salient example of the process described by Prasenjit Duara, who describes, “…linear History, by understanding the past through the linguistic signs of the present, reduces or sublates the past to the present.”9 The narrative timeline has retroactively implied nationalist motives onto events that were not explicitly articulating nationalist desires. Through closer examination of the movements in Bangladesh, it is clear that students did not articulate a specific goal of independence from Pakistan, and in fact, often organized specifically around policies that would deepen the connections of the two wings of the nation. The use of students as a national symbol in the present, has as Duara models, sublated the students of the past to the political needs of the present.

Duara is also instructive to this examination in his connections between narrative and nationalism. He argues that “what appears as the delineation of an evolution of a nation is a complex process of repressions and recreations.”10 He continues to contend, “we need to reflect theoretically on such basic features as periodization and special eras as being not simply convenient ways to organize data, nor simply as the teleological path to modernity, but as rhetorical strategies to conceal the aporias and repressions necessitated by the impositions of a master narrative.”11 Further, expanding Paul Ricoeur’s deconstructive methods of tracing the variances in the interpretation of signs and the ways in which they are transmitted through

---

10 Ibid, 32.
11 Ibid.
historical narrative, Duara argues that “it is of great importance to grasp the particular process whereby transmission seeks to appropriate, conceal, or repress dispersed meanings because it is often through this conflictual relationship that we can glimpse history outside of the categories of the nation-state.”12 With regard to the historiography of students in Bangladesh, we see this distinctly in two immediate ways. The first is a near total repression of any discussion of inter-Pakistani cooperation or solidarity in the united period. Common ground among students of the two wings, often rooted in an even larger, globalized notion of youth culture and identity, is virtually non-existent in the characterization of student history in Bangladesh. Another example is the common exclusion of the student mobilizations against the Ershad regime. In a periodization that creates a sense of building toward, and for, the nation-state, the fact that the anti-Ershad movement was in opposition to the post-independence Bangladeshi state complicates the nationalist representation of student motivations. In light of the dominant nationalist narrative, this project provides a closer and longer historical consideration of the student movements, rooted in primary sources and oral histories that are closer to the student perspectives than the nationalist usage.

Yet, while the unsettling of the singularly nationalist narrative is one subtext of this project, the implications are greater than simply “rescuing” the students from an over-simplified representation. The construction of nationalism is Bangladesh is a project still quite active, and the contest for the past has particular political currency. This contest takes place in the discursive realm, to be certain, but there are also real, material aspects to this battle. Willem van Schendel points out that from the moment of independence, there has been no real consensus on a nationalist identity in Bangladesh. He writes, “There is still no uncontested sense of nation in

---
12 Ibid, 73.
Bangladesh,” and identifies a three way contest between “renewal nationalists,” “Islamist nationalists,” and “cultural pluralists.” This contest, he points out, has been waging for twenty-five years, yet the population *en masse*, have never really invested in any of the “Bangladeshi” identities proposed.\(^\text{13}\) Thus, the contest continues with vigor. In 2011, the government of Bangladesh passed new censorship laws, making it illegal, among many other things, to criticize the “father of the nation” Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (father of the current Prime Minister and former leader of the current ruling party).\(^\text{14}\) The ruling party has also taken an active role in controlling the official narrative of the nation by, in 2010, declaring it illegal to publicly state that the independence of the nation was declared by anyone other than Sheikh Mujib in 1971.

Thus, while some aspects of a historical narrative leading toward the nation may not always be part of prescribed program, certainly in the case of Bangladesh, it is also part of a deliberate process.

The students of Bangladesh are a powerful symbol for the nation and subject to a great deal of narrative contest, yet nations are not the only ones that can use narratives. Indeed, in focusing in on student identity, this dissertation encounters narrative in another way that is far more active on the part of students. Narratives can be used to create nations, but they can also be used by movement participants to build, and justify, their mobilization. As Francesca Polletta has argued, narratives often serve as the vessel for which a political platform, or “political common sense” are disseminated and negotiated.\(^\text{15}\) In other words, by examining the stories that

\(^{13}\) Ibid.


movements tell, we can trace out the framework of their political identity. The stories told by activists combine to create a larger narrative in which movements can place themselves, along with a narrative of the movement itself that can be used to justify actions, explain positions, and recruit membership or alliances. Just as Bhabha and others have traced the narratives leading toward the nation, social movements can create narratives leading toward action. As students in Bangladesh told, and retold, the stories of student mobilizations before them, they were able to position themselves directly into a legacy of successful political mobilization and elevated social status. This served not only a source of personal pride, as demonstrated powerfully in the interviews for this project, but also functioned as a mobilizing tool—as the narrative became more and more established, students were obligated to act by the role the narrative crafted.

Narrative can also serve a function of imagination as well. Particularly in the 1960s, stories about student protests in nations all over the world came together to build a narrative of youth revolt. The shared timing, and sometimes political goals, and shared youth identification of the movements lead to a conflation of the movements, and an imagined community of youth rebels offered an exciting point of identification for young people. This imagined community was experienced in large part through narrative. What Eric Zolov has described as “an emergent, globally shared repertoire of imagery, slogans, fashion statements, and music that now linked...”

---

16 The term “identity” is the subject of some controversy, but in the case of this project I use it with an acknowledged imprecision. By this, I mean that I do not contend that “identity” is fixed or singular, but rather a composite, and component in the notion of “self.” I find the use of both terms “identity” and “subjectivity” provide an adequate level nuance for the purpose of this project, but in no way do I propose a totalizing function for either. For a more comprehensive, and focused examination of the issue of identity, see Roger Brubaker and Frederick Cooper. "Beyond 'Identity'" Theory and Society 29 (2000): 1-47.

youth, psychically if not materially, to each others’ struggles”\textsuperscript{18} can also be examined as a master narrative. This master narrative opened a way for students in East Pakistan to participate in a larger community of youth and student contentious politics, even if they were not able to physically visit the places in which the other events occurred. Importantly though, it was their status as students that particularly legitimized their engagement with this community, and the telling, and retelling of their own stories alongside those read in newspapers and magazines, built a narrative that was fundamentally international in nature. Thus, narrative in the first sense of this dissertation locks students into the nation, but in this second sense, offers a way to imagine themselves beyond the physical confines of the nation.

In essence, we see strategic narrative in this project everywhere: constructed by historians, manipulated by governments, and exercised by movements, making Bangladesh’s student history an ideal lens through which to observe narrative function in multiple dimensions. Yet the student movements that occurred in Dhaka are not simply narrative devices, and must be examined outside of such abstraction as well. The physicality of the student mobilizations and the space where they occurred provides another important dimension to the history of student political power in Bangladesh. Indeed, revealed in the narrative accounts of student activists is a primary importance of the campus space and the contest for control of that space.

**Places and Spaces for Movement**

The common placement of the student mobilizations in the nationalist historical narrative of Bangladesh created a limitation in the understanding of the movements’ spatiality and scale in both physical and imagined terms. In particular, with all of the focus on the nation the level of

analysis never reaches that of the actual space students occupied and ignores the space of the campus itself. This is surprising considering how prominently depictions of the Dhaka University campus figure in oral testimony and memory of various student activists and in contemporary characterizations of the student identity. In addition, the campus area itself occupies a distinct geographic identity in the city, and is a much celebrated space of national pride.

The ways in which social movement participants interact with, contest, and manipulate geography in mobilization and action is a rich field of inquiry, and a great deal of it owes credit to the groundbreaking considerations of space elucidated by Henri Lefebvre. Lefebvre’s contention that in order to understand society, we must consider it in the context of the spaces it produces, re-oriented spatial analysis and offered an important bridge between historical, social and geographic analysis. Building off of Lefebvre’s ideas of the social production of space, social geographers such as John Agnew argued for a distinction of “place” as an analytic tool. Agnew describes “place” as consisting of “three major elements: locale, the settings in which social relations are constituted (these can be informal or institutional); location, the geographical area encompassing the settings for social interaction as defined by social and economic processes operating at a wider scale; and a sense of place, the local “structure of feeling.” Place, then, refers to the ways that social activity is thought of geographically, and how that process of

19 Lefebvre’s conception of the production of space is quite literally the starting point for a wide portion of the work on space and place. Lefebvre’s argument for two spaces – “material space” which is constituted of economic activity, state power, and physical infrastructure, and “mental space” which is constituted of perceptions, ideology and imagination. His primary contention is that space, in all forms, is socially constructed, and is in general state of conflict between the “material” and the “mental.” In particular, Lefebvre is bridging the gap between the discursive and the physical by outlining “spatial practices” in which we construct meanings for spaces, and then act according to those meanings. In other words, to understand space, we must consider both the material and the mental. For more, see Henri Lefebvre, The Production of Space. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. (Malden: Blackwell Publishing 1991). The work was originally published as Henri Lefebvre, Production de l’espace, (Paris: Anthropos, 1974.)

thinking shapes the activity within the space. Importantly though, as pointed out by Byron A. Miller, place should not be confused with “local.” Place can operate on a variety of geographic scales, and can be imagined into varying levels of geographic scale.\textsuperscript{21} Yet while social theorists and geographers lay important theoretical frameworks, it is crucial to explore the function of these models within a historical process. The confluence of historical perspective and social geographic analysis provides important methodological value in examining the role of place in considerations of the past (and present).

The case study of this project, Dhaka University will be seen to constitute a place, and as such, will itself be an agent in the movements that takes place there. The imagined sense of the campus as the site of contentious politics, as well as the physical markers on the campus commemorating student victories and tragedies, is a profoundly powerful force in the minds of movement participants. By foregrounding the place of Dhaka University, and considering Lefebvre’s conceptualizations of “mental” and “material” aspects of the campus, this dissertation illustrates the importance of spatial dimension to understanding movement mobilizations.

Not only does the place of Dhaka University function at a local level, but it functions in larger scale as well. With regard to the idea of geographic scale and social movements, Alberto Mellucci and others have demonstrated that collective identities in social movements can operate on different degrees of space.\textsuperscript{22} On one hand, movement participants are mobilized by local concerns and work within local power structures, but on the other hand, movements apply larger-scale analysis and conceive of their identity in relation to larger structural frameworks, such as capitalism or modernity. In the case of Dhaka University students in the postcolonial period,

geographic scale operates consistently with Mellucci’s description of fluidity. Dhaka University students are concerned with specific campus and local issues, yet they also see the campus as one of many campuses globally that are sites of contention and power, dealing with much larger scale issues such as the emergence of the New Left, imperialism, and global youth cultural expression. In all of the scales though, Dhaka University campus as a place is central to the collective identity formation that takes place.

**The Existing Narrative of Bangladesh**

There are two bodies of work on the history of Bangladesh: one in English and one in Bangla. Notably, these two bodies of work rarely intersect in reference to each other, but both do follow, more or less, the description of Duara and Bhaba on narrative structure as leading toward the nation. Accordingly, of the Bangla language historical scholarship, the vast majority of work is focused on the history of Bangladesh’s 1971 war with Pakistan, and the abuses alleged to have occurred during the conflict. In addition, there is a large quantity of historical memoirs written by figures from the Liberation War period. The work on the war, while not specifically analyzing student mobilizations, serves as an important avenue through which students have been represented. Jahanara Imam’s *Ekatorer Dinguli* (The Days of ’71) is a popular example. Imam’s memoir chronicles the war period and the activities of her son, a young Dhaka university student that joins the resistance against West Pakistan and is ultimately killed in the war. The Dhaka University campus is depicted as the epicenter of resistance and the

---

23 The language of Bangladesh (and the state of West Bengal in India) is Bangla. The language is frequently referred to as Bengali, most commonly by those outside of Bangladesh and particularly by Indians. Although there is a degree of political contention regarding the proper way to reference the language, this dissertation will adopt a method of referring to the language as Bangla (since this is most common in Bangladesh) and the regional, linguistically based identity as Bengali (which includes both West Bengal and Bangladesh). In cases where the language is referenced as Bengali in a quotation, I have left it in original form.

young students are staunchly nationalist in their vision for a free Bangladesh. While the
descriptions of student activity given by Imam are not untrue, they are selective, and contribute
to a distinctly and overtly nationalist characterization of student collective identity.²⁵

Regarding student mobilizations in Bangladesh the most substantial work written in
Bangla, in terms of both volume and focus, is the four volume series Bangladesher Chatro
Andolaner Itihash (History of Bangladesh’s Student Movement).²⁶ Hanan’s periodization is
notable: volume 1 examines 1830-1971, volume 2 covers 1953-1969, volume 3 is entitled Pre-
Liberation period, covering from the late 1960s until the war or 1971, and Volume 4 covers “The
Liberation War” of the late 1960s into the 1971 war. Interestingly, despite the title reference to
Bangladesh’s student movements, none of the volumes actually extend into the period in which
Bangladesh as a nation exists. The amount of data that Dr. Hanan has compiled is astounding,
and highly useful in tracing the organizational development of the political institutions in which
student mobilization takes place. He provides a chronicle of student organizations, political party
affiliations and specific demonstrations over the course of the pre-independence period. Hanan’s
characterization of the movements as those of Bangladesh, rather than East Pakistan (which is
the actual political state the movements took place within) is indicative of the national claiming
of the historical legacy. Other than the implications of his title and periodization though,
Hanan’s work is a useful catalog of student political organizations and their formal activities.

²⁵ Imam’s work was also the inspiration for an English language fictional novel, by a Bangladeshi-British author,
Tahmima Anam, A Golden Age (London:JohnMurray, 2007) which follows a similar storyline as Imam’s memoir,
and in which a similar character as Imam’s son appears.
²⁶ Mohammed Hanan, Bangladesher Chatro Andoloner Itihash. (History of Bangladesh’s Student Movement) Vol.
Badruddin Umar has also produced a great deal of work on the subject of student movements, in both English and Bangla, and is more analytical in his approach than many other treatments. In Bangla, the volume *Bhasha Andolan Proshongo (Context of the Language Movement)* is a strong study of the motivations of the Bhasha Andolan participants and the connections to the rural class interests of the time.\textsuperscript{27} Umar makes use of diaries and direct interviews, alongside his own personal observations and experience as faculty at Dhaka University, to make a case for the Language Movement as the first step in a longer revolutionary consciousness of the working class in Bangladesh. Unlike the dominant narrative of the nation, Umar links the *Bhasha Andolan* to a regional identity of Bengali, and discounts the role of the nation. This is common in both his Bangla and English language examinations. In the larger body of his work, Umar seeks to shift the focus to the rural population rather than focus on the urban elites. He continues with this perspective in *Nabhvier Nagarik Burgoa Abhnhthan o Annanay Proshanga* (Urban Bourgeoisie Revolt of 1990 and Other Issues). While this is one of only a few resources that analyses of the Ershad period, Umar is ultimately still writing with an agenda to de-centralize the role of the urban population in the historical development of the nation, and his treatment of students tends to flatten them into the category of urban elite.\textsuperscript{28}

In the body of historiography written in English, Kamruddin Ahmad’s *Social History of East Pakistan* is foundational in historical analysis of the region. Perhaps the first substantive historical analysis produced in English on the region, Ahmad’s work covers the majority of the period of united Pakistan in the post-1947 Partition era. Given its publication in 1967 though, the work is naturally limited in periodization. In addition, while Ahmad’s treatment of the

\textsuperscript{27} Badruddin Umar, *Bhasha Andolan Proshongo (Context of the Language Movement)* (Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1986).

Language Movement is useful in outlining the wider political and economic concerns of the *Bhasha Andolan* beyond the issue of language, the latter half of the book suffers from a preoccupation with outlining the abuses of the West Pakistani government and Ahmad’s case for a working class rebellion.  

There is also a large body of English language work that was produced in the period just after the 1971 war. International political involvement in the 1971 war has occupied a particularly prominent place in scholarly work on the region. Historical examinations have been concerned with the international negotiations and the role of diplomacy, and very little work has been produced in English from non-macro political lens. Perhaps the most well known, and widely regarded of the work is Richard Sisson and Leo E. Rose’s *War and Secession: Pakistan, India, and the Creation of Bangladesh.* Sisson and Rose provide a comprehensive look at the political developments leading to the 1971 war, but maintain a high-level political focus throughout. Outside of government officials, individual actors, particularly students, are not the interest of the work.

Sarmila Bose has made a recent and significant intervention into the issue of nationalist framing in the historiography of Bangladesh with *Dead Reckoning: Memories of the 1971 War.*

---

31 Exceptions, naturally, exist and are notable. Recent scholarship on the region reflects a new shift toward cultural analysis. See for example, Sufia M Uddin, *Constructing Bangladesh: Religion, Ethnicity and Language in an Islamic Nation.* (Raleigh: UNC Press, 2006).
In this work she addresses the quality and credibility of the scholarly work produced on Bangladesh’s national history, focusing on the events of the 1971 war. Her work, while highly controversial in popular terms\(^{34}\), challenges the dominant narrative of Bangladesh’s war and raises questions regarding the accuracy of many standard assumptions widely repeated in the historiography. Bose’s work is most useful beyond her specific findings regarding incidents of mass slaughter in the war. She points to many claims that are repeated from work to work in the written history of Bangladesh that have no original verification whatsoever. This repetition has been the result of both partisan intent and academic inertia. In challenging the dominant, nationalist, narrative of Bangladesh’s creation, she has opened the door for a re-examination of assumptions within the historiography and made a call for a fresh approach to Bangladesh’s past, free from nationalist and partisan preoccupations.

Outside of work focused on the war, in terms of longer surveys of Bangladeshi history, Willem Van Schendel has provided perhaps the most accessible narrative of all to include students and the cultural identity of Dhaka University. *A History of Bangladesh*, while still highly macro in examination, provides a description of the cultural development of the nation in a regional context.\(^{35}\) His work is also one of only a few to extend beyond the 1971 war and into the Ershad era, although the treatment is limited. Van Schendel is particularly useful in identifying students as a distinct political class, and traces their recognition by the state as a force following the *Bhasha Andolan* and into the 1960s.

Umar provides a comprehensive account of the political climate of the student movements prior to the war. Similarly to his work in Bangla, in this series he argues that the students, while important figures, were secondary to the rural working class in terms of political importance. He also argues that ultimately the students failed to create a meaningful dialogue with the working class, and as such, became an over-empowered elite minority. Interestingly, Umar seems to take issue more with the nationalist idea of student activism, and in his work points to several attempts to form alliances with working class in which students take on a regional identity that overcomes nationalist desires. In this way, Umar has started the work of recovering student collective identity from the nationalist narrative that this dissertation seeks to draw out further.

With regard to Bangladeshi student movements in the period following the war, there is a very small amount of work, in both English and Bangla. S.M Shamshul Alam has published one article examining the movements against Ershad, arguing, much like Umar, that the students represented the interests of a minority elite. Alam provides a useful chronology of the development of widespread resistance to the autocratic regime of General Ershad, and examines the continued quest for democracy in the period after the regime is ousted. Talukder Maniruzzaman, has put forth an account in Bangla of the Ershad period arguing for the centrality of students in the campaign to bring down the autocratic dictatorship of general Ershad in the

---

1980s, but Maniruzziman disconnects the movement of the 1980s from prior student mobilizations.\textsuperscript{37}

There is not, in English or Bangla, an examination available that examines the Dhaka University student mobilizations as the sole focus for the full period covered in this dissertation. While the work on the earlier periods exclude the later Ershad campaign, the work on the Ershad campaign excludes the previous mobilizations. This dissertation hopes to bridge the gap between the two. Further, despite the acknowledgement that students have been important figures in the historical development of the nation, there has been little inclusion of their actual voices. By making use of oral history interviews, this project adds some of those accounts back into the narrative. Finally, by using a methodological approach rooted in spatial analysis, and recognition of multiple geographic scales, this analysis of student politics on Dhaka University sheds new light on the complicated political and social negotiation in the postcolonial period of Pakistan.

In bringing together different strategies of analysis, such as narrative, social movement theory, spatial analysis, and oral history, the approach of this dissertation is decidedly interdisciplinary. As a cultural and political historian, my approach is most deeply rooted in archival evidence and oral histories collected between 2007 and 2011 during fieldwork in Bangladesh. However, in my analysis of the movements themselves, and their relationships to the campus, I have made use of important work done by sociologists and social geographers of social movements. The result in this dissertation is a methodology that provides a more nuanced understanding of Bangladesh’s history, but also seeks to present a model for combining

contemporary social movement theory to historical analysis and more generally, for the value of interdisciplinary methodology.

**Organization and Chapter Summary**

The dissertation follows a more or less chronological organization. The chapters each focus on a period of student mobilization on the Dhaka University campus. However, the dissertation also traces the ways in which a political identity of “student” is formed and rearticulated over time. As the chapters progress, therefore, the narrative must accept a degree of fluidity and reinterpretation of events through time.

*Chapter 1: The Language of Student Power and Space: Dhaka University, the Bhasha Andolan and the Shaheed Minar*

This chapter examines the traditional starting point in the narrative of student politics in Bangladesh – the *Bhasha Andolan*, or Bengali Language Movement. This chapter argues that in the Bengali Language Movement the rituals of political protest were established and the political identity of “student” in East Pakistan was born. The Language Movement’s physical and ideological concentration on the Dhaka University campus, and the death of several student demonstrators (subsequently known as the Language Martyrs) formed the foundation for a long standing and widely held notion that students at Dhaka University constituted a political class. Further, the chapter considers the battle over the *Shaheed Minar* memorial for the students killed and the claiming of the campus space as a student controlled area.

*Chapter 2: Ghore Bhaire: Pakistani Students, Home and the World in the Early Global Sixties*

This chapter examines the students of Dhaka University *ghore, bhaire* – at home and in the world. Focusing on student’s cultural identity and expression, the chapter demonstrates that the campus place became defined as the center of the cultural elite in early 1960’s Dhaka. As the
Global Sixties took shape, this chapter explores the ways that students at Dhaka University imagined themselves as part of the larger global “student” community of the early Global Sixties. Arguing that students participated in a “shared repertoire”\(^{38}\) of cultural expression, this chapter examines the ways that students imagined themselves as part of a global imagined community; the creation of a “transnational public” of youth existed alongside local identity, providing illustration of a point in which students conceived of themselves simultaneously in multiple geographic scales and expressed a collective sense of identity that defies a distinction between nationalist and internationalist.

Chapter 3: New Battles, Tested Rituals: Political Organizing on the Campus in Ayub’s Martial Law

This chapter overlaps in periodization with previous chapter, but instead of examining the cultural identity students, it focuses on the political mobilization of Dhaka University students in the period of Martial Law in the four years following the 1958 coup d’état of Ayub Khan. As students faced a political crisis unlike that they had encountered before—a complete and total suspension of democracy—the political identity of students became increasingly expressed as the “defenders of democracy.” The period of mobilization under Ayub’s Martial Law around issues of education reform and Basic Democracy is frequently overlooked in the shadow of the massive mobilization period of 1968-69, but this chapter demonstrates that the early campaigns were an important part of the process in both consolidating students as a distinct political class and in establishing the physical linkage of the identity to the campus space.

\(^{38}\) Zolov, 15.
Chapter 4: The Campus in Context: “Mass Upsurge” at a Local, Regional, and International Scales

This chapter looks specifically at the massive mobilizations referred to as “Mass Upsurge” against the regime of Ayub Khan. Focusing on the period of 1964-1969 it considers how students on Dhaka University engaged with different contexts—local, regional, and international through their activities as student political activists. In this period, the campus, still the center of student activity, became contextualized as a political movement space within a larger network of spaces in the 1960s. The combination of an international youth identity and a strong localized political infrastructure allowed Pakistan’s “1968” to stand as one of the most successful political mobilizations of students in the Global Sixties. As a result, the 1960s on the campus of Dhaka University provides a strong case study for how the Global Sixties took place at different geographic scales simultaneously.

Chapter 5: From Political Activists to Muktibahini: Students and the Bangladesh Liberation War

This chapter examines the period following the overthrow of the Ayub regime and the period of the War of Liberation of Bangladesh (1970-1971). It considers the way that in light of the sudden and violent outbreak of armed warfare, the political identity of the Dhaka University student was overtaken by that of muktibahini (freedom fighter). It also demonstrates the function of Dhaka University campus as a symbolic place of contentious politics, as evidenced by the pointed targeting of the campus for destruction by the West Pakistani Army. The fact that the West Pakistani political crackdown both began and ended with a brutal invasion of the campus, destruction of the important monuments to students victories, and slaughter of students and intellectuals illustrates the widespread sentiment that the campus itself was a symbolic place not only to students, but to the military government of Pakistan as well.
Chapter 6: Ritual and Resurrection: Students and the Campaign Against General Ershad

This chapter explores the period from 1982-1990, and the mobilization against the dictatorship of General Ershad. In this period following an abeyance of student activity during the 1970s after the war, much of the political action had moved to the political parties – which were unable to cooperate in the face of the Ershad takeover. The students mobilizing against the dictatorship thus had two major obstacles. First, was the obvious suspension of democratic freedoms, but second, was the political parties’ refusal to cooperate and form a united oppositional force, making a mass mobilization almost impossible. The student wings of the political parties were caught between the orders of the party and the pull of a united student opposition. Students were ultimately successful when they employed the master narrative of the Dhaka University political class- linking the resistance to previous struggles, and once again, the major political opposition came from the campus. This chapter explores the re-emergence of the Dhaka University students as a political force and the function of the campus as a space of contention. It argues that the narrative linking all of the struggles into one legacy, compelled students to act by virtue of sharing the same geographic space as previous movements and empowered them to claim a legitimacy in defense of democracy. The resurgence of the political identity in the independent nation of Bangladesh also illustrates that political awareness was not limited to a nationalist anti-Pakistani position, but a sense of democracy and resistance in the face of any state power.

Altogether, the examinations within these chapters combine to paint a more nuanced picture of Bangladesh students and problematizes the static depictions that have taken hold of the historiography. The history of students, and the ways that young people on the campus of Dhaka
University imagined their role in society in the increasingly globally connected post-War II era, at both the local and global level, is illustrative of the shared experience of youth in places across the world. Further, in analyzing the movements in a spatial context of the campus, and meaning applied to the spaces the students inhabit, the examination links consideration of political mobilization with ritual space and scale. This study of the role of the Dhaka University campus in both physical and imagined terms is useful in understanding youth motivation and action in arenas far beyond the boundaries of Bangladesh. Indeed, as the nature of the state goes through multiple transformations, from newly formed post-colonial state, to military dictatorship, to civil war, to another newly formed state, to military dictatorship, the context of Bangladesh is a rich lens through which to see the role of student mobilization in the face of a wide variety of political structures.
CHAPTER 1
The Language of Student Power and Space: The Bhasha Andolan and Shaheed Minar

Can I ever forget the twenty-first of February
Incarnadined by the love of my brother?¹

The song Amar Bhaier Rokte Rangano Ekushey (My Brother’s Blood Spattered on the 21st) is performed annually on the 21st of February as part of countless performances across Bangladesh and within the Bengali Diaspora in memory of protesters killed on February 21, 1952 as part of the Bhasha Andolan (Language Movement).² The song, said to have been written at the bedside of a student who had been shot by the police in a protest on Dhaka University, laments the death of those killed, and calls for action to continue the movement. It concludes with the lines “The souls of my martyred brothers still cry. But today everywhere the solemn strength of the people has begun to stir and we shall set February ablaze by the flame of our fierce anger. How can I ever forget the twenty-first of February?”³ Indeed, the events of February 21, 1952 are not forgotten in Bangladesh – the movement, the martyrs, and the monument to them occupy a dominant presence in the historical and emotional memory of Bangladesh as a nation. The annual celebration of Ekushe on the grounds of Bangla Academy and Dhaka University is typically the largest secular celebration of the year, even exceeding the

² As point of clarification regarding terms and translation: Bhasha Andolan (translated directly as Language Movement) refers to the movement in East Pakistan from 1948-1956 for the addition of Bangla as a national language of Pakistan; the word Ekushe (translated directly as twenty-first) when used as proper noun refers to the events of the date February 21, 1952 in which several protesters were killed and to the annual memorial celebration of the Language Movement on the 21st of February; Shaheed Minar (translated directly as Martyr’s Memorial) refers sometimes generically to any monument to those killed on February 21st, and sometimes specifically to the large national monument near the grounds of Dhaka University.
³ Chowdhury, 579.
attendance of Liberation Day festivities. Tariq Rahman captures the legacy of the Language Movement well, describing,

the symbol of *Ekushe*, as the 21st of February was called, resonated throughout the political and cultural life of the intelligentsia of East Bengal. The essays, poems and plays on it in particular and the language movement in general bear witness to it crucial significance. In fact, *Ekushe* and the *Shaheed Minar* were (and remain) the most powerful symbols of resistance in the political life of what is now Bangladesh. They gave emotional force to political and economic demands…

The *Bhasha Andolan* provides a narrative story that condenses the complex political and cultural negotiations that were taking place in the newly formed postcolonial state into an emotionally charged story of martyrdom and righteousness.

The significance of the Language Movement is also reflected in the bounty of literature available on the subject, academically and popularly. The narrative of events of the *Bhasha Andolan* has been particularly well recorded in the definitive and detailed studies produced by Badruddin Umar and Bashir al-Helal, among many others. Yet while the key role of students in the movement and the location of the *Bhasha Andolan* occurring largely on the Dhaka University campus is well known and celebrated, there is little consideration of the *Bhasha Andolan* as part of the process of defining the campus of Dhaka University as a distinctly contentious political

---

space. Thus, this chapter will explore two inter-related components: first, it will demonstrate that the *Bhasha Andolan*, as the first major student mobilization in East Pakistan, was the first stage in a process leading to the establishment of Dhaka University students as a distinct and empowered political class. The cultural and political conditions of the movement established the framework for future interpretations of the role of students as protectors of democracy and Bengali culture that will be seen throughout this manuscript; second, this chapter will demonstrate that through the physical geography of the campus as the movement’s hub and the continued contest over the erection and destruction of the *Shaheed Minar*, the political and cultural identity was directly linked to, and extended upon, the *place* of Dhaka University. Thus, the power of the campus as a contentious place, with the ability to both affect and be affected by the students on its grounds, is established during the *Bhasha Andolan*.

**Finding the Place: Dhaka University in a Postcolonial Pakistan**

Dhaka University was not always a contentious place – at least not in its relationship with state power. In fact, the University was established as a reward for Muslim elites in East Bengal who remained loyal to and supported the British colonial government during the attempted Bengal Partition of 1905-1911. While resistance to the administrative partition of Bengal had been fierce in Kolkata, in East Bengal the Muslim population saw the split as a potentially positive change that would increase economic and political representation for Muslims. When the political mobilization of West Bengal successfully pressured the British to annul the Partition, many Muslims in East Bengal felt betrayed. The British appeased the bitter East Bengalis by promising to build an educational institution to rival that of the great universities of Kolkata, and to base it in Dhaka. The university was actually not built until 1920 (WWI interrupted British plans for building the campus), but even at this point of the height of
Nationalist agitation in West Bengal (and throughout much of the subcontinent), Dhaka, and the Muslim intelligentsia in particular, remained largely supportive of the British colonial regime and often agitated for the need to be more explicit in the Muslim League’s loyalty to the British. As the Nationalist movement progressed, and following the Lahore Resolution in 1940 (which called for the establishment of Muslim state(s) in regions with populations of Muslim majority) the faculty and students of the university were highly supportive of the Pakistan project and were vocal supporters of the Muslim League and the leadership of Mohammad Jinnah as the “father of Pakistan.” After independence in 1947, the state of Pakistan was created into two wings, and Bengal was split along virtually the same lines as the 1905 Partition (East Pakistan was the former East Bengal and West Pakistan was carved from the Northwestern region of India). Dhaka became the provincial capital of the Eastern wing.

Almost immediately after independence, the relationship between the two wings of East and West Pakistan began to change. Despite a larger proportion of the total population residing in the Eastern wing, power was heavily concentrated in the Western wing, and most of the political posts were held by individuals from the Western portion. In addition, in 1947 East Pakistan was verging on a severe food crisis, and memories of the 1943 Bengal Famine were still

---


fresh. The population was anxious to avert another calamity on the scale of the disaster just four years before, and panic and hoarding became increasingly widespread. The new government’s response was inconsistent and vacillated between utter disinterest and ineffective implementation of policies in addressing the inflated prices of food in East Pakistan and in addressing the rumors of impending disaster. Further compounding the problem was the government’s reliance on colonial models of economic principles- the government repeated many of the very mistakes the British had made in the earlier famine, including the disastrous cordonning system and the levy system. Relief aid was poorly allocated and distribution was disrupted by corruption. The most egregious error however was the prohibition on the production of salt in the coastal areas of East Pakistan. The prohibition meant that salt had to be imported from West Pakistan, at much higher cost, and rang far too familiar to the salt tax that had launched Gandhi’s Great Salt March of 1930 that had catalyzed the independence movement. While most of the West Pakistani press was largely inattentive to the concerns in the Eastern wing, one Karachi columnist wrote

It is an unintelligible mystery that in the other part of Pakistan famine is looming large in the wake of serious food crisis, when in this part there is enough food...Are we going to build up Pakistan’s prosperity on the dead bodies of our brothers, sisters and children?

10 The Bengal Famine of 1943 resulted in 7-10 million deaths over a period of about one year. This amounted to the death of about 1 in 7 Bengalis from starvation and associated diseases. For more on the Bengal Famine, and the administrative policies leading to it, see Amartya Sen, Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlements and Deprivation (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982).
12 Of course, in 1930 the Muslim League did not participate in the Salt March, and were in fact, critical of Congress’ breaking of the law. However, once the independence movement was more established, the Salt March became part of a shared legacy of resistance in popular understanding that was claimed by all Indians, regardless of the early Muslim League’s non-participation.
Despite the early and overt imbalances in distribution of resources and power, organized resistance and mobilization in the Eastern wing was slow and scattered.

The first real resistance to food policies of the government came from students. In September 1947, the Democratic Youth League was formed from various members of left-leaning student organization at Dhaka University. They aligned with several other organizations to put together relief committees. However, due to a scarcity of resources, the concentration of the groups in urban areas, political infighting, and general problems with organization, the relief efforts were largely failures. The food crisis had subsided by 1951, and public consciousness had shifted to other battles, but the food and salt crisis was a critical first flicker in the fire of discontent blazing beneath the surface between East and West Pakistan. As Badruddin Umar describes,

"Though the food crisis and famine condition of 1947-1951 was not as severe and devastating at the famine in 1943… it was very extensive and caused great hardship and misery to millions of people in East Bengal…Added to that suffering was the disillusionment of the people in general...who had dreamt of a happy, trouble free and peaceful life during the Pakistan movement and were now facing even physical liquidation and the threat of it in the new homeland for the Muslims."\(^\text{14}\)

The same sentiment is captured in an illustration by a Bengali historian Ahmad, entitled “After the Honeymoon” that depicts the harsh reality of power in post-colonial Pakistan. The image depicts a skinny East Pakistani rickshaw puller struggling to pull a cart loaded with a large and ungrateful passenger labeled West Pak on a path toward the “Punjabi Paradise.”

\(^{14}\) Ibid., 40-41.
The food crisis, and the dissatisfaction it engendered, was a small but important moment in the consolidation of Dhaka University students’ development as a political class. While the students did work collectively, they were not yet articulating their own demands in terms of entitlement to power—indeed, students at Dhaka University were largely mobilizing on behalf of the peasants who were much more devastated than the urban populations. Yet, critically, the food crisis presented the political opportunity for the Democratic Youth League to form, and to cut its teeth in the process of mobilization and collective action. The Democratic Youth League, and students of Dhaka University, were now organized—they only needed a cause that resonated with their own experience.

The decision to institute a singular national language in both wings of Pakistan was, in some regards, a matter of practicality. Jinnah was convinced that there needed to be unity on the

---

issue of language and that all parts of the nation needed to conduct state business in the same language. The choice of which language was less practical – the language chosen, Urdu, was spoken by only a small percentage of the population, in both East and West Pakistan. By numerical majority, there were more Bengali speaking Pakistanis than any other language (56 percent of the total population) and several other languages had wider usage than Urdu (spoken by about 3 percent of the population). Urdu was, however, the language of the established political elite. Despite the majority of the population speaking Bangla, many West Pakistani based elites argued that Bangla as a language was too closely tied to Sanskrit, and it was shared with the state of West Bengal in India, and thus, not legitimately Pakistani. Drawing on communal difference still raw from the turbulent British departure, Muslims elites in West Pakistan argued that Bangla was “a Hindu language.”

When Urdu was established as the official, and singular, national language, there was immediate response from East Pakistani intellectuals and provincial representatives. Dr. Mohammad Shahidullah, a Bengali linguist at Dhaka University, argued that “If Urdu or Hindi instead of Bengali is used in our law, courts, and universities, that would be tantamount to political slavery.” Shahidullah’s concerns were not unfounded and hit close to home for the middle class of East Pakistan, most of whom did not speak Urdu. In a pamphlet produced by the Tamuddun Majlis, a cultural organization of students and professors at Dhaka University, Abul Mansur Ahmad wrote, “If Urdu is made our state language then the educated people of East

---

16 It should be noted that the issue of official language was also a major point of contention in post-colonial India, and the issue of language was debated through constitutional amendments throughout the 1960s and 1970s. For a good examination of the post-colonial developments in India, see Ramachandra Guha, India After Gandhi: The History of the World’s Largest Democracy, (Sydney: Pan MacMillan, 2008).
17 Van Schendel, A History of Bangladesh, 110; Also see Rahman, “The Bengali Language Movement,” 1-6.
Pakistan will become illiterate overnight and they will also become disqualified for government service.”

In the same pamphlet, the demands of the *Bhasha Andolan*, while still in a nascent stage, were articulated for the first time. There were two basic demands: (1) for Bangla to be the language of educational instruction, court proceedings, and mass communication in the province of East Pakistan and (2) for Bangla and Urdu to be the languages of the central government. The pamphlet was distributed widely, and while much of the rural population remained largely uninterested in the issue of national language (they were more concerned with the food crisis), the urban population of Dhaka was increasingly agitated. Students, in particular, seemed to have found their cause.

**Putting Student Political Power into Play**

In February of 1948, students from several organizations, including the Democratic Youth League and the *Tamaddun Majlis*, met to discuss the formation of a united student organization. A new political body was formed with the name “East Pakistan Democratic Youth League”

There was considerable debate over the name, as to whether to include the word “Muslim” in the coalition name, but ultimately, it was not supported by the majority of students. The group decided that the emphasis should be on youth, since there was already a Muslim League. In the secret conference, students put plans in place for a *hartal*, or general strike, and they drafted a preliminary manifesto, described by a student present at the meeting as a

---


21 Ibid.

22 Tajuddin, Ahmed, Personal Diary, March 2, 1948, in Bangla Academy archive collection.

23 Umar, *Language Movement*, 44. This should not be confused with Democratic Youth League, which was the smaller, previously formed group. The new East Pakistan Democratic Youth League virtually absorbed the old group, but there were other organizations represented as well.

24 Ahmed, Personal Diary, March 2, 1948, in Bangla Academy archive collection.
document, “prepared on the basis of the democratic principle of economic, social, political and
cultural improvement and development of the youths.” The formation of the East Pakistan
Democratic Youth League was an important step in the articulation of a student political identity;
indeed, the fact that the political goals of the organization are somewhat vague adds further
evidence that the greatest function of the conference was to consolidate, and make physical, the
shared imagined community of “youth.” While the students were not yet sure how this identity
would be empowered, there is clear indication that it was understood on some level to have
political potential.

The first real physical test of the political identity of the students came on February 26, 1948 with the hartal. Students were successful in shutting the educational institutions down, and had wide participation in street demonstrations by students from Dhaka University, the Engineering College, and the Medical College. Later in the evening the students met on the campus of Dhaka University to discuss plans to move forward. There was wide outrage over the recent remarks of East Pakistan’s provincial representative in Congress, Nazimuddin, who had defended Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan’s rejection of a proposal to include Bangla as on the languages of the Constituent Assembly. Nazimuddin had been quoted in the newspaper as saying “Most of the inhabitants of East Pakistan think that Urdu should be accepted as the only state
language.” Students decided, after much discussion, that issue of language would be the focus

---

26 Cited in Umar, Language Movement, 47.
of their efforts. They formed the State Language Action Committee, which was comprised of students and faculty from Dhaka University and a few other educational institutions.\textsuperscript{27}

The State Language Action Committee acted quickly to escalate the issue of language to primary importance. President Jinnah was scheduled to visit Dhaka in March, and the students knew it was critical to have a consolidated movement upon his arrival. Cm Tarik Reza describes the frantic first days of the organization as it came together,

On 2 March 1948, student leader Shamshul Alam became the new Convener of the State Language Action Committee. The boycott of classes, meetings, rallies, publication of statements and distribution of leaflets had been going on since 28 February 1948. On 6 March 1948, a meeting on the Dhaka University old Arts Faculty campus called upon the people, the student and youth community to observe a general strike on 11 March 1948.\textsuperscript{28}

The strike on March 11 marked a turning point in the movement, and in students’ sense of their own role in it. The strikes were observed by all educational institutions, and the students picketed in front of the High Court and the Secretariat. According to Alam, “About fifty students were injured in the clash and nearly a thousand people were arrested.”\textsuperscript{29} The government attempted to minimize the conflict, and frame it in communal terms, by issuing a statement to the press that,

Some saboteurs and a group of students went on strike today to observe the strike called for protesting against the decision not to have Bengali as a language of the Centre. All the Muslim areas, and most of the non-Muslim areas refused to observe the strike. Only a few Hindu shops were closed…It is now clearly understood from the information obtained after searches that a deep conspiracy

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{29} Alam, “Language as Political Articulation,” 477.
is now on for creating division among the Muslims and creating chaos in the administration for undermining Pakistan.\textsuperscript{30}

The government’s characterization of the strike was not only inaccurate in terms of the strike (countless eye witness accounts confirmed the strike was quite widespread in Muslim and Hindu areas), it also established what would become the standard government response to the language issue: the actions were being orchestrated by forces (implicitly Indian, or at the least Hindu) that wanted to see the destruction of Pakistan. In this way, the government generally avoided any real discussion of the content of the demands of the movement- merely characterizing all mobilization as efforts to create chaos.

In response to the arrest of so many student leaders, the strikes were extended for several days, and on March 15\textsuperscript{th}, students called for a non-stop hartal. Sensing the rising tide of agitation, and hoping to damper the tension before Jinnah’s arrival scheduled for March 19\textsuperscript{th} Nazimuddin agreed to meet with the students of the Language Action Committee. The meeting resulted in an eight point agreement, signed by Nazimuddin and the students present at the talks. Among the eight points were an agreement to release those who had been arrested protesting the language issue, that Nazimuddin himself would introduce a special proposal to the Executive Council to include Bangla as a national language, and a statement that Nazimuddin affirmed, after discussions with the State Language Committee, that the movement was initiated by East Pakistani students and not enemies of the state.\textsuperscript{31} The imprisoned students were released from custody later in the evening. In addition to the victory of their release from prison however, was another significant gain for the students: the agreement codified, officially, that the language


movement was orchestrated and lead by students. The meeting, and the agreement, had established the legitimacy of the students as a negotiating political identity both in their own minds and in the eyes of the government officials.

Jinnah’s arrival on April 19th was met with less fanfare than previous trips, but there was still significant excitement for his visit. The issue of language was forefront in everyone’s mind, including Jinnah’s. Philip Oldenburg has considered Jinnah’s seemingly harsh stance on Bangla, and has provided an interpretation that seeks to make sense of why this issue was allowed to become so contentious. Pointing to Jinnah’s increasingly difficult task of trying to forge a sense of unity among the cobbled together nation, he argues,

> While the primary explanations of Pakistani decisions [regarding language] are likely to be direct political and economic ones of the self-interest of West Pakistan in maintaining an exploited Bengal, the Pakistani leadership was not invariably cynical and self-aggrandizing. It is important to take seriously the ideological position of the leadership, to accept the idea that the leaders felt their actions were just and right… Jinnah was not really addressing the question of which language would be the state language of Pakistan when he went to Dacca in 1948. Rather he was addressing this question: why has the demand that Bengali be included as a state language arisen so suddenly?\(^\text{32}\)

Jinnah’s speech at the Race Course Maidan on March 21st reflects his anxiety on the issue of national unity, but it also reflects a certain uneasiness with too much power falling into the hands of the provinces and out of his federal control. In that way, he saw the issue of language symbolically as well, although in a different way than students saw it as such. Jinnah declared,

> Our enemies, among whom I regret to say, there are still some Muslims, have set about actively encouraging provincialism in the hope of weakening Pakistan… A flood of false propaganda is being

daily put forth with the object of undermining the solidarity of the Mussalmans of this state and inciting people to commit acts of lawlessness. The recent language controversy...is one of many subtle ways whereby the poison of provincialism is being sedulously injected into this province.\textsuperscript{33}

In a more famous speech, given at a special Dhaka University convocation to honor him, Jinnah expressed similar concerns about the divisive nature of the language issue. Implying that the students were being manipulated, he declared to the student audience,

\begin{quote}
Let me make it very clear to you that the state language of Pakistan is going to be Urdu and no other language. Anyone who tries to mislead you is really the enemy of Pakistan. Without a state language, no nation can remain tied up solidly together and function. Look at the history of other countries. Therefore, so far as the state language is concerned, Pakistan’s shall be Urdu.\textsuperscript{34}
\end{quote}

In a meeting that same evening of March 24\textsuperscript{th}, Jinnah met with students of the Language Action Committee.\textsuperscript{35} In that meeting, the students asserted themselves in a way that seemed to surprise Jinnah. Perhaps emboldened by their newfound sense of political agency (which was only further legitimized by the fact that the nation’s president and symbolic “father” of Pakistan had granted them audience), the students in attendance pressed Jinnah forcefully on the issue of language. Adamant that the movement was not anti-patriotic, the students argued until Jinnah became upset.\textsuperscript{36} The question that arises from the meeting is whether Jinnah was upset by the bold behavior of the students or if meeting with the students forced him to face the reality that the language movement was not foreign fomented. Either way, in his final address of the visit, Jinnah re-asserted his position that Urdu, and only Urdu, should be the national language of Pakistan.

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{34} Quoted in Alam, “Language as Political Articulation,” 478.
\textsuperscript{35} Umar, Language Movement, 47-51.
\textsuperscript{36} Ahmad, Diary, March 24, 1948. Bangla Academy Archival Collection.
Later that same year, Jinnah died suddenly of heart failure and there was considerable political chaos in the wake of his death. Liaquat Ali Khan assumed power and continued the same language policy position that Jinnah had taken. In fact, Khan was even more unwilling to consider the issue of language and had been among the first opponents to the idea in the assembly motion in 1948. A series of governmental restructuring efforts were put forward and a string of political assassinations took place at higher levels of office- including Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan in 1951. Nazimuddin became Pakistan’s Prime Minister thereafter.\(^{37}\)

In the midst of the political chaos at the national level, students found space to become one of the most powerful political voices in East Pakistan, particularly in Dhaka. Students extended their interest beyond the issue of language, and mobilized around a variety of issues such as constitutional reform and economic parity between the wings. In some ways, the period between 1948 and 1952 appears to be a time of disorganization on the part of the students, due to the variety of issues around which the students mobilized, but in fact, it was a period of considerable consolidation. Student leaders came to new prominence as legitimate political representatives, and frequently met with heads of state and party leaders, including Fatima Jinnah, the younger sister of Mohammad Jinnah. Fatima Jinnah encouraged students to explore their role in forming a dual wing youth league, in order to advance opposition politics to Liaquat Ali Khan’s increasingly unpopular regime (and with whom her own relationship had deteriorated badly).\(^{38}\) It is also during this nascent period of political action that a young university student Sheikh Mujibar Rahman became politically visible. Rahman, who would later become the face

\(^{37}\) Umar, *Language Movement* 89.  
\(^{38}\) Umar, *Language Movement* 74. While the idea to form the youth league cannot be characterized as having origin in Ms. Jinnah’s plans, it does reflect a realization on the part of state officials that the students could potentially be manipulated or used for political gain.
of the Bangladesh independence movement and first president of Bangladesh, was not yet at the front of the Awami League, but he learned important lessons and forged a sense of political strategy directly tied to his experiences as a youth activist.

A conference was called to be held March 28, 1951 in which about 200 student delegates from students and youth organizations across East Pakistan were to converge on Dhaka University campus for a two day summit. Sensing the danger, the government enacted Section 144 of the Constitution to extend across the campus area. Section 144 forbade public gatherings and demonstrations. The location of conference was changed to an off-campus location, but on the second day of the summit, the police threatened to charge the students. In response, the students held the second day on boats on the main river in Dhaka, the Buriganga. At 2:30 am on March 28th, the formation of the East Pakistan Youth League culminated in the release of a lengthy manifesto addressing virtually every grievance the Eastern province had with Western domination. The manifesto addressed the condition of students specifically, stating,

We the middle class youth, dreamt that in Pakistan we would get employment, facilities for developing trade and commerce, get house [sic], get higher culture and standard of living. But being confronted with the cruel bashing of reality, our dreams have been destroyed.39

The Manifesto also called upon West Pakistani youth to form a sister organization, and stated the immediate need to coordinate between East and West Pakistan youth organizations.40

Importantly, the grievances with the West Pakistani controlled government did not extend to the population of West Pakistan generally – indeed, the Youth League adamantly defended their position as patriotic Pakistanis – they just had a different conception of what Pakistan was. A.G.

39 Ibid., 74-80.
40 Ibid.
Stock, a British Visiting Lecturer at Dhaka University from 1947-1951, observed a conversation that captures the multivalent identity in the students at the time. He describes in his memoir, …on the way to college one morning, two students just in front of me were talking earnestly…one was saying to the other ‘I am first of all a Bengali, then I am a Muslim, then Pakistani.’” Stock observed that over the course of his tenure at Dhaka University, he watched the “rising emotions of the intelligentsia over the matter of the Bengali language.” H was also witnessing the complexity of the political and cultural identity that postcolonial East Pakistani students were in the process of defining. It was simultaneously defined in regional, religious, and political terms.

At the same time the Youth League was forming and taking on new issues, the problem of national language was still being debated at the Constituent Assembly level as well. Over the course of 1948-1952, several proposals were put forward regarding the language problem. One proposal was to make Arabic the national language since it was the language of the Koran, another argued that Bangla could be adapted to rid it of its “Indian” influence by changing the scrip to Arabic and replacing Sanskritic origin words with Perso-Arabic ones. The latter proposal gained some currency, and even led to the establishment of several adult education centers in East Pakistan with the purpose of teaching the Arabic script to adults already literate in Bangla. The reaction from the students however was indignant. Students from Dhaka University issued a statement through the English language daily newspaper The Pakistan Observer, that if the script of Bangla was changed it would alienate Bengalis from their

---

42 Ibid.
44 Ibid.
literature, their cultural heritage, and implied that they were culturally subordinate to West Pakistan.\textsuperscript{45} For students, the question of language had taken symbolic meaning- to concede to anything but Bangla as one of the national languages was like admitting that they themselves were inferior Pakistanis, inferior Muslims, and culturally invalid. The Youth League issued a 9 point memorandum in March 1951 that stated that forced implementation of any language other than Bangla in East Pakistan province constituted “cultural genocide.”\textsuperscript{46}

Following the assassination of Liaquat Ali Khan, Nazimuddin assumed power. Students, having met with him before Jinnah’s visit in 1948, were optimistic that he would hear their demands. Anisuzzaman, a student at Dhaka University and member of the Youth League recalls,

\begin{quote}
We the students were hopeful that he would know better than Liaquat [Ali Khan] had known that we were not being puppets of another cause. We were more radical than he was, and many of our Constitutional demands we knew were not going to win us his favor, but on the issue of language we thought we had a chance – but he completely betrayed us.\textsuperscript{47}
\end{quote}

The moment that betrayal was made clear was in Nazimuddin’s visit to East Pakistan in January 1952- his first visit as the leader of all of Pakistan to the province from which he hailed and which he had represented in the Assembly\textsuperscript{48}. In a speech before the All Pakistan Muslim League in Dhaka, Nazimuddin declared, “Urdu will be the state language of Pakistan.”\textsuperscript{49} Nazimuddin

\begin{footnotes}
45 Ibid.
48 While Nazimuddin was from Dhaka, his family was not considered, nor did they consider themselves, Bengali due to roots in West Pakistan. Nazimuddin could speak Bangla, but was not able to read or write it, and was part of the elite population that spoke Urdu.
\end{footnotes}
repeated the characterization of the movement as “provincialist” and even read excerpts from Jinnah’s 1948 declaration accusing the language activists of being “enemies of the state.”

**Demonstrating the Strength of Student Power in the Bhasha Andolan**

Immediately following Nazimuddin’s speech, a meeting of the Youth League was convened and the language movement was reignited with fervor. Posters appeared all over the Dhaka University campus. The Youth League dedicated all of its resources to coordinating the *Rashtra Bhasha Parishad* (State Language Committee) that brought student organizations and political parties under one umbrella organization. It was headed by a Dhaka University student leader, Kazi Gholam Mahbub. The Language Committee called for processions at a daily pace, and for a province wide hartal on February 4, 1952 and declared it Protest Day.

The students declared that Nazimuddin was breaking the 8 point agreement (calling it a treaty) that had been agreed to in 1948, and declared that he was unfit to rule. An editorial in the *Pakistan Observer*, written by Maulana Adbul Hameed Bashani, a highly revered cultural and populist figure, called on students specifically to demand Nazimuddin uphold his obligation. Acknowledging the powerful position the Youth League held in mobilizing mass numbers, he implored that “students must prevent the imposition of an alien language upon 50 million helpless people.” In the course of the next few days, “the Youth League emerged as the most influential organization during the whole movement.”

---

52 “Call To Action for Youth of Bengal” *Pakistan Observer*, February 1, 1952. Bangla Academy Archive Collection.
The February 4\textsuperscript{th} day of action was profoundly successful. The turnout was beyond even student expectations, and the movement spread far beyond the confines of a student and middle class cause. The city of Dhaka came to a virtual standstill as it was engulfed by “the biggest demonstration in living memory in East Bengal.”\textsuperscript{54} Students carried placards that read “Nazim: Obey the Treaty or Give Up your Seat” and a procession of militant student that called themselves “Protectors of Bangla” marched in mock military procession with signs saying “Defend the honor of Language.”\textsuperscript{55}

The government responding by declaring that the Youth League, and the State Language Committee had been influenced by communists with ties to India. As evidence they pointed to the flyer produced February 2, 1952 by the Communist Party of East Pakistan (EPCP) in which it called for the government to “Establish the right of Bengali language and equal status of all languages.” It also called for the languages of West Pakistan, such as Punjabi, Sindhi, and Pashtu, to be given equal status alongside Urdu. The pamphlet concluded by calling on all party workers to join with students and mobilize the masses to make Bangla a state language.\textsuperscript{56} The charges of a communist conspiracy were unconvincing however, and one editorial in the Iffitak noted, “If the Communists are leading the Youth League, then they are doing a good job of hiding it. For all appearances, they seem to be following the lead of the students.”\textsuperscript{57}

Following the February 4\textsuperscript{th} protests, there were sporadic and continued demonstrations throughout the province. Classes at Dhaka University remained closed and the campus became

\textsuperscript{54} “Dacca Quits” Pakistan Observer, February 5, 1952. Bangla Academy Archive Collection.
\textsuperscript{55} Reza, Ekush, 36-48.
\textsuperscript{56} Umar, Language Movement, 93. The pamphlet is also reprinted in full in Umar, Purba Banglar Basha Andolan o Tatkalin Rajaniti, 189-196.
\textsuperscript{57} Staff Editorials, Iffitak February 5, 1952. Bangla Academy Archive Collection. It should be noted that the Iffitak, like the Morning News, was by and large supportive of the government and tended to downplay the success of the movement. This makes it only that much more remarkable that even they found the claim to be preposterous.
the main meeting place for information and planning. The Amtolla, a large tree on the campus lawn where students had met following Nazimuddin’s speech in January, was established as a de facto base meeting ground and place of communication.\textsuperscript{58} There was another massive demonstration on February 11th. During these demonstrations, flyers were handed out for a general strike on February 21\textsuperscript{st} demanding Bangla as a national language. The strike was endorsed by virtually every political and vocational organization in East Pakistan, with the exception of the ruling party the Muslim League.\textsuperscript{59} Following the demonstration of February 11\textsuperscript{th}, the Pakistan Observer, the only major paper that was sympathetic to the movement, printed an editorial entitled “Crypto Fascism.” In the editorial, Abdus Salam criticized Nazimuddin as nepotistic and out of touch on the language issue. In response, the government shut down the offices of the Pakistan Observer and arrested the editors, claiming that the editorial was un-Islamic.\textsuperscript{60} The ban on the Pakistan Observer only made the government look worse. The Youth League issued a statement on February 17 denouncing the government ban and calling for renewed agitation. On February 20\textsuperscript{th}, the government instituted Section 144, a ban on political processions and public gatherings, under the excuse that they had gathered information to indicate the protests planned to attack the Assembly House.\textsuperscript{61}

A hurried meeting was called with as many representatives of the umbrella State Language Committee to try and determine how to respond. There was a major program scheduled for the next day, and the question at hand was whether it would be called off as a

\textsuperscript{58} Ahmed, Diary February 5, 1952.
\textsuperscript{59} Umar, Language Movement 96; Reza, Ekush, 48-49.
\textsuperscript{60} “Crypto Fascism” Pakistan Observer, February 12, 1952. Bangla Academy Archive Collection.
\textsuperscript{61} Umar, Language Movement, 99.
result of Section 144, or whether the program would continue in knowing violation of the law. Up until the point of February 20th, while the actions had been antagonistic, they had not technically ever broken the law. In the debates over the action of February 21st, the students asserted their own power forcefully and took full ownership of the movement. As Umar describes,

> The great majority of the State Language Committee were against violation of 144, but the general secretary of the Youth League…, convener of the Dhaka University State Language Committee of Action,… and the Islamic Brotherhood [a student Muslim organization] spoke in favor of violation. Those who against the violation argued that the language movement had reached a stage when it could not be limited only to the student community. It had become a concern and movement of all sections of the people. There was no organization in East Bengal at that time which could handle the situation which would develop after the violation of 144 and there was no organization preparation.

The meeting became a contest for power between the students and the other parties. While student leaders argued that if Section 144 was not violated the movement would cease to exist and would dissolve, but the established political parties refused to condone breaking the order. One student leader argued that the Youth League had been the “parent body” of the State Language Committee and that if the university students decided to violate 144, the umbrella committee had “no authority to decide otherwise.” The students were characterized as extremists, and the majority of the organization voted against violation. Oli Ahad, general secretary of the Youth League, loudly declared that whatever the decision of the Committee, the students would strike on February 21st. In response, a committee member moved that if the votes

---

62 Ibid., 100.
63 When the founding conference of the Youth League faced the imposition of Section 144, they had moved the conferences to the boats, which was not covered in the jurisdiction of Section 144, thus, they had not ever violated the order.
64 Ibid, 100.
had no binding authority then the State Language Committee should be disbanded. The move was approved, and the organization was dissolved on the spot.66

The events of the February 20th meeting were critical in establishing the students as a discrete political class. Many students defied party orders to vote in favor of violation, and the assertion the debates had once again legitimized that the successes to date had been largely the result of student actions. The students of Dhaka University left the meeting with the sense that the movement was now in their hands exclusively. They spent the night making preparations for the next day’s actions.

The police also spent the night fortifying the area around Dhaka University. The next morning, the students gathered under the Amtolla and after several hours of debate and consultation with University administrators and party leaders that attempted to dissuade the students from marching, a procession headed out the gates of Dhaka University. Waiting outside were rows of police. Once a few students passed through the gate, the crowd of over a thousand students began to pour out, chanting and shouting. The police responded by throwing tear gas shells and arresting male students en masse. The female students were not arrested however, and the procession continued toward the Assembly house as planned in the program. As students reached the Assembly house the situation had escalated to a battle. Police and students alike were throwing bricks and getting more and more agitated. As the Assembly was about to meet, tensions suddenly escalated and police opened fire on the student demonstrators. One university student Rafiquddin was shot in the head and died instantly. Others were injured and died later.67

---
66 Ibid., 101-103.
As news of the killings spread, the city of Dhaka was in chaos. Riots and spontaneous demonstrations broke out across the city, and people swarmed toward the campus of Dhaka University. Alam argues that the shootings irrevocably changed the entire nature of public attitude toward Section 144, and the government in general. He explains, “The students that were killed attained shaheed (martyr) status, and entered the Bengali psyche forever.”\textsuperscript{68} The shootings also brought international attention to the issue, increasing the pressure on the government to justify not only its actions, but the language policy in general.\textsuperscript{69}

In the evening of the attacks, several students constructed a monument on the campus entrance to those killed in the protest. The police destroyed the monument almost immediately.\textsuperscript{70} Within hours, Shaheed Minars (Martyr Memorials) had sprung up all over the campus. Riots continued for several days, and sporadic violence erupted all across the campus and government office quarters. The office of the \textit{Morning News}, a newspaper owned by Nazimuddin’s family, was burned down on February 24\textsuperscript{th}.\textsuperscript{71} The ruling party, and provincial government also devolved into chaos. Several leading figures resigned in protest, the newspapers that had been previously supportive of the West Pakistani perspective abruptly began to print scathing criticisms of the government, not only on the issue of language, but of provincial parity as well. The tide of discontent in East Pakistan was clear in the depiction of the West and East relationship.

\textsuperscript{68} Alam, “Language as Political Articulation,” 479.
\textsuperscript{70} Reza, \textit{Ekush}, 56.
\textsuperscript{71} Umar, \textit{Language Movement}, 100.
While strikes and protests continued in East Pakistan, the government position in the West Pakistani press in particular held strong to the characterization that the disruption in the Eastern wing was part of an Indian Communist conspiracy. The resentment between the two wings grew deeper and the Muslim League lost all credibility in the East wing. This was made clear in the elections of 1954. In the wake of the violence, the major political opposition parties in East Pakistan had formed a coalition platform in 1953, called the United Front, based on 21 principles of unity. Among the demands were that Bengali be made one of the state languages of Pakistan, that an official Shaheed Minar be erected in the memory those killed on February 21\textsuperscript{st}, that February 21\textsuperscript{st} be known as Martyr’s Day throughout Pakistan, and that East Pakistan be given full provincial autonomy.\textsuperscript{73} When the National Assembly passed a motion to consider Bangla as one of the national languages in 1953, it was too late. By then, the issue of language has been absorbed into a full movement for autonomy. The martyrs had transitioned in the

\textsuperscript{72} Untitled. \textit{Saink}, February 25, 1953. Bangla Academy National Archives.

\textsuperscript{73} Rahman, “The Bengali Language Movement,” 16.
imaginations of East Pakistan from students killed for the right to Bengali language, to students killed for East Pakistan’s right to a Bengali identity. In the 1954 elections the United Front won an overwhelming number of seats, but the government dissolved their authority within months. The issue of language, while still highly symbolic, was one of many political grievances openly expressed in the complaints from East Pakistan.

**Memorial Space and Political Definition of the Campus**

At the national level, the effect of the *Bhasha Andolan* would take years to flesh out and would feed larger movements to follow\(^7\). At the local level, however, the effect was much more immediate. As the physical hub of the Youth League, and the origin of the strikes that were met with violence, Dhaka University became directly linked as the *place* of the *Bhasha Andolan*. Thus the spatial memory of the events, sacrifices, and victories were associated with the campus. This was reinforced by the continued battle over the erection of the *Shaheed Minar* and in the annual gathering on *Ekush* that took place on the campus grounds.

The battle for the establishment of a permanent memorial to the students killed in the movement reflected the students’ refusal to concede ownership over the legacy of the movement to the government. The government’s continued destruction of many *Shaheed Minars* across the campus added fuel to the fire of resistance every time it happened. On February 24\(^{th}\) at the gates of the Medical College, students constructed a large memorial to the Martyrs. The father of one the killed students came to the dedication ceremony and prayers were held for those who had

---

\(^7\) Bangla was ultimately instituted as a national language in the Pakistani Constitution of 1956. The effect was largely too little too late, although it did cool the tensions between the two wings a bit. The changes and adaptations of students as a political and cultural class in the period after the *Bhasha Andolan* and in the early 1960s is discussed in Chapter 2.
died. The ceremony prayers called the ground of the monument “hallowed” by the blood of the martyrs. The police razed the monument to the ground on February 26th.

Students responded by building replica Shaheed Minars in virtually every public space on the campus. Each of the residence halls had a monument, all the major lawns, and there were several artistic depictions created that depicted the martyrs and political slogans. The students, in crafting and placing the monuments were not only laying claim to the legacy of the movement, but claiming the campus space as well. The act of physically erecting a monument, in defiance of the authorities, became deeply symbolic as a mean to continue the struggle of the martyrs. On student remembered building a monument as “it was as if everything stopped. It was just mud

---

75 Reza, Ekush, 56.
77 Photographer unknown. Present in Liberation War Museum display and posted on the internet at http://www.21stfebruary.org/photo_ij2.htm
and clay and memory and it was deathly silent. We felt a connection to the martyrs as we
constructed it, and every time we saw it.”

Figure 1.4: A portable *Shaheed Minar*  

Figure 1.5: Students mourn at a *Shaheed Minar* on the campus

---

79 Photo by Professor Rafiqul Islam, reprinted in Reza, *Ekush*, 82.
Following the successful election of the United Front in 1954, the police stopped destroying the *Shaheed Minars*. The monuments remained as important reminders though of not only the movement, but of the victory of students in claiming the spaces they inhabit as places of student power.

In addition to the monuments themselves, the annual ceremony held to commemorate *Ekush* became an important ritual on the Dhaka University campus that tied it to the spatial memory of *Bhasha Andolan*. Regarding *Ekush*, Qazi Azizul Mowla explains,

> It is because ritual occurs in places that spaces become special. An event ‘takes place.’ Often the ritual will have connection with the site where it occurs because of a previous event, but after time, it is the ritual that is remembered and associated with the site…International Mother Language Day/21st February [*Ekush*]…may be a case in point.\(^{81}\)

The ongoing process imbuing of symbolic meaning to the spaces inhabited by *Shaheed Minars* is considered by Reece Jones as well, who argues, “these monuments…institutionalize the perception of a unique connection between Bangladesh, the Bengali language, and the land.”\(^{82}\)

On the campus, the monuments provided a physical means to mark the territory in the name of the newly developed political identity of the Dhaka University student.

**Conclusion**

Willem Van Schendel summarizes that “The language movement, or *Bhasha Andolan*, gave rise to a new type of politician in East Pakistan: the Bengali speaking student agitator.”\(^{83}\)

Indeed, the language issue, and the utterly disastrous policy response on the part of the Pakistani

---

\(^{80}\) Photo by Professor Rafiqul Islam, reprinted in Reza, *Ekush*, 71.


government, created the political opportunity structure for students to develop their collective political identity. It also gave rise to a new political geography in which students could anchor themselves. The campus space of Dhaka University, in the course of the movement and in particular in the aftermath of the *Ekushe* violence, transformed into a movement space. The development of the student political identity and the creation of the movement place of Dhaka University were dependent processes. The case of the *Bhasha Andolan* and the development of the place of Dhaka University provides an important case study in understanding the larger relationship of political identity and place as a mutually constitutive relationship.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, students turned their gaze to the international context in which their identity, and campus place, was situated. The 1960s presented new opportunities for the expansion and adaptation of the political identity of “student” through both physical interaction with students in international exchange programs and through an imagined community of student protesters. The projection of the campus into a global framework also leads to shifts and modifications in the place identity. The heart of both the notion of the campus and student though remains deeply rooted in the events of the *Bhasha Andolan* and the enduring legacy of the struggle is reflected in the imagery and rituals of the *Bhasha Andolan* that are adapted for new political mobilizations.
CHAPTER 2

Ghore Bhaire: Pakistani Students, Home and the World in the Early Global Sixties

Following the success of the Bhasha Andolan, the empowered role of students in East Pakistan’s political and cultural identity was clear. Willem Van Schendel has pointed out that the “…Bhasha Andolan gave rise to a new type of politician in East Pakistan: the Bengali-speaking student agitator.”\(^{1}\) The role of students in mobilizing the movement, as well as the centrality of the campus to both the demonstrations and the massacre, cemented Dhaka University as the hub of East Pakistani contention with regard to the oppressive policies of the Western based government. Further, having laid the organizational structure of student politics on campus and after the initial success in mobilization goals, students were well positioned to explore different facets of the newly established identity. The campus, and the students that occupied it, had become a community in both physical and imagined terms. In the aftermath of the Bhasha Andolan, the place remained politicized and students continued to view themselves as a political and cultural class.

This chapter will explore how the student identity that came to be defined in the Bhasha Andolan operated, in both imagined and physical terms in the years following its emergence within a larger global identity of youth and students in the late 1950s and early 1960s. While Chapter 3 in the dissertation will consider the local campaigns and political battles waged by the students within Pakistan, this chapter aims to set aside political organizational developments, and explore the sense of identity from a transnational cultural perspective. The title of this chapter references the famous novel of the Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore. *Ghore Bhaire*, often

---

\(^1\) Van Schendel, *A History of Bangladesh*, 113.
translated as Home and in the World, explores the conflicts between local and international, Western and non-Western, tradition and modernity, personal and political, and the ways in which an individual can balance or reconcile these aspects within his or her identity.\(^2\) While Tagore’s period of representation is the Nationalist movement of the early 20\(^{th}\) century in West Bengal, the duplicities Tagore explores have wide resonance with the position of East Pakistani students in the early 1960s. As the Global Sixties took shape across the world, students at Dhaka University in this period provide a clear example of the inefficacy of a binary understanding of local and international.\(^3\) The frequency and ease with which the Pakistani student identity moved within and between local and non-local conceptions of community illustrates the fluidity of these concepts.

So while on a national level, Dhaka students dealt with very specific concerns such as the widening gap of opportunity economically and politically between the two wings of Pakistan, the seizure of power by Ayub Khan’s 1958 coup d’état and the imposition of Martial Law, and unpopular education reform policies, they were also formulating layers of identity that were less tightly defined by local politics. The temporal location of the student surge in the 1960s compels us to consider it within a larger framework of youth cultural expression and revolt in the beginning of the Global Sixties. In the Global Sixties, as Timothy Brown has argued, “...the

---


\(^3\) The term Global Sixties, loosely defined, can be understood as the period from about 1958-1974 (as periodized originally by Arthur Marwick *The sixties: cultural revolution in Britain, France, Italy, and the United States, c. 1958-c. 1974*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) in which youth activism and cultural expression took on global and transnational dimensions with increased fervor. While the experience of the Global Sixties certainly varied from locale to locale, the period marks an important era in the creation of global youth cultural identity and shared language of protest. While much of the scholarship on the era tends to focus heavily on Western experiences, there is increasing attention being paid to non-Western environments and to connections between Western and non-Western experiences. For more on the Global Sixties in non-Western manifestations see Zolov, *Refried Elvis*, and Samantha Christiansen and Zachary Scarlett (eds), *The Third World in the Global 1960s*. New York: Berghahn Press, 2012.
nation-state cannot function as our primary frame of reference, not only because of the importance of transnational influences in shaping local events, but because of how intimately ‘1968’ was linked to the creation of globalizing imagined communities that cut across national boundaries.”

Thus, the Pakistani student movement, in both the Eastern and Western wings of the nation, of the late 1950’s and early 1960’s, while often addressing local concerns and operating within a finite geographic boundary, must also be considered in the ways that it connected to a globalized sense of student identity; students carried ideas through international travel and student exchange programs, and actively consumed and negotiated the increasingly global popular culture of youth.

**Direct and Indirect Transfer in the Transnational Public in the Global Sixties**

The term Global Sixties, and the academic treatment of the era has shifted toward a more truly global approach, and portions of the world previously excluded, or given short shrift, from analysis are increasingly more well represented. If, as Arif Dirlik suggests, we view the Global Sixties as a case in which “different languages of radicalism arose in different contexts that shared a common vocabulary but derived their grammar from their concrete historicity,” the balance of Pakistani students’ national and international concerns is easier to manage. Eric Zolov, in his study on the Mexican student movement and counterculture of the 1960s describes a “globally shared repertoire of imagery, slogans, fashion statements and music that… linked youth, psychically, if not materially, to each other’s struggles.”

---


critically important component of the Sixties for East Pakistan – the non-material linkages that were a large part of the formation of the new youth identity. Yet the existence of an “imagined community” of youth, does not preclude a physicality of the community as well. In this way, we see the issue of scale and space re-emerge as fundamentally important in conceptualizing the complex identities of the 1960s. In considering the interconnected identities of the 1960s, a few theoretic frameworks are helpful. Students at Dhaka University in the 1960s can best be understood as operating within a network of scenes and as part of a transnational public as explained in this brief theoretical discussion.

Charles Perry, in his history of San Francisco’s Haight-Asbury district in the 1960s, describes a network of places, shops, newspapers, groups, events, and people that together constituted a kind of hothouse within which the hippie counterculture took root and flourished. Parry recounts a network of discrete locations and groups that come together to form what Darcy Leach and Sebastian Haunns have termed a scene. A scene, in the case of the Global Sixties, is a world-wide, network of people who share a common identity and a common set of contentious beliefs, values, norms, and convictions often articulated in terms of youth or student identity. It is also, simultaneously, a network of physical spaces where members of that group are known to congregate, such as college campuses. Scenes are made up of spaces, in the physical sense that you can go there and participate at least on a superficial level just by being physically in the location, but it is also a place in the sense that there is an identity applied to the spaces and the activities that take place in them. The scene is a place in which one can participate in a certain political or cultural idea and can perform the identity publicly.

---

In the case of East Pakistan, the campus space of Dhaka University was the physical space in which students and youth and could access and perform both the local and the Global Sixties. In the local sense, by building off the legacy of the campus as the site of the *Bhasha Andolan*, the campus was easily signified as a place of contentious politics and cultural expression. The meaning of *Bhasha Andolan* resonated specifically within the local historical conditions of East Pakistan and students congregated and ritualized the space of the campus through celebrations of *Ekushe*, building and re-building *Shahid Minars* and holding meetings under the Amtolla just as previous movements had done. In addition, the period following the *Bhasha Andolan* saw the emergence of a new cultural elite, and the 1950s represented an era of “Bengali Revivalism” that included new expression in art, music and drama. While expressed in cultural terms, the celebrations of Bengali deltic tradition—such as a valorization of old folk songs and styles of dress—were also a political statement of the validity of the East Pakistani heritage. The political subtext on campus was clear—celebrations of *Ekushe* became reminders that cultural heritage and the official national identity of Pakistan were at times in conflict. Thus, following the *Bhasha Andolan*, the cultural dimension of Bengali nationalism was fore grounded.

Van Schendel describes, “the second half of the twentieth century thus witnessed the emergence of a regional culture that gradually discarded both Kolkata-centered and West Pakistan-controlled cultural models and became more and more self-confident.”

Campus celebrations and the young population of students were at the vanguard of cultural expression. Mayur recalls,

> It was a time of experimentation in theatre, writing, music. Dhaka University was full of innovation. Young people enjoyed the old traditions like Baul [a folk musical style] and then they had their

---

own ideas too. Through their expression, people tried to establish the right to a cultural identity.9

A particularly contentious issue was the poetry and literature of the celebrated West Bengali, Rabindranath Tagore. Tagore’s poems were made into songs and performed with great popularity, much to the disapproval of the West Pakistani officials, who claimed they were too Indian. In fact, in 1961, the government banned all Tagore poetry from broadcast on the radio. Students defied this ban and the work only became more popular as an expression of defiant culture.10 Cultural expression at the local level then was directly connected to the campus, and conversely, connected the campus to the wider sense of Bengali nationalism as expressed in depictions of rural pastoralism and tradition. In this way, on Dhaka University, students were both cultural revivalists, protecting longstanding heritage, and new modernists bringing those expressions to experimental forms in film, theatre, and radio in particular.

Yet it was not only local cultural expression that students experimented with. With regard to the global scale, the campus was also a space where students could congregate to debate international events such as the Vietnam War, listen to music, share magazines and discuss fashion, and participate in precisely the same types of activities that they imagined other students, on other campuses, are doing. On the Dhaka University campus, students could perform their globality without ever leaving the local geography. The local meaning, then, was not in competition with the larger global imagined community that is also present—it shared the

---

10 Van Schendal, History of Bangladesh, 156. Tagore’s own contentious political nature as an anti-colonial figure contributed to the merged political and cultural value his work presented.
same place. The Global Sixties youth identity constituted a transnational public. Thomas Oleson connects the imagined community to the physical community by explaining,

first, transnational publics are not detached from physical space, but they do imply a transformation of space, a new way of combining the local, the national and the transnational; second, transnational publics are mediated and communicative, but they are also very much rooted in real people and places and in face-to-face interactions.\(^1\)

The transnational public then includes both physical interaction and imagined connections. The way in which these connections occurred varied, but students, and their identity as such, were important carriers in the creation of the transnational public.

One of the most characteristic, and phenomenal aspects of the Global Sixties is the high level of interactions within the network of scenes. On the obvious level, we have literal physical interaction in the form of actors that move from one place to another and carry codes from place to place. Since scenes are signified locally, but often engaging with political and cultural conditions that are beyond the local level—such as the Vietnam War, rock and roll music, or racism, there is a large degree of overlap that allows relatively easy movement from one network to another. In the case of Pakistani youth, study abroad represented the ideal avenue for physical interaction with scenes in the United States and in Europe, particularly the U.K. The temporary nature of study abroad programs also created an avenue on which students carried these experiences back to Pakistan and blended them into the local scene.

In 1957, Naem G. Rathore, a Pakistani international student at Columbia University conducted a study on the international exchange students from East and West Pakistan. The purpose was to assess the experience of Pakistani students in the United States and their experiences on returning to Pakistan. The study, which consists of 2,369 surveys and 40 long personal interviews provides a detailed look into the psyche of the Pakistani international student and illustrates aspects of the global community in which students were actively participant. It also provides a glimpse of the early experience, shortly after the Bhasha Andolan but before dictatorship of Ayub Khan (1957 is when the study is finished). The study not only reflects the ways that students experienced study abroad – it also serves as a lens into their own perceptions of different components of the transnational public of global students in which they participated.

Within the study, a great deal of attention is paid to the cultural adjustment (or lack thereof) of students both in the United States and upon returning. For the majority of students surveyed, the trip to study abroad was the first instance of international travel. Of those who had travelled internationally though, the wide majority (249 of 328) had travelled to India, which likely represented only minor cultural shifts (considering the two nations of India and Pakistan had only been independent of each other for 10 years at this point). The study also offers insight into the inter-wing relationship. Rathore points out,

> It is interesting to note that 81% of the students indicated having travelled within their provinces, but that travel between the two provinces of East and West Pakistan was very low, only 3%. In

---

13 Ibid, 11.
fact, more students had gone abroad (328 students or 16%) than had visited the other wing of their country.\textsuperscript{14}

The disproportion is remarkable, but also one of physical nature. The Eastern wing of Pakistan was separated by over 1,500 kilometers from the West wing, and there was not a consistently connected a rail agreement with India for ground travel. Early communication between the two wings often took a circuitous sea route of going all the way beneath and around the subcontinent to reach the Easter province from West Pakistan. The first direct flights from East Pakistan to West Pakistan were not launched until 1955, a full eight years after the nation’s formation, and even then, were less frequent than flights to London.\textsuperscript{15} Thus, in a practical sense, it was much easier for Pakistanis in both provinces to take a holiday in India than in the “other” wing of Pakistan.

Rathore’s study also examined the motivations of students for study abroad. In the surveys, which included both students who had already studied abroad and who were preparing to go abroad the majority of students (80%) reported that they sought out study abroad due to better educational opportunity, and in a related way, 9% reported “better prospects and prestige” as their primary motivating factor. 10% of the students indicated though that their primary motivation was a “broadening of outlook in life.” As Rathore reports, “one woman student wrote: ‘It will help me to get rid of my parochial views.’”\textsuperscript{16} The students also indicate a clear preference for the United States over great Britain, (93% preferred to go to the United states over Great Britain) and while some students reported political motivations for their favorable impressions of the US over Britain, such as the US support for famine relief in Pakistan and a

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{15} Van Schendel, \textit{History of Bangladesh} 137.
\textsuperscript{16} Rathore, \textit{The Pakistan Student}, 13-14.
disapproval of Britain’s imperial relationship with the subcontinent, a great many of the students report purely cultural or personal reasons for the preference. For example, one student suggested that “American people are frank and free and not reserved like the British.” This characterization is also reflected in a study published in the *Journal of Social Psychology* in 1958. In “National Stereotypes of University Students in East Pakistan,” the authors report the characteristics most commonly ascribed to Americans were “Friendly, Generous and Open-minded,” while the three most commonly ascribed to the British were “Aggressive, Conservative, and Cunning.”

The latter study on national stereotypes does not indicate however if those surveyed (97 Dhaka University male and female students) had studied abroad or travelled at all.

The issue of American women was a concern that seemed to particularly influence perceptions as well. In fact, Rathore has an entire section of the study devoted to impressions of American women by both male and female Pakistani students studying abroad. Within their assessments there is an interesting gender divide. Rathore points out,

“Almost all of the women students had a great deal of admiration and respect for, and wished to emulate American women. The men were almost evenly divided in their opinion – with a slightly greater number holding a favorable view. The majority commented on the equality of men and women. Others appreciated the contribution American women were making to their families, communities, and country, in contrast to the passive role played by Pakistani women.”

---

In the individual comments recorded, students reveal that actual experience in the US may have demonstrated the differences between popular culture representations of women and the actuality of life in the real world. One male student commented, “American women are not what people see through Hollywood publicity. They are said to be simple, good housewives, and good mothers but many work outside the home. They perform the household duties and they contribute to their country.” 19 Another female student echoed this approval of American feminism commenting, “American women are jolly and enjoy life. They are not beaten by their men and can express their ideas freely.”20 Yet not all students saw American women, and their social or political empowerment as a benefit. In particular, students that had not yet gone abroad had more reservations about the behavior and moral standards they would encounter. As Rathore reports, “Most of the unfavorable replies came from students who drew information from sensational and tawdry magazines. They referred to what they felt to be a low standard of morality, lewd and vulgar dress, easy divorce and premarital sexual relations.”21 It should also be noted that in addition to “tawdry magazines,” Rathore reports that “Dr. Kinsey’s research seems to have received much publicity and created an astounding impression upon the students about the supposed morals of Americans. There were repeated references to his work both in the questionnaires and interviews.”22 While naturally there would be a varying level of agreement with Western feminine roles in any group, the survey results speak on some level to the transformative power of physical encounters. The students that had only media representations of Western women were more likely to view shifting gender norms through a negative lens than those who had face-to-face encounters with real women. All of the students were participating in

19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid. 20-22.
22 Ibid. 21.
a negotiation though in the implicit question comparison of American feminine norms and Pakistani norms.

In contrast to face to face encounters resulting in more favorable views of Western women’s position however, students that lived in the US had a less positive view of racial discrimination in the US. Students surveyed prior to travel in the US reported, for example, that America was “a country inhabited by different races helping one another for mutual benefit.” Of those interviewed that had lived in the US, it was markedly different. Many Pakistani students listed “racial discrimination” as their greatest challenge to study in the US. As Rathore describes in a section on housing difficulty, “The majority of them reported how a vacant place would turn into ‘Just Rented’ as soon as the landlady or landlord would answer the bell and see their complexion.” Another section of the report on cultural adjustment revisits this same issue of racial discrimination. It describes,

“Over and over again these Amgrads reported that rooms were denied to them, even though outside signs advertized ‘Rooms Available.’ One Amgrad described the experience felt by many: ‘At first they thought I was a Negro. When I told them I was a Pakistani they were nice, but they still did not give me a room.’

Students that lived abroad, while still largely favorable in their impressions of the United States, had firsthand experience with racial discrimination.

Interestingly, while highly disapproving of racial segregation and the treatment of blacks in the US, Pakistani students did not necessarily feel a sense of shared identity with African-Americans. It did, for some however, foster a sense of solidarity with white students opposed to

23 Ibid. 19.
24 Ibid. 30.
25 Ibid. 42.
racial discrimination in the South. In an event in 1966 in which a group of exchange students from the United States visited Pakistan, the *New York Times* describes an event in which, “between the songs, the students spoke about life in the United States (civil rights, Vietnam, John F. Kennedy’s assignation)...”\(^\text{26}\) The issue of racial discrimination was an issue with which many Pakistani youth could directly see the hypocrisy of American rhetoric of freedom and equality. In the Rathore report, one returned student describes, “They [Americans] say they believe in democracy, but draw the line at colored people.”\(^\text{27}\) The outrage at the injustice of racial discrimination also affected students who not travelled. Tariq Ali, while studying in West Pakistan, received his information on the United States via magazines and news reports, much like many other students. He describes,

Sometime during this year [1957], I read a tiny news item in the news-paper, which shocked my profoundly. A black American, Jimmy Wilson, had been sentenced to death for stealing a dollar in some backwood hell-hole in the Southern United States...The American magazine *Masses and Mainstream*, which also arrived regularly, had carried a great deal of material on the condition of blacks in the United States. But the sentence on Wilson surpassed everything. I went to school in a rage, discussed the issue with friends,...we decided that we should organize a school student demonstration to the US Consulate on Empress Road.\(^\text{28}\)

Ali describes the demonstration and his surprise that bystanders were largely unaware of who Jimmy Wilson was. The protest illustrates the importance of magazines and newspaper stories as modes of transmission (albeit piecemeal), but also indicates an early ideological and global political engagement on the part of the students in the they felt entitled to comment on, and complain, to the government of another nation regarding the treatment of its citizens.


\(^{27}\) Rathore, *The Pakistan Student*, 19.

Youth and Student Culture in Negotiated across Borders

It is striking, however, that whenever critiques of the United States or the American people are discussed, it is never the American student population that is the subject of either Eastern or Western Pakistani student disapproval. Indeed, it is landlords, school administrations, or the government of the US that are the source of frustration for Pakistani students. Later, the same delegation of American exchange students in Karachi mentioned earlier expressed the same impression, “They say they like us Americans and it’s just that man Johnson and his gang they don’t like.” Another student captured the disconnect clearly, “In one breath they tell us we ought to get out of Vietnam and in the next breath they ask us how they can get into an American University.” The students themselves in their exchange between the US and Pakistan became physical representatives of the coming together of different perspectives, and the result was frequently a fusion of the two. In the event referenced above, “the group…sang Bob Dylan’s ‘Blowing in the Wind’ and two Urdu songs they [the American students] learned here.”

Shamshul, a Dhaka University student who visited the United States in the early 1960s as part of an exchange program through an international NGO, recalls similar experiences of shared cultural connection, but also felt politically isolated in the United States. He recalls,

I went there [to the U.S] and I felt everyone was very kind. It was not so different once you were together with other students…the older Americans, I was unsure with them…we were much more formalized in Dhaka between the elders and young people, so I was more nervous talking to them, but the other students and volunteers, we had a good rapport. They liked to share music and wanted to hear about my country – all very friendly and curious.

29 Lukas “U.S. Students find Karachi Friendly,” 16.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
But we did not always agree either. I was already a communist, and there were some students in America that could not believe that. I did not see the potential there for a radical movement. They were not very politically wise. We had shared tastes on other things though - I watched many films in America – I couldn’t even count for you how many.32

Kabil, another student at Dhaka University during the same time, echoes Shamshul’s sense that American culture and the politics of the US government, while not exclusive of each other, were often compartmentalized. He recalls,

Well, we liked the American people. We always have been friendly. But many students, especially those of the Left persuasion, did not like the American government, because they were imperialists. So sometimes when the subject of political matters was at hand, we were, you could say, very anti-American. But we loved to watch the movies, listen to the songs… most of us, for certain the EPSU students, we liked American things.33

In addition to the United States there was also a significant amount of cultural and physical exchange that took place between Europe and Pakistan. In 1964, a French organization, Association of the Friends of the French Republic, held a month-long Friendship summer in Montargis, France. At this student summit, students from forty nations met, exchanged ideas, and discussed the politics and culture of their respective nations. While the topic of the conference was specifically economic cooperation between nations, the topics discussed included colonialism, the war in Vietnam, and the American civil rights movement. In addition, regional

---

33 “Kabil” Personal interview, 2010.
issues such as the dispute over the Kashmir region between India and Pakistan was the subject of a debate between a student from East Pakistan and a student from Calcutta, India.\textsuperscript{34}

Much like the students studying in the United States, significant components of the transnational public were also carried by the hundreds of young students returning from study abroad programs in the UK. Travel to Britain, while still only available to a small portion of the population, was far more common than to the United States and there was an established Diaspora community in Britain of family members and acquaintances. This community grew significant in the 1960s, and as travel and communication became more affordable and accessible, the connections between the two communities was strengthened. A report on Pakistani migration into Britain explains,

> Large scale immigration to Britain from Pakistan began in the 1950s, when Britain encouraged migration from the former colonies to satisfy its post war labour needs… The introduction of the ‘voucher system’ in the 1960s also aided movement from Pakistan. This allowed those who were already in Britain to arrange jobs and vouchers for their relatives and friends. The voucher system reinforced kinship and friendship bonds and had a major impact on the patterns of settlement.\textsuperscript{35}

The increase in travel in the late 1950s and early 1960s facilitated the transfer of materials and codes back and forth between the UK and both East and West Pakistan. There were then, naturally, further levels of transmission, as students brought materials that had been imported into Britain from other environments back home. The result, as was characteristic of the Global Sixties, was an influx of global information for students to use in orienting their worldviews.


Tariq Ali remembers a moment of such a materials transfer, “…my parents had visited Britain and returned with a magazine I had neither seen nor heard of before. It was the January—April 1962 double issue of the New Left Review.” Ali himself, many years later, would serve as an editor to the publication, but as a young student in Pakistan in 1962 he found the global perspective enlightening in his own construction of a political point of view. In a similar fashion of cultural transfer, Shofiq, who traveled from Dhaka University to London in 1963 recalls,

“I went to London for some study and some holiday in the time…I guess I made four or five trips between in those days. I suppose the story you expect to hear is that I went and saw all these new things—like sex, drugs, and rock and roll. But those things were not new to me. We were doing that in Dhaka too, just not as publicly…well, perhaps not so much as in England, but it certainly was here. Of course I did my part by bringing back as many albums as I could carry and mailing magazines to my sister. She waited so greedily for these magazines…it was a lot of fun actually.”

Thus, crossing borders in the hands and suitcases of family members and travelers, pamphlets, leaflets, magazines, newspapers, and various other printed ephemera from the 1960s carried the symbols of one scene to another and television footage of demonstrations and concerts also gave clear pictures of the sartorial codes being displayed by scene participants. In this way, the visual aspects of a scene could extend beyond the local, and could be picked up in other scenes and re-enacted or adapted to the local expression of a different scene. In Dhaka, there was a particular craze over mod clothing styles of London’s counterculture. Shanta, a Dhaka University student who had not travelled outside Dhaka herself recalls,

---

36 Ali, Street Fighting Years, 90.
37 Ibid.
38 “Shofiq” personal interview, 2008
"I had my hair in that little flip that all the women had - we Bengalis liked all the flowers in the hair too, because we already put flowers in our braids...and I liked the look of the London women. I remember seeing the ads for all the beauty products- it was all over the place. We did our eyelashes like the girls in the paper...I think we liked the [mini] dress of London because it looked a bit like the clothes were wore. Of course we wore pants with ours!"³⁹

Figure 2.1: Example of the feminine style represented in the media of the 1960s.⁴⁰

Shanta’s recollection demonstrates an important component of the construction of the East Pakistani cultural scene. Even if some of the origins of the style were outside of Pakistan, there

was an appropriation and adjustment of the fashions to the local conditions. Pakistani students, instead of seeing white foreigners in “Western” dress, saw young people expressing their style within their own context. They drew similarities, but also recognized their own specificity and cultural context (as Shanta does by pointing out Pakistani women wore pants with their dresses). Thus, the young people on Dhaka University’s campus provide a powerful example of how we can view the flow of cultural exchange as one of transnational, or international engagement, rather than exportation or importation. Eric Zolov in studying similar cross-fertilization in Mexico City, explains,

> Whereas earlier theories of cultural imperialism emphasized a monolithic conversion of cultural identity to the benefit of multinational capital, a transnationalist perspective offers a more nuanced reading of identity as a social process…the question is not of cultural homogenization versus cultural heterogenization, but of how the two are interactive.\(^{41}\)

Examples of such cultural interactions, or fusions, abound in Pakistan’s late 1950s and early 1960s in particular and provide important evidence for the international scale of student and youth identity in the 1960s. Rokeya, whose mother attended Dhaka University in the early 1960s, recounts her mother’s identification with the transnational culture, “She was proud of herself in the days of the 60s – she was a beautiful woman and she was always very cutting edge and cosmopolitan. She still kind of dresses like a hippie today actually.”\(^{42}\) While Rokeya’s mother had never actually travelled outside of East Pakistan, she felt a part of a larger imagined, heterogeneous community that she was able to access through media and shared information.

---


\(^{42}\) “Rokeya” Personal Interview, 2010.
In addition to being carried through travelers, this combination of cultural influence can also be found in the media produced in Pakistan itself as well. In a single page of advertisement in the *Pakistan Observer* newspaper, for example, there are ads for Urdu, Bangla and American English language films – one which depicts a “Laugh Crammed Campus Riot” entitled “Fabulous Senorita.” Another page reveals similar multicultural availability with an ad for an American Music performance alongside South Asian films.

Figure 2: As for films playing in Dhaka.\(^{43}\)

---

Perhaps the best example however, of the seemingly natural blend of “foreign” and “local” is seen in the Pakistani rock band The Bugs. The Bugs formed in the 1950s, and were by all visual regards, a cover band of the British rock band The Beatles. The members wore Beatle style haircuts and straight black pant suits.

---

44 Ibid.

---
Farooq, who played lead guitar in the band, describes the formation,

> We use to get together in Jimmy's apartment and sing along to the Beatles first album, no harmony. We all sang the lead vocal and it felt really good—no microphones, our loud singing was getting attention also from other apartment building across. Word was starting to get around in schools, we all had Beatle hair... no one in Pakistan was doing anything like this.\(^{46}\)

For Farooq, the fact that nobody else in Pakistan was doing the same thing was a point of pride. The adoption of a Western haircut was not an example of conformity to a culturally imperialist consumer culture, but rather an expression of youthfulness and the transnational public of which he felt part. The band’s drummer Jimmy Jumshade recalls,

> At that time the only 4/5 star Hotels in Pakistan (InterContinental) opened and they only exclusively engaged foreign bands, mainly from Italy. We were the first local band hired to perform at that chain... We did instrumentals and also songs of that day. Mainly The Beatles, Rolling Stones, The Animals, Creedence Clearwater Revival, The Shadows, The Ventures, Tom Jones, Englebert Humperdink, Gerry & The Pacemakers, The Eagles and some Pakee folk songs instrumentals.\(^{47}\)

The combination of folk and “foreign” music, as well as the band’s popularity among audiences of local and international origins demonstrates the transnational characteristic of the band. The Bugs also represented an example of shared community between the Eastern and Western wings of Pakistan that provides an important counter example to the widening political animosity between the two wings. Junshade recalls his trip to East Pakistan with excitement,

---


\(^{46}\) Farooq Fatah, email message to Samantha Christiansen, March 20, 2012.

…Amazing time we had like Rock Stars. We also travelled to the music and art loving people of that time: East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) where we were welcomed like heroes and we had the best time of our music days…

In a separate discussion Junshade recalls, “Indeed our trip to East Pakistan was one of the best & greatest of our experience!! And after 40 years I visited Bangladesh & met some of our fans/Groupies & it is fantastic as to how they still remember us.” Junshade’s memories also illustrate an impression of the Eastern wing as the “music and art loving people of the time,” a role the cultural revival of the Bhasha Andolan had established. It is also illustrates that the culturally rich climate of the 1960s in Dhaka, often referred to as “Bengali revivalism” and “Bengali Modernism” as also highly transnational. Music that could be determined “foreign,” provided a cultural bridge between East and West Pakistani youth, as well as the larger global community.

Conclusion

The physical, transnational cultural exchanges that occurred between students of Pakistani and the world in the period just after the Bhasha Andolan were important steps in the active construction of Pakistan’s “scene” in the early Global Sixties. As the students of East Pakistani continued to engage with the transnational public of students, the scene on the university campus reflected this shared identity. The place of the campus, as a site of performance and validation of youth culture and style is fundamental in understanding the cultural identity of students in the Global Sixties.

---

48 Ibid.
49 Jimmy Jumshade, email communication to Samantha Christiansen, February 10, 2012.
50 See, for example, Van Schendel’s discussion “A new elite and cultural renewal”, in A History of Bangladesh, 152-158.
In addition to style though, the Global Sixties were also about a new political engagement and the political aspects of the scenes should not be overshadowed. A significant aspect of the period was an engagement by many young people across the world with ideas of revolution, democracy, and the legitimacy of the state’s power. Students in Pakistan were not experiencing a new politicization; rather they felt they were leading the way as they tackled local political concerns. Shamshul, who had travelled to the US in 1962, describes,

The political consciousness of the American students was undeveloped compared to ours. It was not radical and it was not revolutionary. They had some complaints, but they were still mainly capitalist in their outlook.\textsuperscript{51}

The sense of political superiority that Shamshul felt reflects the level of political engagement of students in Pakistan following the \textit{Bhasha Andolan} politicization, but it also demonstrates an important area in which Pakistani students felt legitimately more sophisticated, and experienced, than their Western counterparts. Hassan echoes Shamshul’s characterization of American student politics,

They [referring to American students] did not have the same conditions as we did. We had no democracy – we had Martial Law. And the difference was that we had to be more serious. The students of Dhaka University were responsible for [addressing] a bigger set of problems politically. It was not child’s play for us.\textsuperscript{52}

Yet while Hassan and Shamshul drew differences out in the comparison of youth political identity, others saw parallels in the events in Pakistan and other nations. Tariq Ali points out, “Generals De Gaulle and Ayub Khan had both seized power in the same year. A decade later

\textsuperscript{51} “Shamshul” Personal interview, 2010.
\textsuperscript{52} “Hassan” personal interview, 2009.
both men would be confronted by the rise of new and powerful mass movements.” The parallels of the two national “1968s” are indeed remarkable. Almost immediately upon assuming power in the 1958 coup, Ayub Khan struggled with student resistance in both wings of the nation. In the next chapter, moving back toward a national context, the student campaign against the dictator and his policies provides another level of movement scale for students in Dhaka that ran sometimes parallel to the cultural cosmopolitanism of the Global Sixties campus, but often intersected and became intimately bound with transnational and international issues.

---

53 Ali, Street Fighting Years, 80.
CHAPTER 3
New Battles, Tested Rituals: Political Organizing on the Campus in Ayub’s Martial Law

While students in both wings of Pakistan were often able to find common cultural ground in the transnational public, the same could not generally be said for the rest of Pakistan, particularly the political establishment in each province. In fact, even with some shared cultural community among the youth of the world, the Eastern wing of Pakistan was increasingly alienated from its Western counterpart. The growing rift between the two provinces had been amplified by the Bhasha Andolan and the political legitimacy of the Western dominated government structure had been severely unsettled for East Pakistanis. Following Ayub Khan’s 1958 coup d’état, students at Dhaka University developed a deeper structure of movement capacity and the campus itself, already defined as contentious by the Bhasha Andolan, became the heart of resistance to state policies seen as oppressive and imbalanced in favor toward the West. The political machinations of the students in the years from 1958-1962 built up Dhaka University as a powerhouse of resistance and confirmed that students were a distinct political class. In the later 1960s, student politics merged more explicitly with the Awami League party platform, although “students” remained a distinct entity that exerted a considerable pressure on the party, even when cooperating. The 1960s on Dhaka University are frequently referred to as the “Golden Years” of student power, and while the greatest victory—the overthrow of the Ayub Khan regime through the 1968-1969 Mass Upsurge campaign—looms large in the collective memory of those years, the period of the first several years of Ayub Khan’s Martial Law, was an important era of cementing students as a critical political voice and the place of Dhaka University as the definitive political arena for East Pakistan. This chapter will examine how in the context of Ayub Khan’s Martial Law, students solidified their position as a political
class, and confirmed the importance of the campus space, to gain major mobilizing power in the years under Ayub Khan’s regime.

A State Autonomous from the Nation and Everyday Politics on the Campus

The *Bhasha Andolan* had touched on many grievances felt in East Pakistan and the issue of language, as, Afroza Anwary has astutely pointed out, provided an important value amplification for feelings of unfairness in the general balance of power between the wings.¹ The platform of demanding representation in language had not only opened up a discussion of representation (or lack thereof) generally, it also opened a debate over the meaning of patriotism within the new nation of Pakistan. As the government had attempted to cast the student activists in East Pakistan as influenced by outsiders and foreign agents, students responded by framing their movement in terms of their legitimacy as Pakistanis (by frequently referencing the numerical majority in the Eastern wing population versus the West). Further, as the movement developed, the framing was re-aligned to argue that students were fighting for, and protecting, a basic democratic right to language. Thus, despite the intent of the government to cast the movement as anti-Pakistani, the *Bhasha Andolan* actually validated the patriotism of students, and empowered them as protectors of national democracy.² This became critically important as Pakistan’s democratic structure transformed from the system in place at independence, which was largely dominated by the single party of the Muslim League, into political confusion after the 1954 elections. Lawrence Ziring describes,

With the 1954 defeat of the Muslim League in East Pakistan and its rupture in West Pakistan, new political formations emerged.

² Ibid.
Coalition governments reflected the failure of any single party to develop a national following and, to compound the confusion, the political individualists who are as much a part of the Pakistani scene made a shambles of the political process.³

While parties aligned and split over a myriad of contentious issues between 1954 and 1958, and there were several assassinations of leading political figures, the very fabric of the Pakistan political system seemed to be dissolving.⁴ There was widespread surprise and confusion when the beleaguered President Iskander Mirza announced in October 1958 that the constitution was suspended. He declared that political parties were abolished and Martial Law was enacted across the nation. Shortly thereafter, on October 27, 1958 General Ayub Khan took control as the President of Pakistan and Chief Administrator of Martial Law. The same day Mirza was shuttled out of the country, never to return. It was then clear that military elites had orchestrated the coup d’état and within weeks the position of the Presidency was restructured to hold vast centralized authority and the office of Prime Minister was abolished.⁵ The raison d’être for the changes was the continued political and social upheaval (with a specific point towards the crisis of the Bhasha Andolan) and the need for stability and cohesion in the fragmented nation.

⁴ Despite the typical characterization of the period as one of inertia and chaos, there were some important political developments that occurred in East Pakistan after the 1954 elections. In 1955 the major political party, the Awami Muslim League, changed its name to simply Awami League to de-emphasize the religious component and amplify its secular platform. In 1956, amidst one of many political restructuring schemes, the Awami League was offered the opportunity to sit in a provincial government in East Pakistan. The proposal was highly contentious, and while ultimately the majority of the party decided to participate in the government, others in the party argued to boycott the scheme based on the lack of democratic process and its root in the 1956 constitution that declared Pakistan an Islamic state and created a stronger centralized power. Rising political star Sheikh Mujibar Rahman participated in the new government, and the original party founder Maulana Bhashani quit the party in outrage. Bhashani formed the National Awami Party (NAP) in 1957 on a platform much farther to the left than the Awami League. In this way, it is important to note that in the period under Ayub, the Awami League was a reform party, and the NAP advocated more of a Left revolutionary platform. These differences would play out among the student groups as well, as discussed later in this chapter. For more see Van Schendel, History of Bangladesh, 110-120.
Despite its non-democratic nature, this rationale, and the military coup, was actually widely accepted among many segments of Pakistan’s population. Fatima Jinnah, sister of the nation’s deceased founding father, or Quaid-e-Azam, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, praised the change as a “new era” that promised to “root out the administrative malaise and the anti-social practices, to create a sense of confidence, security and stability and eventually to bring the country back to a state of normalcy.”⁶ Those who were less supportive were arrested and put in jail within the first months anyway (including the leaders of the major political parties in East Pakistan) and with the imposition of Martial Law and the ban on political party activity there was little to no venue for voices of dissent. Indeed, while Ayub’s coup occurred without bloodshed, it was carried out in a manner that expressed an intense power of the state and a militarily enforced intolerance for opposition. Van Schendel describes the significant shift in state structure it represented, explaining, “The coup of 1958 was as critical an event as the language movement…Whereas the language movement was a clear manifestation of the popular, participatory nation attempting to influence the state, the coup of 1958 augured in a state that was relatively autonomous from the nation.”⁷ The shift toward a state of total unaccountability controlled by the military had a particularly strong effect on the position of East Pakistan in terms of political representation. While the eastern wing still constituted a population majority, and had successfully rallied for more political representation in the 1954 electoral defeat of the Muslim League, the military had not been an arena in which East Pakistanis were well integrated. Van Schendel summarizes,

---

⁶ Morning News, October 29, 1958. Quoted in Ziring, The Ayub Khan Era, 9. Of course within a few years Fatima and Ayub would be pitted against each other politically, but in the initial period, she supported his power grab.

⁷ Van Schendel, History of Bangladesh, 118.
For East Pakistan, all this took on a special meaning. Here military rule meant that power was now even more decisively in the hands of non-locals. East Pakistan’s elite had wielded power mainly through political mobilization, not through the army or the bureaucracy. The headquarters of Pakistan’s army, air force, and navy were all in West Pakistan. The vast majority of the armed forces’ personnel were recruited from West Pakistan; a mere 3 per cent of the higher ranks were East Pakistanis. In particular, the political influence exerted by Dhaka University students, and to which they now felt entitled, had not been through military service—indeed, it had been won in popular confrontations and appeals to democracy. The imposition of Martial Law and the new concentration of power in the hands of the military suddenly closed the door to the students’ political power in both an immediate sense and in the long term potential for political careers for the middle class of East Pakistan.

Despite this shrinkage of opportunity at the national level, however, the campus itself still provided an arena in which students could operate. In fact, since the ban on political parties did not include a ban on student organizations, the campus became an oasis of dissent and the mobilizing structures and symbols established in the *Bhasha Andolan* were able to flourish rather than flounder in the face of the dictatorship. This not only further legitimated the idea that the students functioned as a distinct political class, the concentrations of political activity on the campus, further confirmed the relationship of that political identity to the campus space itself.

The entire structure of life in Dhaka University was organized around political and cultural mobilization. While the large umbrella student organizations of the *Bhasha Andolan* period remained as representative collective bodies, the organization of the students’ living halls was really the foundation of the system. This created an intensely personal connection for

---

8 Ibid, 118-119.
students to mobilization, and allowed for a wide and open arena for concerns and issues. In a celebration of the 90th anniversary of Dhaka University, the Daily Star describes the campus culture of the time and gives a glimpse into the way life was experienced by students,

… A hall-based student’s union, elected by the students of the hall, regularly organized debate, literary, cultural and sporting competitions. In the 50s, Anisuzzaman recollects, elections of central or hall-based unions were held regularly. ‘Because of hall-based cultural activities, bright students through their performance and organizational skills could easily draw attention and get elected in the next election,’ he says. ‘More importantly, we tasted the collective hall life to the fullest, which naturally created a bond and sense of solidarity amongst us,’ he adds. In the 1960s and subsequent decades, more and more students enrolled and expanded the horizons of all sorts of activities.9

This characterization matches life described by A.R. Khandaker who describes “…the Halls used to organize debates and lectures on subjects of general interest, hold competitions on set and extempore speeches and brought out magazines.”10 Both accounts illustrate a campus full of activity and an established structure that allowed for quick mobilization when needed, but also a sense of everyday politics. Thus, while from 1958-1962 there were not any major campaigns specifically oriented against the Ayub regime’s legitimacy, (although small, mostly ad hoc demonstrations had taken place on occasion), there was still a culture of political and cultural identity on the campus.

The non-centralized structure of the hall based system allowed for a multitude of issues to be discussed, circulated, and connected in the minds of students. Thus, as Kabil recalls, in one

---

10 A.R. Khandekar, quoted in Yuto, Kitamura. The Student Movements in Bangladesh: the Role of Students and Student Organizations at Dacca University during the Independence Movements between 1947-1971. (PhD dissertation University of California, Los Angeles, 2000), 64.
conversation students might discuss issues such as food quality in the canteen alongside international events such as the 1958 revolution in Iraq or the SEATO/SEATO alliances. “There was not a distinction of this is political and this is not political,” he explains, “It was just what was discussed in the day. You could say everything was political I suppose. We were, in a way, preoccupied with politics.”

The political environment is also present Shamshul’s depiction of campus life, who recalls, “We read everything – Lenin, Marx. We believed in humanism and developed a real love for the working people. The political debates of the time were significant. The needs of the working class were of great importance to us.”

The pointedly Leftist political orientation of Shamshul’s account also exhibits the prominence that Leftist revolutionary ideology had reached among the students. While during the Bhasha Andolan many students had already discovered Marxist thought, in the 1960s, Leftist thought reached the height of influence among students. The elected leaders of EPSU were all openly Marxist, and though the communist party was outlawed at the time (as were all political parties after the coup) there was connection between the students and the underground Leftist structure. Badruddin Umar explains, “As a student body the pro-Communist Students’ Union made its public appearance in 1962, but organizational preparations began earlier. A unit of the Communist Party among students was formed…which played an effective role in organizing the Students’ Union… In 1959, the Students Union won in four out five university residential halls.”

As the communist parties off campus were driven underground, they were flourishing in the corridors of the

---

residence halls. There was also a good relationship between students in Dhaka and the West Pakistani communist group, the Students Federation of Pakistan. While there was not a great deal of physical interaction between the groups, they organized events in solidarity, and shared a common platform and ideology. This helped create a sense that students were really engaged in a global, or International, community.  

Clearly, the culture on campus was certainly politicized – in fact, it was one of the few spaces where any sort of organizing was even allowed. S. Humayan and Tanweer Khalid point out,

In the initial stages Ayub Khan was able to ruthlessly suppress and restrain the Bengali regionalist politicians. The vacuum of leadership thus caused by the suppression of political leaders and parties was filled up by student leaders and their organizations. The Bengali regional discontent now came to be articulated and expressed by student leaders.  

The Bengali discontent was, in fact, growing considerably. The disparity between the wings was increasing and there was a building sense of tension in the region.

**Students Confront Interiwing Imbalance and Assert an East Pakistani Place**

Even at independence from Britain in 1947 there was a significant economic and infrastructural advantage for the Western province. However, in the period after Pakistan’s birth, the disparity between the two wings grew significantly. Wealth was largely concentrated in the

---

14 “Shamshul” Personal interview, 2010. The shared repertoire of the 1960s discussed in the previous chapter is also quite relevant here. Much of the flavor of the political components of the transnational public of students in the 1960s was distinctly Leftist, either Old or New depending on the political conditions, and reading the classic texts was a way to engage with a larger community of ideological solidarity. Of course, the left orientation of the student group also gave Ayub Khan and his regime ample political cover. He frequently claimed communists were operating out of Calcutta to undermine the Pakistani state and frequently used the social unrest in the country as evidence for communist infiltration. See Franda, *Radical Politics*, for more.

Western wing – in fact by the government’s own economic evaluation in the 1960s, 66% of Pakistan’s industrial wealth was owned by twenty-two families, all of which were in the Western wing. Further, those same elites controlled 87% of the assets of the nation’s banking and insurance industries.\(^\text{16}\) East Pakistan was also allocated far lower amounts in the national budget for development. From 1955-1960, for example, the total expenditure on the East Pakistan was 26% with the Western provinces receiving 74% of national disbursement.\(^\text{17}\) Adding further outrage to the obvious disproportion of spending was the fact that the rural delta of the Eastern province produced a vastly larger proportion of the national raw materials, particularly jute and rice. This meant that the economy of the Eastern wing developed along the lines of a supplier of raw goods for export, with little import or industrialization. East Pakistan’s share of national exports in 1948-1949 had been 44.8%; in 1960-1961 it constituted 70%.\(^\text{18}\)

The economic grievances were tied to disproportions in educational and employment opportunity as well. The numbers of students enrolled in school in combined Pakistan between 1951 and 1961 had increased by 69.42% but the difference in the numbers between the wings reveals the situation more starkly. In the same period, the percentage increase of school enrollment in West Pakistan was 143.72% while in the Eastern wing it was 6.3%.\(^\text{19}\) The apparent improvement in education at the national level can thus be seen as an opportunity largely afforded to those in the West. The disparity was also clear specifically at the level of the university. Between 1951 and 1961, post-graduate graduations increased in West Pakistan by

\(^\text{18}\) Ibid. 19.
68.58% but fell in East Pakistan by 11.96%.\textsuperscript{20} Further, the numerical data reveals that for every post-graduate in East Pakistan in 1961 (there were 7,146) there were over three in the Western wing (there were 24,324).\textsuperscript{21} Considering that the population in the Eastern wing numerically exceeded that of the West, it was strikingly clear where the educational advantages were held. Educational advantage the led to employment advantages, and the rate of employment in non-agricultural industries in East Pakistan was less than twenty percent.\textsuperscript{22} In a study entitled “Supply of Educated Manpower in East Pakistan (Students)” the report authors make particular note that of graduates in 1960 and 1965 with degrees in the Humanities, employment prospects in the Eastern province were “limited in locale and availability, leading to restlessness among the population.”\textsuperscript{23} Interestingly, in the recommendations section of the report, rather than suggest industrial changes to provide jobs for those “restless” Humanities graduates, the report proposes that “more students should be advised to study in engineering fields.”\textsuperscript{24} In the report’s breakdown of majors in East Pakistan from 1961-1969, History, Political Science and Economics command a massive majority of enrolled students (over 60%), all of whom were likely well aware of their limited employment potential at graduation. Thus, the students faced specific consequences of the disparity between the wings, as well as a generalized recognition of the imbalance.

The students, now the main bearers of political expression, expressed this “restless” discontent in frames familiar to them. Annual celebrations of \textit{Ekushe} offered fruitful ground for

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{22} Van Schendel, p. 135.
\textsuperscript{23} Institute of Education and Research University of Dacca. \textit{Supply of Educated Manpower in East Pakistan (Students)}. (Islamabad: Planning Commission Government of Pakistan) 1971.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
an assertion of political discontent and an assertion of Bengali identity. Tariq Rahman describes that, “[a] measure of resistance…was the celebration of Shahid Day [Ekushe]. The Confidential Report of the Intelligence Branch reports that in 1961 it was ‘more vocal that year. The procession in Dacca on Shahid Day was about a mile long.’” 25 Indeed, students had used the occasion to make more generalized statements of discontent. The same government report revealed that students had hoisted black flags of protest above four of the residence halls. Interestingly, the report makes a point of explaining that no specific political party could be attached to the activities and it appeared to be orchestrated by students independently. 26 The government’s awareness of the subtext of the Ekushe celebration is clear, but it made no move to prohibit student activity in the way parties were banned. Perhaps the regime underestimated the degree of dissatisfaction on the campus or the mobilizing capacity of the students, but both were made acutely clear in 1962, when the Ayub regime finally came to full blows with the students in Dhaka.

Over the course of his first four years, Ayub struggled to present his regime as valid, and took several measures in attempts to imbue a sense of legitimacy to his government. The cornerstone of his vision was a plan he called Basic Democracy. The concept behind Basic Democracy was that Pakistan’s general population was too poorly educated and naïve to really comprehend what was in their best interest, so a system in which a body of 80,000 representatives cast ballots on all issues was both more efficient and more reasonable. (The population of Pakistan at the time exceeded 170 million, making 80,000 representatives constitute approximately 4 per cent of the population.) 40,000 of the representatives would come

from each wing. There were a variety of complaints with this plan from the beginning. Some East Pakistanis argued that they were higher in population and therefore ought to have a more representative share of the votes; others argued that limiting franchise to appointed officials who not beholden to any actual electorate was not democracy at all; other still complained that the system was too vulnerable to the very types of corruption and nepotism that had led to the coup in the first place.\(^{27}\) Regardless, Ayub was adamant in his prescriptions for Basic Democracy. “Our ultimate goal,” he explained, “is to restore democracy but of the type that people can understand and work.”\(^{28}\) While the Basic Democracy scheme was laid out shortly after he came to power, Ayub tweaked the plan and process throughout his regime. In 1961, Ayub received the report from a Constitutional commission with regard to his Basic Democracy. The report was critical of Ayub’s limited franchise system and heavily centralized power, and in response he was furious. East Pakistani representatives on the commission had been particularly critical.

In January 1962 as Ayub made preparations to implement a new Constitution (that disregarded the recommendations of the commission) he arrested the most vocal opponents to his plans under charges of being “anti-Pakistani.” Those arrested included an East Pakistani political figure, Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, who had a long legacy of political legitimacy that went all the way back to the nation’s founding, had served in Jinnah’s cabinet, and had even served as the national Prime Minister for a brief period before the coup. If the government’s actions were meant to ease the pressure mounting against the Constitutional reforms, Suhrawardy’s arrest had the opposite effect. Karl Von Vroys describes the reaction of students,


The Dacca University campus erupted. During the next few days students went on strike, assembled under their traditional mango tree, passed resolutions concerning the arrests, beat up a police spy, and assaulted Pakistan’s Foreign Minister. The forceful action that followed an order to Vice Chancellor to declare a month’s vacation at the University and subsidiary colleges. The morning this decision was announced the students in mass formation left the campus, manhandled policemen, overturned and set fire to a bus, stoned firemen who arrived at the scene and chanted derogatory slogans about the President.29

The picture painted by Von Vroys matches the description of others, and importantly, also reflects the importance that space of the campus place. Kabil explains the explosive reaction,

We were already talking among ourselves. The situation with Basic Democracy was that we had no real democracy. It was not democratic in the least. The Basic Democrats would only do what Ayub demanded, so we felt it was not a real democracy. We were also angry about many things though. Basic Democracy is easy to explain – it is not a fair system. Pakistan was never really one nation. It was home to many nations. We did not feel like this system was fair, but I don’t know if we knew what would be fair at that time. We did not like the bias though. There was always a bias against the Bengalis. So when Suhrawardy was arrested it was like a spark.30

The festering resentment in the Eastern wing, and the concentration of political activity on the campus made the environment ripe for a resurgence of student action. In the days following the arrest it took on more force, and as students demonstrated against the arrest, they also asserted a more generalized anger. Umar describes,

The students of Dhaka University…were emotionally charged after the arrest of Suhrawardy and the strike of 1 February was practically spontaneous. The students not only went on strike but took out a long procession through the streets of Old Dhaka . On their way, they pulled down and tore Ayub Khan’s photographs

which they snatched from some of the wayside shops. The streets resounded with ‘Down with Ayub Khan.’”

Clearly, the students were directing their anger at the government, not merely at the arrest.

Similarly, the incident of “assault” on the Foreign Minister to which Von Vroys refers is also detailed in Umar’s account of early February. The Foreign Minister, Mazur Qader, had come to Dhaka University and was planning to give a lecture to the students. Umar describes what occurred next,

As soon as Manzur Qader entered the room…students who had gathered became very agitated and began throwing questions at him on various policies of the Martial Law Administration. As soon as he got up before the microphone, the students caught him by his shirt, spat on his face, manhandling him badly. They did not allow him to speak, took over the microphone, and began to denounce the Foreign Minister and the government. Finally, the police arrived and rescued him.

The ferocity of student anger over the arrest was clearly a dangerous situation for the government. Word regarding the confrontation with the minister spread rapidly among the students. When asked about the incident, Kabil recalls,

I was not there for the attack on Qader but of course I knew of it. Everybody heard about it. It was a big moment. I don’t recall who was behind it- it was more a spontaneous reaction. As I said, there was a great deal of anger among the students and there were many small things happening in the dormitories. The political situation on the campus was very charged.

The “charged” political atmosphere took shape into a movement the days following the arrest.

Recognizing that the campus was a dangerous tinderbox, the administration (under direction

31 Umar, Emergence of Bangladesh Volume 2, 47-48.
32 Ibid.
33 “Kabil” Personal interview, 2010.
from the government) announced on February 5th that the campus would be closed until things settled down.

Student leaders responded to the closure of the campus with force. Drawing on the traditions of *Bhasha Andolan* mobilizations, they called meetings under the same mango tree, the Amtolla, that had been the main meeting area for organizers in the past. On February 6th, student leaders of EPSU called a meeting to discuss the closure. The meeting was attended by thousands of students, and they converged on Curzon Hall on campus to march off the campus and through Old Dhaka. Police attempted to block the students from leaving the campus, but after skirmishes and mounting numbers, the students marched through the surrounding area. Umar describes,

> The student demonstration created considerable enthusiasm among the residents of Old Dhaka and many shops shut down, spontaneously creating a strike like atmosphere. These student actions largely contributed in involving the masses of the people into the resistance movement, because they were not limited to the question of Suhrawardy’s arrest but covered other grievances and were directed against the Martial Law in general.\(^{34}\)

The key moment in the day was not when the students confronted the police—they had done that repeatedly, but when they moved off campus and presented a collective identity of students as a force against the regime. The spontaneous support of non-students legitimated the voice of students as political representatives. The convergence of the local population and the students replicated the structure of *the Bhasha Andolan* in which students has acted first and were later joined by the wider population.

In addition to the sites of the *Bhasha Andolan*, students created new ritual spaces during the Martial Law period as well. One place that would remain in the popular perception of the

---

\(^{34}\) Umar, *Emergence of Bangladesh* Volume 2, 49. This meeting and march is also described in detail in Hannan, *Bangladesher Chatra Andolaner Itihash*. Volume 2, 48-56.
campus as a political space was established during the Ayub era; in the course of planning events, they held councils at the Modhur Canteen. The canteen, which was virtually a tea stall, became an unofficial, and less formal gathering spot for political conversations and ideological debates. The spatial designation of the spot as a political gathering area became quickly established. A former student describes that Modhu, the canteen owner, “became a favorite among the student leaders and was greatly loved by the youth. Out of sheer love students used to call him ‘Amader Priyo Madhuda’ (our favorite older brother Modhu).” He also describes the environment of the canteen, recounting, “By 10 am Modhur canteen would be bubbling mostly with student leaders and workers rather than customers…”

Gatherings at the canteen provided a political space for students that did not require a formal meeting and allowed for building community between groups and among students less intensely involved. Hassan describes the dispersed sense of political activity on the campus, saying the canteen was, “one of many spots. It was not just one. There was not always a formal structure or agenda. The whole area around the University could ignite at any moment.” This informal community of students and the spaces in which they congregated were intimately bound. For this reason, when the students were told on February 7th to leave the campus and clear the residence halls, the students disregarded the order and occupied the campus, barricading major entry points and declaring the area as in their control. Umar describes that after an ad hoc demonstration, “students reluctantly began to leave the residential halls, but some of them remained. It took a week for the university

37 Hannan, Bangladesher Chatra Andolaner Itihash. Volume 2, 56-60.
authorities and the police to eject them.” Skirmishes with police continued, and police began arresting students in effort to resolve the protracted unrest.

Despite the government’s attempts to minimize the press on the subject, battles and arrests did appear in some local newspapers and in the international media. The Pakistan Observer reported a clash between students and police near a campus entrance on February 11th in which police resorted to lathi charges to break up the group of marchers. It did not specifically mention which student organization was behind the demonstration, indicating on some level that the identity of “students” was a descriptive enough marker. In the international media the unrest was drawing attention as well. The New York Times reported that “Arrests Continue in East Pakistan: Up to 43 More Seized After Latest Student Agitation” and describes,

The series of demonstrations began avowedly as a student protest against the arrest in Karachi Jan. 30 of Huseyn Shaheed Suhwarardy, a former Prime Minister of Pakistan…Many persons here have expressed the view however that East Pakistani students had used his arrest only as a pretext to demonstrate anti-Ayub sentiment. Many East Pakistanis appear to feel that the Central Government favors the western part of the country.

Reports such as the one in The New York Times were upsetting to the government that was trying to minimize negative exposure in the first place. Indeed, while a few stories ran in the Pakistan Observer that mentioned the uprising, the rest of the dailies in East Pakistan had little to no information regarding the students and simply reported the basic information regarding the arrest

---

38 Umar, The Emergence of Bangladesh. Volume 2, 49.
of Suhrwardy.\(^{41}\) The local Governor General Mohammad Azam Khan, reports *The New York Times*, “sharply criticized the Voice of America for having broadcast what he said were false reports about last week’s developments here. He said the United States-owned station had made the problem look much than it was.”\(^{42}\) The Ramadan holiday helped the government to gain some control of the situation as student travelled to their family homes for the holidays and by the end of February the incidences of violent encounters and demonstrations had more or less subsided.

**The September Movement: Education Reform and New Martyrs**

Ayub’s institutional reforms included more than the electoral process. Arguing that an educated population would better understand governance, in 1959 he created an education commission to evaluate the educational system at all levels. The report was completed in 1959, but not published until 1962. Among the recommendations were several important changes to primary and secondary education, but of particular interest to the students were the university reforms. The commission report advised that the two year bachelor’s degree should be changed to a three year program, and that the exam system be tightened up, allowing only two attempts and raising the percentage required to pass.\(^{43}\) The report also addressed the issue of language. Even though the success of the *Bhasha Andolan* was established, and Bengali was

\(^{41}\) The Bangla Academy Archive Collection holds copies of all of the major newspaper sin Bangla and English for this period. It should be noted that government was fairly successful in its efforts to censor the local press. The government managed information control through the use of overt threat, by means of arrest under the Security of Pakistan Act of any editors that printed “anti-Pakistani” statements, and through more soft coercion by providing copious Press Releases with the stories as they saw them fit (which were frequently printed word for word in identical stories appearing in multiple papers). In this way, the foreign papers (such as the *New York Times*) frequently had more information during the 1960s about political events than could be printed in local editions.

\(^{42}\) Ibid.

\(^{43}\) Umar,65.
constitutionally recognized as one of the two national languages, Ayub’s frustration over the language issue lingered. He claimed,

It is quite clear to me that with two national languages we cannot become a one-nation state; we shall continue to remain a multi-nation state. I am not necessarily arguing against this; I am just stating a fact of life which has to be recognized. For it is the case that one language cannot be imposed on the whole country. It is equally true that if the people—both in East and West Pakistan—want to develop cohesion they must have a medium to communicate with each other. And this medium must be a national medium. To evolve such a medium we have to identify common elements…and allow them grow together through a common script.\(^44\)

The education commission attempted to incorporate this position into the report by recommending that Bangla and Urdu could be written in Roman script, and further suggesting the requirement that English be taught as a mandatory subject from primary through graduate level programs.\(^45\) The recommendations, coming on the heels of the Suhrawardy arrest, only further ignited fury among the students as they interpreted the move as a back door attempt to undermine the victory on the *Bhasha Andolan*. Kabil recalls the uniting and symbolic effect,

The education commission report galvanized the students to act as a body. We had many activities taking place, but we were all facing this issue as one. The issue of the three year program was part of it, but writing the Bengali script in English letters—it corrupts the entire language. The students had already rejected the writing of Bengali in Arabic, but now they were trying again to undermine our cultural heritage.\(^46\)

Thus, the script change made a direct link to the attempts made in the struggle of the *Bhasha Andolan*, and the issue of education reform was again linked to larger symbolic battles. Student leaders from the halls and from the two major groups, Chatra League and Chatra Union called a


\(^{45}\) Hannan, 243-244 and Umar, 66-67.

\(^{46}\) “Kabil” Personal Interview, 2010.
joint meeting at Modhur Canteen. At this meeting, attended by hundreds of students, they promised to work together against the reforms. The leaders of Chatro Union also made an appeal that the mobilizations against the education reform must be linked to the larger resistance struggle against Ayub’s Martial Law.\(^{47}\) While there was some disagreement among students on how widely to cast the frame (some wanted to focus on student issues while others proposed building stronger and more explicit alliances with the working class) the students united in their decision observe a general strike on August 15 in protest of the Education Commission report. They also agreed to form a new joint committee call the All Parties Student Action Committee, just as students had done previously with the Youth League during the consolidation of the *Bhasha Andolan*.\(^{48}\)

This pattern of consolidation and solidarity among the student organizations in the face of a common issue was possible due to the already established repertoire of joint mobilization on campus and it once again positioned “students” as a political force. On the day of the August 15\(^{th}\) strike, students from Dhaka University and surrounding campuses and high schools converged on the campus and met beneath the Amtolla. Speeches made by student leaders at the meeting drew connections between the arrest of Suhrawardy, the education reforms, Ayub’s new constitutional vision, and importantly, the role of students in making demands to the Central Government. Umar describes that

on hearing the speeches delivered in that meeting, the assembled students were fired up and they spontaneously joined a massive demonstration which was taken from the university premises and passed through some of the major streets of Dhaka. After that,

---

\(^{47}\) Umar, 67-69; Also see Hannan, 242-244 and Azad, Lenin *Unoshattarer gono aouvuthan : rastra, samaj o raja* (People’s Uprising of Sixty nine : State, Society and Politics) (Dhaka: University Press Limited) 1997, pp. 11-17.

\(^{48}\) Ibid.
student demonstrations became a regular feature and continued until 10 September.  

Classes were not held with regularity and the entire atmosphere of the campus was one of a nerve center. On September 10, 1962 Ayub released the majority of previously arrested students and Suhrawardy from jail suddenly announcing, “The Government is now satisfied that Mr. Suhrawardy will not henceforth participate in any disruptive activity.” Whether Ayub intended the release to be seen as a concession to the students or not cannot be known, as he made no indication of lessening his hard-lined stance on education reform or Basic Democracy, but the students at Dhaka University took it as a victory. Shamshul recalls, “We won his release essentially. Ayub was trying to undermine the collective actions of students and the workers but it was too late for that. The revolutionary mechanism was already in place.” When Suhrawardy landed in Dhaka on September 16th, he was met with a huge crowd of supporters and many students went to greet him at the airport in a celebration of victory.

The students had already called for a general strike on September 17th, and the arrival of Suhrawardy in Dhaka just one day before amplified the call significantly. At the airport rally, students handed out leaflets and chanted for the hartal the next day. Shamshul recalls, “Yes! I was there at Tejgaon [airport]. It was a huge event – possibly the largest crowd I had seen at that point for a political gathering.” The event built up excitement and students met on the campus to coordinate the next day’s event. It was decided that the day would begin with a meeting in the

---

49 Ibid.
50 Quoted in Ali, p. 222.
51 “Shamshul” personal interview 2010.
52 Umar, 69.
morning on the Dhaka University campus at 10 am. However, sporadic demonstrations began at dawn, and confrontations with police were reported across the city from early in the day.

On the campus the morning of the 17th there was some confusion but ultimately a massive procession of students marched from the campus toward the Secretariat. The march was met with heavy resistance from the police, as described by the *Pakistan Observer*,

The advance column of the procession crossed the Court Buildings peacefully. It was then that police rushed out of the …compound with *lathis* and charged the students—this cut the procession in two. The processionists also started brickbatting police and the court building. The police made further *lathi* charges on the same spot until the whole procession was thrown helter-skelter. Many were injured, among them a small boy. The road was littered with stone and bricks and empty tear gas shells, it wore the look of a minor battlefield.

The chaos of the day continued. Vehicles were set on fire, the campus was raided repeatedly, and later in the afternoon police opened fire on a demonstration of students and workers, killing several protesters. Hundreds of protesters were arrested and continued skirmishes erupted throughout the night.

Student leaders gathered and decided to observe a province wide strike the next day, and on September 18th they held a funeral procession on the campus for the students killed on the previous day. The funeral procession was allowed by police to take place, and the event took place in a somber but non-violent mood. Students declared the day “Education Day” in

---

54 Umar, 69-70.
58 Umar, *Emergence of Bangladesh Volume 2*, 72. The funeral procession was also mentioned by “Shamshul” and “Kabil” in personal interviews, 2010, but neither attended the event.
memory of the martyred students killed and September 17\textsuperscript{th} was established as day of resistance ritual, alongside \textit{Ekushe}.\textsuperscript{59} The leaders of the major political parties also gathered to issue a joint statement to the press regarding the events of September 17\textsuperscript{th}. It was signed by virtually every political figure considered to have any influence in East Pakistan, including Suhrawardy and Sheikh Mujibar Rahman. It declared,

\begin{quote}
It is with a strong sense of resentment and indignation, we condemn the wanton police atrocities that have been perpetuated upon peaceful and unarmed student demonstrations in Dacca yesterday. We are extremely shocked at the unprovoked and reckless acts. Eye-witness account of the incident discloses that the police took the offensive in attacking unarmed students and members of the public and abruptly opening the fire on them.\textsuperscript{60}
\end{quote}

The statement concludes with a demand for judicial inquiry and with the declaration that the authors, “strongly urge the government to accept the just demands of the students.”\textsuperscript{61} The political leadership aptly saw the prominence of students in the resistance and in the statement they never attempt to undermine the impetus of the protests and mobilizations as student centered. In this way, the students provided some cover for the political re-emergence of the parties. The party leaders, particularly Sheikh Mujibar Rahman, of the Awami League began to hold meetings directly with student leaders to incorporate the student component into larger regional platforms.\textsuperscript{62} Mujib’s ability to coordinate with the students was unpinned by his own participation in the Bhasha Andolan, and he was given particular credibility among students as a benefit of his past role as a student activist. In a meeting on September 24\textsuperscript{th}, the All Party Students Action Committee announced that it was going to disband and students would work

\textsuperscript{59} Humayan and Khalid, “Student Politics,” 278. Education Day was quickly incorporated into the model of annual \textit{Ekushe} memorial celebrations with pamphlets and performances occurring on September 17\textsuperscript{th} throughout the rest of the united Pakistan period.

\textsuperscript{60} “Inquiry Demanded” \textit{Pakistan Observer}, September 18, 1962.

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{62} Hannan, \textit{Emergence of Bangladesh Volume 2}, 246-262.
directly with the parties to make their demands. On September 30, after continued strikes and pressures, the Ayub government announced it would abandon the changes to the educational system, particularly the three year program of study.\textsuperscript{63} Only a few weeks later, Ayub announced that he had implemented a new national Constitution and lifted Martial Law. He also announced an election campaign for a vote (under his system of limited franchise) in 1964.

Conclusion

Following the successful mobilizations of the Suhrawardy arrest resistance and the September Movement, students began a new phase of activity that was far more directly tied to a regional political identity as articulated by the parties. Yet the students were still a powerful force—importantly, in general the parties were asking for the help of the students, not manipulating them. The period of Martial Law from 1958-1962 had clearly demonstrated that students were a significant political force, and could in fact, replace political parties when needed. The concentration of activity on the campus, once again, anchored the identity to the space of Dhaka University. Old places such as the Shahid Minar and the Amtolla were re-instituted as sacred and meaningful and new places, such as Modhur Canteen, were added to the growing political geography of the campus. Over the next six years students would work alongside parties and alongside their West Pakistani counterparts to create a force substantial enough to topple the dictatorship of Ayub Khan. The next chapter will explore how the “Mass Upsurge” campaign and its apex in 1968, was a simultaneously local, transnational, and international engagement in the eyes of students participating. The combination of an international youth identity and a strong localized political infrastructure allowed Pakistan’s

“1968” to stand as one of the most successful political mobilizations of students in the Global Sixties, yet the underpinnings occurred in the period of Ayub’s Martial Law.
CHAPTER 4
The Campus in Context: “Mass Upsurge” at a Local, Regional, and International Scales

The Martial Law period, and the fresh victories Dhaka University students felt they had achieved with regard to the arrest of Suhrawardy and the repeal of the Education Reforms, launched a new era of student political engagement. In the period of 1958-1962, the restrictions against party organizations had focused political activity, both physically and ideologically, on the campus and in the hands of students. This set the stage for students to embrace, and explore that political power even after the restrictions of Martial Law were lifted. The 1960s on Dhaka University, like many other campuses around the globe, was a time of fervent ideological debate, mobilization, and youthful expression of political agency. The combination of an international youth identity and a strong localized political infrastructure allowed Pakistan’s “1968” to stand as a remarkably successful political mobilization of students in the Global Sixties. As a result, in addition to continuing the historical examination of students in east Pakistan, the late 1960s on the campus of Dhaka University provides a strong case study for how the Global Sixties took place at different geographic scales simultaneously. This chapter will examine the period of 1964-1969, and how students on Dhaka University engaged with different contexts—local, regional, and international—through their activities as student political activists. Through this varied scale of identity mobilization, the campus, still the center of student activity, became contextualized as a movement space within a larger network of spaces in the 1960s. On the local level, students at Dhaka University continued to articulate a frustration with the disparity between the wings and mobilizations transitioned more distinctly to a movement for East Pakistani autonomy rather than student-specific concerns like education reform. Students became major supporters of the Six Points Platform, and the Awami League, and Sheikh Mujibar
Rahman nurtured a close relationship with the campus and students. The local scale was also deeply connected to regional concerns as well, as the 1965 war between India and Pakistan highlighted the precarious reality of East Pakistan’s military security. The Indo-Pak War had enraged students in West Pakistan was well, who mobilized around disapproval of the Tashkent Agreement. The shared anger over the war gave students in both wings a shared cause—opposition to the Ayub regime, although the specific grievance with regime were different. The regional dynamics of Mass Upsurge, the dual wing campaign that ultimately toppled Ayub’s rule, is an important level of interaction for the students. Finally, at the international level, student’s position in society, defined as students, connected them to a larger narrative of student unrest taking place around the world. The campaign in Pakistan was seen as one of many similar campaigns, and connections were made to student uprisings outside of Pakistan both by students at Dhaka University and students in other parts of the world.

Local Context: Politics and Parties in East Pakistan

The East Pakistan local political context following Ayub’s lifting of the ban on political activity that had been in effect during Martial Law was in a period of fragmentation. The parties that had come together in the 1954 elections to form the United Front were no longer in alliance, and there were additional splits that had occurred among them, forming even more small parties. The two parties that dominated were the Leftist party of the National Awami League (NAP) and the more centrist Awami League, now under the clear leadership of Sheikh Mujibar Rahman. As noted in the previous chapter, the NAP was the result of a split from the Awami League.

---

Maulana Bhasani, the party’s original founder, declared that the Awami League was too centrist and formed the NAP in an effort to shift the political influence toward the working class and peasant farmers. Since the Communist party had been banned in Pakistan in 1955, the NAP essentially served as a proxy party for communism in East Pakistan. The Awami League, as characterized by Bhasani, represented instead the middle class and urban elites. There is some accuracy in the depiction of the early Awami League as representing middle class interests as the leadership was comprised of almost exclusively East Pakistani small businessmen and lawyers. Mujib was characteristic of the middle class reformists, and his leadership in the Awami League in the early 1960s was particularly non-revolutionary in nature. The Awami League exclusively supported parliamentary and constitutional reforms as a means to address political grievances. There were other parties, including far Right and Islamist parties, but they controlled only marginal influence, and were particularly ineffective in the urban areas. Among the students, and on the Dhaka University campus, the NAP and the Awami League were the most influential by far. The NAP, however, was highly divided between the pro-Soviet faction and a pro-Maoist faction, and these divisions continued to undermine their abilities to act collectively. Umar explains that “By mid 1963, the Soviet and the Chinese lines sharply divided the Central Committee [of the NAP] and the entire party. These differences on the international line of the communist movement created differences in their approaches to various internal and domestic problems and tended to increasingly push these apart until the party was finally split in December 1966.”

The splits in the party had a significant impact on the Dhaka University campus as well; EPSU, the student group associated with the communists, also split. Two groups

---


3 Umar, *Emergence of Bangladesh Volume 2*, 128.
formed, referred to as the Motia group (the pro-Soviet faction under the leadership of Motia Chowdury) and the Menon group (the pro-Chinese bloc under the leadership Rashed Khan Menon). The two groups were not hostile in their interactions, but were often preoccupied with their disagreements among each other, leading many students to abandon EPSU for the more stable Chatro League, which was the student wing of the Awami League. The main unifying body on the campus was the Dhaka University Central Student Union (DUCSU), an elected body of representatives that became more prominent organizationally as EPSU declined.

In 1962, Ayub Khan appointed a new provincial governor to the Eastern wing, Abdul Monem Khan. Monem Khan was enormously unpopular, particularly among students. He also recognized the threat that Dhaka University presented and he directed a concentrated campaign at the University to undermine the political power that the place represented. Within months of his appointment, he replaced the vice-chancellor with a more cooperative figure and orchestrated the firing of several known dissident professors. In a speech in December 1963, Monem Khan chastised students for being “distracted” by politics, arguing that,

The first and foremost responsibility of students is to devote themselves to their studies. By and large the student community is aware of its responsibilities. But there are always those who for their narrow and limited purpose take every opportunity to encourage strikes and disorder in educational institutions…Through strikes and general indiscipline…the education of our boys and girls is wasted and everyone else except

5 Rahman, “The Bengali Language Movement,” 23; Umar, Emergence of Bangladesh Volume 2, 120-123; Hannan, Bangladesher Chatra Andolaner Itihash. Volume 2, 266. The issue of the dismissal of professors was also referenced in personal interviews with “Kabil,” “Nazrul,” “Shamshul,” and “Hassan.” It should also be noted that Badruddin Umar, who is the author of many works cited in this dissertation, was among the professors targeted at Dhaka University. He was was on the faculty of the Political Science department.
the people who deliberately encourage such indiscipline in the loser.\textsuperscript{6}

The argument that students as a community should not be a politicized unit is a line of reasoning Monem Khan maintained throughout his governorship, and in every annual address to the province from 1963 until 1968, it was a point he stressed.\textsuperscript{7} His continued insistence on the point, however, also belies his inability to gain any real ground on the problem.

One other major intervention Monem Khan made on the campus even more clearly illustrates the solidification of the idea as students as a political class. In an effort to undermine the campus political structure, Monem Khan created a student group of his own, the National Students’ Federation (NSF).\textsuperscript{8} Despite Monem Khan’s position that students ought to avoid political activity, the NSF organized rallies and demonstrations in support of government policies, and created chaos and havoc at other groups’ events. Kabil recalls,

\begin{quote}
The NSF were hooligans. They violently disrupted processions and they made it impossible to meet. Once I remember, they sat under the Amtolla for the whole evening just so that other groups could not convene there. Fights would break out and they were heavily supplied with weapons by the government. There had been conflict on the campus before between groups of course, but not to the degree of this. It was very disruptive.\textsuperscript{9}
\end{quote}

Similarly, in his memoir of his days on campus, Dr. Nurul Nabi describes the NSF, and confrontations, and paints a picture of the sense of terror of the NSF, recalling,

\begin{quote}
The party was comprised of opportunistic students from elitist families. The NSF recruits were the sons of members of the Convention Muslim League Party and bureaucrats. With the direct
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{6} Quoted in Kitamura, \textit{The Student Movements in Bangladesh}, 118.
\textsuperscript{7} Ibid, 119.
\textsuperscript{8} Hannan, \textit{Bangladesh Chatra Andolaner Itihash. Volume 2}, 272 and Kitamura, \textit{The Student Movements in Bangladesh}, 127-129. Note that this is not the same National Student Federation of West Pakistan, which was of a Left ideology and a leading group in the campaign to overthrow the Ayub regime in the Western wing.
\textsuperscript{9} “Kabil”, personal interview, 2010.
support of the government, the NSF’s job was to harass and frightening the activists of Chatra League and Chatra Union from participating in anti-government activities…One day after class, I was walking to the hall along the bank of the pond. As I walked I saw a couple of NSF thugs taking turns beating up another student. Their leader, Pahpattu, was smoking a cigarette, enjoying the action. This crime happened in broad daylight, but no one dared to do anything about it…Another incident of NSF bullying occurred one evening after dinner…Suddenly we heard pandemonium coming from the corridor outside. We came out of our dorm to see what was going on. We saw a number of NSF thugs with daggers and sticks in hand, screaming in the hallway, hurling abusive words toward Chatro League followers and frantically hunting for their rooms…Before we could collect our thoughts, we heard violent kicks at our door. They were screaming at us and threatened to shoot the door down if we didn’t open it…They rushed in and asked, point blank, who among us was a Chatro League activist…one of the attackers and a student from the Biochemistry department recognized me…he told them to leave us alone and luckily they did.\(^\text{10}\)

The NSF’s focus on rooting out and terrorizing student activists belies the government’s anxiety at the effectiveness of the organizations on campus. The introduction of the NSF into the space of Dhaka University was a clear attempt to undermine the organization structure of the campus.

The NSF was successful in many of its attempts to infiltrate the space of the campus, but it could not fully disrupt it. In a show of solidarity, in 1964, the Dhaka University convocation was boycotted by all of the student groups on campus (with the obvious exception of the NSF). Umar describes the event,

Governor Monem Khan was the ex-officio chancellor of the Dhaka University and he was to preside over the convocation to be held in Curzon Hall…on the appointed day, 22 March, when the Governor took the chair…the students, and with them teachers (those wearing ceremonial gowns), stood up and left the specially erected dais. This resulted in a comic situation in which the chancellor, vice-chancellor and other university authorities remained sitting in

\(^{10}\) Nuban, *Bullets Of ’71*, 102-104.
their chairs with nobody before them, under the huge *shamiana* [decorative tent] with chairs turned upside down!\(^\text{11}\)

The event was widely covered in the press, since they had all been there for the ceremony, and it was a major embarrassment to the administration. Umar points out, “The newspaper reports and photographs of the failed convocation ceremony caused considerable satisfaction in the opposition circles and it helped the anti-government mobilization considerably.”\(^\text{12}\) It was also an important statement about the campus as a place of non-cooperation with Monem Khan and the regime he represented. He may have been officially the chancellor (the governor is the chancellor of all higher educational institutions, and the administrative head of the school is the vice-chancellor) but the limits of the government’s domain were clearly demonstrated. Thus, despite fragmentation of the opposition parties, the introduction of the violent NSF, and the student groups’ ongoing bickering among themselves, there was still a sense of shared identity and place present as well, and with the right reason, it was still a force that could be mobilized.

**1965: Ayub’s Miscalculations at Home and Abroad**

In January 1965, Ayub Khan was sworn in as President of Pakistan. What followed over the course of the next year was a series of miscalculations, that ultimately destabilized the entire regime and positioned students in both wings of his nation against him. The election had not taken place with full adult suffrage, and had been contested between Ayub Khan as the government’s candidate and Ms. Fatima Jinnah as a united opposition candidate. Even though he claimed victory in the elections, the majority of the population in both East Pakistan and West Pakistan had not been given franchise, and thus, the legitimacy of the regime was seen no

\(^{11}\) Umar, *Emergence of Bangladesh Volume 2*, 90. The event is also described in Kitamura, *The Student Movements in Bangladesh*, 112.

\(^{12}\) Ibid,
differently than prior to the elections. Just a few months later, Pakistan became embroiled in the messy Indo-Pakistani War of 1965.

The war with India, also often referred to as the Second Kashmir War, revolved around the disputed territory of the Kashmir region. The dispute was a continuation of the unresolved border agreement of the 1947 Partition, and in 1965 the conflict took a sudden and swift turn in terms of military and industrial force on both sides. First a series of skirmishes in April, and then in a highly deadly period of three weeks of all-out battle in September, the conflict drew international concern for its explosive potential. In West Pakistan, the war effort was initially more popular, as the border was part of the Western province and there were stronger anti-Indian sentiments. In East Pakistan, however, the issue of Kashmir resonated far less meaningfully.

Patricia Walton Hill, an American who lived in East Pakistan during the 1960s observed in her memoirs the lack of interest felt by many in East Pakistanis regarding the war over Kashmir. Recalling a conversation about it she had with a Bengali on the street, she quotes him saying,

Kashmir! Government make a lot of noise, make trouble with India about Kashmir…What do Bengalis care about Kashmir? They have more Muslims in West Bengal in India than in Kashmir… When trouble with India, is hard for Bengalis… West Bengal has so many things we need here—fruit and vegetables all year, and good cloth, but we can never get them now.

The war was not only unnecessary to the East Pakistanis, but it disrupted the delicate regional balance of local trade and security. Indeed, the war significantly cut off East Pakistan not only from India, but from West Pakistan as well, exposing a severe vulnerability. Sisson and Rose explain, “The eastern province was cut off from the world during most of the war and saw itself...”

---

13 See Sisson and Rose, War and Secession, 19-22 for more detail on the election results.
as defenseless in the event India had decided to move armies against East Pakistan.”\textsuperscript{15} Thus, rather than stoking nationalist pride, as Ayub hoped the war would do, and which public appeals for support drew upon, the war deepened the resentment in the Eastern province.

The war was also a resounding military strategic failure on the part of Pakistan. First, Ayub had been convinced that the population in key areas of the Kashmir region would rise up with Pakistani troops in resistance to Indian occupation; that support had failed to materialize on the ground though, leaving the Pakistani troops unsupported and with poor quality intelligence. The conflict also proved that militarily Indian forces were able to advance far more effectively than Pakistani troops in both land and air capacity, a reality of the ongoing conflict that Pakistan’s population was not prepared to face. It ended in a cease-fire, mediated by the Soviet Union in Tashkent, at the bequest of the United Nations; at the time of the cease fire, Indian troops were poised to take Lahore and a Pakistani defeat was imminent. As many scholars argue, the mutual cease-fire was the best-case scenario for Pakistan who had virtually lost the war already.\textsuperscript{16}

Yet the agreement at Tashkent was not seen by the population of Pakistan as a success in any way. The agreement drove a wedge between Ayub and his close ally, Foreign Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Bhutto was a young and rising star in the West Pakistan political scene, expected to follow Ayub’s political legacy in the Presidency. He was however, intensely critical

\textsuperscript{15} Sisson and Rose, 19.
of the agreement and of the lack of intervention by Western allies, particularly the United States, in the face of such a humiliating defeat.\textsuperscript{17} Ziring describes the mood of the post-Tashkent homecoming,

\begin{quote}
News of the agreement in Tashkent shocked the Pakistanis, who had expected something quite different. Virtually everyone believed the talks would fail, and preparations were underway to welcome Ayub back as a hero of the people. But when news was relayed in the evening over Radio Pakistan there was only surprise and dismay…When the President finally returned to Rawalpindi there were no celebrations, no press conferences, and no high-level meetings. Ayub did not even seem inclined to explain why he chose to sign the agreement and went into immediate seclusion…Zulfikar Ali Bhutto likewise refused to comment and went directly to his ancestral home in Sind.\textsuperscript{18}
\end{quote}

The bizarre behavior of Ayub and the silence from the government further salted the wound of defeat. Even in East Pakistan, where the war had been unpopular all along, there was widespread dissatisfaction with the entire affair. Ayub’s miscalculations in 1965 had made it a difficult year for his regime, but he had also set forth into motion two movements, one in each wing of his nation, both spearheaded by students, that would eventually end his rule altogether.

The reaction to the end of the Indo-Pakistani War was stronger in the Western region, but it coincided with unrest in the East as well. In both wings, students played pivotal roles in the movements that developed. In fact, although there was limited physical contact between the two student mobilizations, the shared target, and the shared rhetoric of democracy in Pakistan, created a unique bond between the two provincial movements. Although technically part of one nation, and working to overthrow the same government that ruled them both, the movements

\textsuperscript{17} Bhutto disapproved so whole heartedly with the terms of the agreement that he is said to have resigned his position in the Cabinet while at the meeting, however Ayub refused to accept the resignation and Bhutto was visibly upset. See Ziring, \textit{The Ayub Khan Era}, 47-53 on Bhutto’s early career, and 64-66 for his activity in Tashkent.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid, 67-68.
operated in relative independence of each other. That said, there was still a shared identity between the students, as students of Pakistan, and a relationship that was different than the shared identity with a larger, imagined global youth community. Thus, the shared campaign of the two wings (physical and in solidarity) represents another scale of the political activity of Dhaka University students.

In West Pakistan, students took to the streets in protest just 48 hours after Ayub’s return. Riots and demonstrations, led by students but adding others as they progressed, brought major urban cities to a standstill, particularly Lahore. *The Pakistan Times* reported,

> Rioting began some time after noon. The police ordered a halt to the marchers converging on the city, many of whom were joined by veiled women who carried children said to be the dependents of men killed in the war…All attempts to stop the students were answered with increased resistance and rowdiness. Soon the brickbatting began and the police were ordered to counterattack using their tear gas canisters. The battle raged for several hours…the disorder spread around the areas surrounding the city colleges where the police, on the defensive, resorted to shooting. An official government announcement stated that the first victim was a policeman and that the struggle grew as a result.\(^{19}\)

The riots grew over the next several days and the student unrest, tapping into older grievances, changed messages from focused complaints that the government had “sold Kashmir” to larger claims of a need for greater democracy in the government. This escalation was a source of concern for the government, which was scrambling to contain the unrest, and worried that the unrest would spread too far into other segments of society.\(^{20}\) In an effort to quell the movement quickly, the government took a conciliatory tone with students, responding to demands by releasing arrested students and allowing campuses to open back up. Yet there was already in

\(^{19}\) *The Pakistan Times,* February 9, 1966. Bangla Academy Archival Collection.

motion a fundamental shift in the nature of the relationship between students in West Pakistan and the government. Ziring describes, “The students had no confidence in the Ayub regime, and all government acts were interpreted as tactics aimed at neutralizing student activism. Conflict, not cooperation, became the norm.”\textsuperscript{21} In a cable sent to the United States Department of State on February 7, 1966 assessing the political situation, it is stated forthrightly,

Pres. Ayub is in political trouble as a consequence of his new foreign policy orientation expressed most recently in the conciliatory Tashkent declaration. Pres. Ayub most probably can weather immediate adverse reaction to policy course, but his reserve political capital has been drawn down and he is under new pressure.\textsuperscript{22}

Shortly after the riots were contained, Ayub made a speech to the nation regarding the decision to sign at Tashkent, but it was by and large an instance of too little, too late. His tenuous hold on legitimacy was looser than ever, and many of close advisors, in particular Bhutto, began to distance themselves from Ayub.

The same State Department cable mentioned previously assessed the difference in the reaction to the Tashkent agreement in East Pakistan, explaining,

East Paks much less aroused about Tashkent than West wing. Fortunately opposition groups divided and, for many, Tashkent less an issue per se than tempting opportunity to embarrass govt. Such attempts make impression on students but not average Pakistani…Most East Pak opposition leaders wish to attack Ayub for authoritative practices and undemocratic emergency restrictions, and there may be some sentiment for promoting East Pak autonomy except for foreign, defense, and monetary affairs.\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid, 74.
\textsuperscript{22} Department of State Telegram American Embassy Office Rawalpindi. February 7, 1966 in Khan, 146.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid, 147.
While the assessment is correct on several points—East Pakistanis were less concerned about the terms of Tashkent than Western citizens, opposition groups were highly divided and scattered, and students were among the vanguard in finding pleasure in embarrassing the government—it misses the mark quite distinctly on the overall mood. Rather than a generalized, possible move for autonomy, there was by this point in time, a quite well developed sense in East Pakistan, emanating from the campus itself, that autonomy may be the only option for the abused eastern province. Further, it was not politicians manipulating students, but rather, politicians responding to the power bloc students represented and informed by students’ analysis. Mozzamel Hoque points out,

> Seen in retrospect, the policies of the period from 1960 to 1970 were dominated by three main issues: (i) political parity, (ii) economic rights and (iii) cultural autonomy. All three of them owed their genesis to ideas propounded by Dhaka university students and intelligentsia. The University’s role had become so pivotal that it is impossible to understand any one of the issues or the scores of ancillary issues of the time without reference to it.  

Indeed, just two days prior to the assessment cable, on February 5, 1966, Sheikh Mujibar Rahman proclaimed the Six Point Program, demanding for regional autonomy based on a confederation between the two wings. The Six Point Program was actually the outgrowth of the Two Economy Theory, which had its roots at Dhaka University. In March of 1965, Chatra League had published a pamphlet entitled *Pakistaner Anchalik Baishamya* (Pakistan’s Regional Disparity), which had been written by a Dhaka university student, Abul Kalam Azad. The pamphlet enumerated vast differences in expenditure, imports and exports, both in foreign terms and inter-zonal trade terms. The pamphlet argued that if national unity meant colonization of

---

East Bengal, then national unity was not possible. It called on students to join Chatra League in resisting the unfair exploitation of their brothers and sisters.\textsuperscript{26} The Two Economy Theory was the product of several professors in the Dhaka University Economics department, who published papers and commentaries in local newspapers arguing that the economic exploitation of the Eastern provinces amounted to colonialism, and advocated for a confederated economic system between the wings to replace the federalized system in place.\textsuperscript{27}

The Six Point Program was presented in the form of a pamphlet called "Amader Baachar Dabi", or "Our Right to Live."\textsuperscript{28} It argued for the same economic autonomy advocated in the Two Economy theory, but it was more specific in calls for separate taxation, financial systems, foreign trade agreements, and advocated for paramilitary troops for the eastern province. The only aspects the two wings should share, argued the plan, were defense and foreign affairs.\textsuperscript{29} The program also called for a sharing of power between wings and advocated a parliamentary system of government rather than the strong presidential system Ayub had put into place with his constitutional reforms.

Students enthusiastically supported the Six Point Program. While students of Chatro Union did argue that the plan was not enough, and advocated a more revolutionary platform, Chatro League and their followers responded with strong support (as would be expected given their association with the Awami League). They launched a week-long program of action

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{28} Das, Mitra. \textit{From Nation to Nation}. 142.
culminating with *Ekushe* celebrations on February 21. Here, students made important connections between the legacy of the *Bhasha Andolan*, and the new calls for regional autonomy. They articulated their cause as “Bengali linguistic nationalism” and explicitly framed Bengali identity as defined by shared language. Indeed, the pamphlets and speeches made at the event directly stated that the first battles for autonomy had been fought by the Language Martyrs.\(^{30}\)

The connection of the Six Points to the *Bhasha Andolan* was important in several ways. First, it imbued a populism into the Six Points movement that implied support more dispersed than party allegiance. Second, it connected the Six Points Program to the campus and to the legacy of student mobilization. Finally, it tapped into an emotionally familiar trope in the resentment between the wings—by reminding East Pakistanis about the Central government’s disrespect for their Mother tongue and stoking feelings of martyrdom and regional pride. This final aspect was particularly important, as the Awami League gained a strong advantage in popular appeal by tapping into regional grievance, while the NAP, already struggling with its own internal divisions, failed to articulate a platform that resonated as emotionally with the population. Kabil recalls, “The problem with the Left was that it was always about Pakistan. They were so interested in revolution for Pakistan that they missed what was happening in their own home.”\(^{31}\) Umar amplifies this point, and speculates that the rise in popularity of the Awami League following the Six Points was as much a failure of the Left to read the East Pakistani political disposition as it was a success of the Awami League to frame discontent in regionalist terms. He argues,

…the situation in East Pakistan was such that…people were just not used to looking for the real and basic reasons for their exploitation and repression. They were not politically educated, even by the Left, to develop such an outlook. They were thus getting more and more impatient to fight the enemy in whatever manner possible and those whom they identified as their enemy were those who ethnically, linguistically, and culturally were alien to them and inhabited a land a thousand miles away from East Pakistan.32

Kabil and Umar both recognize the period as one in which the Awami League shifted in position to become the major political force, but the Left, particularly on the campus, did still command a sizable following. Further, while Chatro Union did not officially endorse the Six Points, it did not agitate against them either. Shamshul recalls,

Those of us who were even not with Chatro League were not disruptive to them. We saw the Six Points as an opportunity to build a revolutionary consciousness. The Awami League was reactionary, but Chatro League had Mujib’s ear and on the campus we all influenced each other. In that way, the students influenced Mujib to the Left on many issues. It was a start – a spark.33

Students in Chatro Union also emphasized that regional autonomy did not mean that they were not still connected with their comrades in West Pakistan. Indeed, in the program of the NAP, conditions of workers in West Pakistan are addressed with as much attention as the Eastern disparity, and the program directly calls for an end to repression in Baluchistan, a region in West Pakistan that was making similar claims of regional discrimination as East Bengal.34 Thus, while this limited their ability to capitalize on Eastern wing resentment, it did create a platform of solidarity with student movements in the Western wing that were an important link in the overall campaign to unseat Ayub.

---

32 Umar, The Emergence of Bangladesh. Volume 2, 114.
34 Umar, The Emergence of Bangladesh. Volume 2, 112-114. For more on the similarities and differences between the autonomy movements in Baluchistan and East Pakistan, see Bukhari, “Autonomy is Better than Secession,” 268-282.
As Mujib and his Six Point Program gained momentum in the Eastern wing, the government scrambled to contain it. The frequency of arrests increased dramatically, and the number of “rioters” being held without due process became a point of mobilization in of itself. Mujib continued to travel around the Eastern province promoting the Six Points, and in May of 1966, the government arrested and detained Mujib following a political rally. After almost two years without charges, the government announced suddenly in 1968 that Mujib and 34 other political figures were being charged with conspiring with India to destabilize Pakistan through a secession movement. The charges were intended to deal a crushing blow to both Mujib and the entire autonomy movement. From the perspective of the government, conspiring with India, or even being accused of such, was political death. Kamruddin Ahmed explains,

> The government thought that the people will rise against Sheikh Mujibur Rahman when they would learn about the conspiracy with India…The government expected that before the end of the trial the people would demand capital punishment for the accused persons. Zafar, the then Law Minister, told the writer those days that it would be difficult for the government to save his family from mob fury.\(^{35}\)

Things did not go as planned for the government however, and the Agartala Conspiracy Case, as the case came to be known, was a political boon for Mujib, the Awami League, and the cause of East Pakistan autonomy.

In an Airgram sent to the US Department of State, the reaction of students to Mujib’s charge is depicted,

> In the quiet pre-dawn hours of a morning in early January, army troops armed with submachine guns and rifles removed a slight manacled man from the Dacca Central jail where he had been

locked up for almost two years. Word of his removal passed
the city the “baazar telegraph”—“The Army has taken Mujib”—but no
one knew where. Several law students met at a room at Dacca
U.’s Iqbal Hall and asked themselves what they could do about the
army’s seizing Mujib. The old means of protest—mass meetings
and demonstrations—seemed somehow inadequate; but no one
could suggest alternate tactics and some of the boys were
afraid…Bewilderment, frustration, and fear again beset the young
educated Bengal, and hatred of the Rawalpindi establishment was
germinating in still more Bengali breasts.\textsuperscript{36}

The cable also warns that “if Sheikh Mujibur Rahman is dragged into a public trial for obvious
political reasons without a convincing case against him he could be enshrined as a martyr to the
cause of Bengal autonomy.”\textsuperscript{37} The assessment was quite correct; instead of destabilizing the
autonomy movement in the East, it gave the scattered political scene new focus and consolidated
the disparate set of grievances into a single shared symbolic cause of Mujib’s unfair arrest.

Nurun Nabi recalls,

\begin{quote}
The Agartala Conspiracy Case made the student community and
particularly the Chatra League, more rebellious and resilient in
their cause. Most of the Awami League leaders were behind bars
and it was the student leaders who filled this void and kept the
movement alive and vigorous. Three student parties, namely the
Chatra League, Chatra Union (Menon Group), Chatra Union
(Motia Group) joined hands and intensified the anti-government
movement…even a faction of the NSF was inspired to detach itself
and join the anti-government movement. By November 1968, the
movement had turned into a full-fledged student revolution.\textsuperscript{38}
\end{quote}

The case did indeed bring the campus together. Just as in previous moments of crisis, leaders
from the major groups came together and formed an All-Party Student Committee of Action
(SCA) and formulated an 11 point program of action. Remarkably, even the pro-government
creation NSF fell apart, and the majority of the group defected to join the anti-government

\textsuperscript{36} AmConGen Dacca. Airgram to Department of State, March 12, 1968, in Khan, \textit{The American Papers}, 248.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{38} Nabi, \textit{Bullets Of ’71}, 117.
campaign. The conversion of these students is, on at least some level, testament to the transformative capacity of the oppositional culture on the campus.\footnote{39}

The Eleven Points, which expanded on Mujib’s Six Points, represented an important convergence of not only the issues of the East Pakistan students, but incorporated demands of West Pakistan as well. The demands also capture the ethos of the student idealism, with local specific grievances alongside larger more socialist-inspired demands. The Eleven Points of the SCA were:

(1) Specific demands relating to education, including the rejection of several University Ordinances; (2) Restoration of democracy and universal adult franchise; (3) autonomy for East Pakistan along the lines of the Six Point; (4) establishment of a subfederation in West Pakistan, giving full autonomy to Baluchistan, the North West Frontier Province and Sind; (5) nationalization of all banks, insurance companies and big industry; (6) reduction of taxes on agriculturalists; (7) payment of proper wages to laborers; (8) the introduction of flood control in East Pakistan; (9) lifting of the state of emergency, public safety acts and other repressive measures; (10) formation of an independent foreign policy, including withdrawal from CENTO and SEATO pacts; (11) release of all political prisoners and students and the dropping of all political cases including the Agartala Conspiracy Case.\footnote{40}

The Eleven Points expanded the appeal of the movement to a wider audience than the Six Points had, and, importantly, opened the movement up to West Pakistan solidarity and participation.

Tofail Ahmad, who was Chairman of the SCA recalls,

\footnote{39} The breaking apart of NSF was also due in part to the leadership vacuum that was created when the two most notorious leaders, Pachpattu and Khoka, were killed in quite violent circumstances. Pachpattu was stabbed to death in his bed and Khoka’s bullet-ridden body was found just off the campus grounds. There were several implications that other student groups were involved in these murders, but no charges were ever drawn up. The deaths did shake the power of the NSF, and activities seem less bold in the later period. See Nabi, 105-107.

\footnote{40} Humayun and Khalid, “Student Politics,” 280. Also see Hannan, Bangladesher Chatra Andolaner Itihash. Volume 2, 362-367. The full Eleven Point program was also published in The Pakistan Observer, January 5, 1969. Bangla Academy Archival Collection.
We were the 10 leaders of the students and we came together to make the program in the spirit of the students, and of the people. We worked tirelessly to spread the movement—we were in touch with some leaders, but not following orders. We were accountable to the students—I was elected as VP of DUCSU by the whole student body. During the Eleven Points formation we were truly a representative body of the students and the desires of the people.\footnote{41 Tofail Ahmed, Personal interview, 2010. In this case, I am not using a pseudonym due to the fact that such similar comments have been printed in proliferation in various media outlets. The use of Ahmed’s real name is done with his approval and I have not included (nor do I imply in any way that there exists) any controversial or politically sensitive material from our interview.}

Tofail Ahmad had a close working relationship with Mujib, and this undoubtedly facilitated a closer relationship between the students at large and Mujib. Ahmad recalls his personal relationship with Mujib, as well the connection of Mujib to the students, recalling emotionally,

He was like a father to me. We looked to him for guidance but his manner was not like a stern figure. We were united in our conviction to free him from the unjust imprisonment of the Agartala Conspiracy. It was a complete fabrication. It showed the people the true colors of the Ayub Khan government.\footnote{42 Ibid.}

The Agartala Conspiracy Case had provoked precisely the opposite of the government’s intent. The movement was more powerful than ever, and it was spearheaded by the most radical elements of political society: the students. As Hassan remembers, “It was really students running the show.”\footnote{43 “Hassan” Personal Interview, 2009.}

1968: The Year of the Student and “The Angry Young World”

It was not only in Pakistan that students were “running the show” and the newspapers and media fed this sense in Pakistan. While newspapers were under strict censorship and were limited in their ability to run stories about the activities of anti-government activity in Pakistan, they were free to report on the activities of students elsewhere, and they did so, in high volume.
In fact, in the *Pakistan Observer* for the year of 1968, student uprisings dominate the coverage, occupying as much attention as the Vietnam War.\(^{44}\) There was also a weekly column reporting on student political uprisings entitled “The Angry Young World” which ran articles on a variety of uprisings. The sense from reading these dailies was of a world being turned upside by youth revolt; thus even though the papers did not have any stories regarding student activity in Pakistan, they fomented a spirit of youth political agency through reportage on other arenas. Of particular interest was the rising young tar in the British New Left, Tariq Ali. In an article entitled “Britain’s Student Revolt Goes International” the international spirit of “1968” is personified by Ali,

> Britain’s Rudi Dutshke is a Pakistani 24-year-old Oxford student Tariq Ali whose energetic face, with its black mustache, is today the very face of student agitation in Britain….The mission that Tariq Ali has set himself and that of his followers is to make heard, as loudly as possible, the protest of a whole youth against the actual state of the world…For the first time in history, Britain today has an internationalist youth. However limited its action may be currently, it is opening a new era.\(^{45}\)

Articles such as these connected Pakistani students directly to the global uprising of youth political activity in 1968. They also made Tariq Ali a powerfully exciting figure, and students were eager to make contact. He writes in his memoir,

> The student movement in Pakistan (which then included Bangladesh) was in its fourth month of struggle and the revolt had extended to every town in the country. The Student Action Committee from Rawalpindi and Dhaka were pressing me to return. I was determined to see it all for myself.\(^{46}\)

---

\(^{44}\) This is from a non-quantitative but comprehensive survey of the collection of the *Pakistan Observer* at the Bangla Academy archives. In particular, the French uprisings in May 1968 and the occupation of Columbia University were covered in heavy detail, with daily updates. Bangla Academy Archive Collection


\(^{46}\) Ali, *Street Fighting Years*, 319.
Ali made arrangements to visit each wing, and after his visit to West Pakistan, where he was well received, he was certain that “The entire country seemed to be crying out for change, but before I could accurately estimate the possibilities I had to visit East Pakistan.”47 Tariq Ali’s experience in Dhaka depicts clearly the fluidity of identity in the period. On one hand he was an international figure, on another he was a West Pakistani, and yet he found common ground while simultaneously recognizing the local specificity. He describes,

I was only in Dhaka for a few days, but it became very clear that this was a different world. Linguistically, culturally and politically it was a separate nation. Its oppression made it difficult not to become a separate state. And yet, I felt more at ease, intellectually and politically, in Dhaka than in Rawalpindi. The political culture was far more advanced. I spoke at a large student meeting underneath the famous Amtala tree on the Dhaka University campus.48

Ali’s speech was important on multiple levels. As a figure, he represented an important blurring of the distinctions between East and West Pakistan, as well as international identity. His visit, and support for the East Pakistan movement represented a convergence of the scales that the mobilization existed within. The fact that he spoke under the Amtolla tied it all together.

Protest against the regime extended through the diaspora community as well, as students in London overtook and occupied the Pakistan High Commission building. *The London Times* reported,

More than 100 Pakistani students took over the Pakistan High Commission Building…after a stormy protest meeting at which students condemned the Ayub regime. They occupied two floors f the building…Demonstrator lined the balcony chanting and

48 Ibid, 323.
waving placards saying: ‘This building is occupied’ and ‘Ayub Out.’  

By the end of 1968, the movement in East Pakistan had reached new levels. The students were united at local, regional and even international scales with a sense of political agency and power.

The final blow to the Ayub regime actually began in West Pakistan. Over the course of the years 1967 and 1968, Bhutto had completely distanced himself from Ayub, and launched a new political party in West Pakistan, the Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) and had gained considerable following with the students in the West. Bhutto had even visited East Pakistan in 1967, although his visit was not as successful at garnering support there as he hoped. Bhutto was an outspoken critic of Sheikh Mujib (in fact the two men had made no secret of their mutual dislike of each other) and at the time of Bhutto’s visit, Mujib’s incarceration had already elevated him to a status of martyr. Bhutto was arrested in West Pakistan in November 1968 and students responded with force. Riots broke out in Rawalpindi, Peshawar, and Karachi, along with small demonstration on other campuses. Students attacked government offices and demanded with force the release of Bhutto and Ayub’s resignation. The riots gained international attention as they grew and students attacked foreign offices and institutions.

In Dhaka, the students responded to the uprisings in the West by escalating the Eleven Point Campaign. The leaders of SAC met at Modhur Canteen and devised a plan to bring the Ayub regime to its knees. Tafail recalls the moments just before the group launched a series of strikes in January 1969 that would come to be called Mass Upsurge, “It was no longer just

49 London Times, July 8, 1968. Quoted in Ali, Street Fighting Years, 244-245.
autonomy. We needed total governmental structural change.\textsuperscript{52} The group decided that they would call for a General Strike on January 5, 1969. The call for the strike was heeded by all of the major political parties. In response to the unity of the SAC, the political parties formed the Democratic Action Committee as a united platform to free all political prisoners and to suspend the Ayub Khan government.

The days following the January 5\textsuperscript{th} general strike were filled with constant agitation in Dhaka. The Guardian newspaper, commenting on the situation, even called Tofail Ahmed, the Chairman of SAC and VP of DUCSU, the “virtual governor” of Dhaka.\textsuperscript{53} The processions were growing larger and larger each day, and the city was no longer functioning. Demonstrations against the regime were reaching into numbers for 40,000 to 50,000 in attendance.\textsuperscript{54} On January 20\textsuperscript{th} the movement took a deadly turn. A massive procession of students had begun to march from the Amtolla to the General Secretariat. The procession was attacked by police, and police opened fire on the students. Nabi recalls,

The police confronted the protesters. A student leader of Chatra Union named Asad was at the forefront of the procession. A police officer approached Asad and brandished his gun at point blank range. He fired. Asad’s lifeless body fell to the street. We couldn’t believe what we had just seen. Anger filled our blood as we charged to the site. The police, overwhelmed, retreated. Asad’s body was recovered and brought to the college.\textsuperscript{55}

The brutal assassination of Asad uz Zamman, a History student at Dhaka University and a well known political activist on campus, had a profound mobilizing effect on the movement. The

\textsuperscript{52} Tofail Ahmed, Personal Interview 2010.
\textsuperscript{54} Umar, The Emergence of Bangladesh. Volume 2, 154-165; Ahmad, A Socio-Political History of Bengal and the Birth of Bangladesh, 216-222; Hussain, What was Once East Pakistan, 4-7.
\textsuperscript{55} Nabi, Bullets Of ’71, 122.
student community was affected deeply and personally by the death of such a popular and prominent member of the campus. Tanvir recalls his feelings on the day of Asad’s death, “I saw him in the morning. He had taken tea here at the [Modhur] canteen. He was making final preparations for the procession. I saw him that very day, then later I heard he was killed. It was a sad, sad day. He was beloved.”

A gruesome image of his dead body just after being shot, with blood pouring from the back of him was printed on the cover of virtually every newspapers the next morning, and SAC declared three days of mourning on his behalf.

Students gathered the morning after the death and raised Asad’s bloodied shirt onto a pole. Thousands of students gathered in mourning for their fallen comrade. Tofail Ahmad recalls, “At that day, we took an oath that Asad’s death would not be in vain. He was one of us—not just a Bengali—a student of Dhaka university, truly one of us. We felt a sadness deep in our bellies.”

Asad was declared a martyr by the students. A well circulated poem for the martyred Asad, captures the mood of the students,

```
Like bunches of blood-red Oleander,
Like flaming clouds at sunset
Asad's shirt flutters
In the gusty wind, in the limitless blue.
To the brother's spotless shirt
His sister had sown
With the fine gold thread
Of her heart's desire
Buttons which shone like stars;
How often had his ageing mother,
With such tender care,
Hung that shirt out to dry
In her sunny courtyard.
Now that self-same shirt
Has deserted the mother's courtyard,
```

---

Adorned by bright sunlight
And the soft shadow"
Cast by the pomegranate tree,
Now it flutters
On the city’s main street,
On top of the belching factory chimneys,
In every nook and corner
Of the echoing avenues,
How it flutters
With no respite
In the sun-scorched stretches
Of our parched hearts,
At every muster of conscious people Uniting in a common purpose.
Our weakness, our cowardice
The stain of our guilt and shame-
All are hidden from the public gaze
By this pitiful piece of torn raiment Asad’s shirt has become
Our pulsating hearts’ rebellious banner.  

The day after the three day mourning period, a gathering occurred just off the Dhaka University grounds that exceeded 100,000 demonstrators from a wide swath of society. Protesters carried placards with Asad’s image, as well as the images of the Language Martyrs from the Bhasha Andolan. During a march protesting Asad’s murder, police again opened fire, killing more demonstrators.

By the end of January, the government had virtually no control of the Eastern province and the students in West Pakistan, following the direction of Bhutto, were rioting again. In an article in a weekly newsmagazine Holiday, in February 1969, Badruddin Umar commented, “the students have emerged as a powerful political factor not because it is an accident, but because they are performing a historical task in the development of our society,” and chastised the political parties for their inability to show the same unity and sophistication as the students

---

59 Ibid. An image depicting the placards can be found in Hannan, Bangladesher Chatro Andoloner Itihas. Volume 3, 371.
demonstrated in the Eleven Point Program, arguing, “It is precisely because the students have announced a programme which is very much in conformity with the thinking of the ordinary people—the peasants, the workers, the middle class, the students…that the people have rallied around their eleven point program.” The movement had taken on dimensions that were beyond the demands of the Six Points, thanks to the students, and it had become imbued with a sense of power that Ayub could not ignore.

Ayub announced, in a symbolic tip of the hat to students, on February 21, 1969 that he would not run for office in the next election. He devised a plan for constitutional reforms and planned for Roundtable talks to discuss the reforms with major political leaders. He also released the prisoners of the Agartala Conspiracy Case, including Mujib. On February 24, 1969, Sheikh Mujib went before a crowd of over 100,000 people at the race course grounds near Dhaka University, and embraced Tofail Ahmed, thanking the students for their work and dedication. At this event, Ahmed placed a garland of flowers around Mujib’s neck and gave him the title “Bangabandhu,” (friend of Bengal). This title stayed with Mujib throughout his life, and is still used as a affectionate and honorific term for Mujib.

The roundtable talks fell apart, and finally, after months of chaos and disorder, Ayub conceded defeat and stepped down from power in March 1969. He handed over power to an interim military administration, headed by General Yahya Khan. Yahya declared Martial Law, but also declared that would hold national elections within a year. The Mass Upsurge had shaken

---

the Pakistani state to its core and the students of Dhaka University felt an empowerment that was on scales both geographically and in terms of community that was unprecedented.

**Conclusion**

The role of students in the campaign to oust Ayub had cemented the political identity of students, and particularly Dhaka University students, in the imaginations of the students themselves, but also in the now ripe consciousness of the East Pakistani nationalist movement. Yet, the movement to bring down Ayub was important not only to Pakistanis, as it existed within the narrative of student revolt that reached a fever pitch in the 1960s. While Pakistan’s “1968” is less often considered in characterizations of the Global Sixties, or even specific treatments of “1968,” the students at Dhaka University provide a good case study for the nature of political activism at the ground level and the varying scales of imagination and mobilization that existed in simultaneity. The case study of “Mass Upsurge” provides an important consideration of the ways that student mobilization at the height of the Global Sixties occurred in simultaneously local, regional, and international scales. The case also demonstrates the importance of examining the symbolic spaces of mobilization in order to understand their success (or failure) in various scales. Importantly, the campus space, while physically local, provides an ideological connection to other campus spaces across the world, and students imagine a political geography that is not defined by national borders.

Shortly on the heels of this height of success though, the students would face a terror like never before. Within two years of Mass Upsurge’s jubilant victory celebrations, the Eastern province would be embroiled in a bloody civil war. The role of students in the war transitioned
quickly and violently from cosmopolitan political agitator to *mukthibahini*, freedom fighters 
waging a guerilla war for survival.
CHAPTER 5

From Political Activists to Guerilla Warriors: Students and the Bangladesh Liberation War

And the students at the university
Asleep at night quite peacefully
The soldiers came and shot them in their beds
And terror took the dorm awakening shrieks of dread
And silent frozen forms and pillows drenched in red

Bangladesh, Bangladesh
Bangladesh, Bangladesh
When the sun sinks in the west
Die a million people of the Bangladesh¹

The success of the Mass Upsurge campaign was unlike previous student victories in Dhaka in both scale and spirit. Students felt exhilarated and empowered by what felt like revolutionary change. Indeed, even outside observers characterized the stepping down of Ayub Khan as a monumental student victory. In an article praising the new revolutionary youth of the world, the International Socialist Review described, “In Pakistan the students touched off a social crisis of revolutionary proportions which brought down the regime of Ayub Khan.”² The description in the same article of the global spirit of youth rebellion captures well the trajectory of the movements on the Dhaka Campus: “Over the past decade, a movement has grown from symptomatic indications of a mood of rebellion against a number of rotted institutions into a powerful revolt of youth...”³ East Pakistani student political identity was not new, but the

¹ Joan Baez “Song of Bangladesh.” Chandos Music, 1972.
³ Ibid.
realization that it was powerful enough to completely unseat the government gave it new vigor and enthusiasm.

The students that celebrated the victory of Mass Upsurge in 1969 were aware that they stood before a moment of substantial power change, and while the notion was still considered a rather radical idea, they may have even begun to imagine that East Pakistan would ultimately secede from Pakistan altogether, but it would have been impossible for them to imagine the dramatic process by which that change would take place, nor did they have any warning of the ferocity with which the West Pakistani forces would attack the now clearly identified symbol of Bengali resistance: the campus space and student population of Dhaka University. This chapter examines the campus and the students in the period up to and into the 1971 Liberation War that ended united Pakistan and created the new nation Bangladesh. While there already exists a great deal of work on the war, particularly the horrific conditions of the rural warfare and the international political dimension, this chapter will focus on how the actions of the West Pakistan government toward the students and campus demonstrates the symbolic importance of Dhaka University as a contentious political space. In the war period, students transition from cosmopolitan student activists to revolutionary muktibahini (freedom fighters) fighting for their own survival.

The Last days of United Pakistan and the Sheikh Mujib-Student Alliance

The relationship between the students and Sheikh Mujibar Rhaman, leader of the Awami League, was strengthened by the student mobilizations to free Mujib from the Agartala Conspiracy Case imprisonment. The physical embrace of Tofail Ahmad and Mujib as he anointed Mujib with the title Bangabhondo before throngs of student demonstrators was
symbolic of a coming together of the contentious student street agitators and the Awami League’s electoral approach. When Yahya Khan assumed power and announced that national elections would be held, students of many different parties combined forces to support Mujib’s candidacy believing that the electoral process could still result in provincial autonomy within a united Pakistan nation-state. The fact that Yahya disassembled the Basic Democracy structure of Ayub immediately and announced that the elections would follow the principal of one man-one vote was particularly encouraging for East Pakistanis who knew they controlled the majority of the national population.  

Mayur, who was a student at Dhaka University during Mass Upsurge and the war period recalls the election campaign period,

Mujib campaigned across the entire country- he went to every town and at that time he was very close with the students- often he used the family connections of students from Dhaka to help him when he campaigned in the villages. Even though I was not part of the Awami League or Chatro League then, I supported him. We all decided to put our effort behind Mujib, because he was the one who was listening. Others were only talking. He had a great presence and represented more than Awami League at that time. It was why he was Bangabhondu.

Hassan, also a student at the time, further emphasizes the influence of students on Mujib, declaring, “It was students who were running the show. Mujib adjusted his program to fit the students, not the other way.” Yet as Mujib became closer to students in the East, he became increasingly further apart from the political parties of West Pakistan. While serving as a loud oppositional voice during the anti-Ayub campaign, after Ayub’s downfall, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto’s new Pakistan Peoples’ Party had quickly positioned itself as the favorite of Yahya’s new

---

4 Umar, *The Emergence of Bangladesh*, 218-220.
5 “Mayur” Personal interview, 2010.
6 “Hassan” Personal interview, 2011.
government, and Bhutto was serving as foreign minister for Yahya. Bhutto and Mujib had never had a good relationship, but the rhetoric between them became particularly vitriolic during the campaign. Bhutto strongly criticized Mujib’s platform of the Six Points as a veiled attempt of secession, and Mujib characterized Bhutto as a typical elitist and West Pakistani chauvinist.  

Mujib’s popularity in East Pakistan continued to grow during the campaign and he worked the angle of discontent shrewdly. In an assessment of the Awami League sent by the American Consulate in Dhaka to the Department of State, the Awami League is characterized as a “remarkable mass party,” and the approach of the party in winning that mass appeal is explained in clear terms,

The Awami League is a vast umbrella sheltering many disparate elements—poor peasants, militant students, workers, middle class professionals, and wealthy businessmen and industrialists. One theme only, binds them together—Bengali Nationalism, or more precisely, anti-West Pakistani feelings. This was the entire thrust of the political campaign…There is no doubt that the Sheikh [Mujib] is the undisputed leader, receiving total loyalty from his subordinates.

Yet while clearly stating the power of Mujib and the Awami League’s many constituencies, the document also points out the importance that students played in the local political scene. It continues to explain,

Whereas party leaders reportedly still hope to obtain maximum provincial autonomy for East Pakistan as the best means of eliminating interwing disparity and addressing regional grievances, a militant minority said to be centered in the East Pakistan Student

---

7 For more on the election campaigns and the various parties and major figures, see Sisson and Rose, War and Secession, 28-34
League (EPSL) reportedly favors secession and the creation of independent East Pakistan. To the kids comprising this group, independence has considerably more glamour than does provincial autonomy…Always a notoriously difficult group to placate, students pose a dilemma for the AL by their radicalism which generally far exceeds that of their elders, as well as by the fact that EPSL provides a strong organizational backbone for the AL (and is a primary recruitment source) and the party simply cannot ignore its demands.9

The assessment also ties the Awami League to the Dhaka University campus by pointing out that almost all of Mujib’s closest advisors were intellectuals based at Dhaka University. In its detailed descriptions, it not only provides a window into the Awami League organization at the critical campaign stage, it also provides a good illustration of the distinct political class that students had “notoriously” come to occupy in East Pakistan’s political climate.

On November 12, 1970, just before the elections were scheduled to take place, East Pakistan was hit with a terrible cyclone. *Time* magazine described Cyclone Bhola as “the worst natural disaster of the 20th century – and one of the worst of all of recorded history.”10 It is estimated to have killed somewhere between 300,000 and 500,000 people. The devastating cyclone was unprecedented and still holds the place as the deadliest cyclone on record.11 In another article, *Time* magazine illustrated the attitude taken by the Western controlled Pakistani government,

…Pakistan’s government proved shockingly inept and many of its people cruelly callous… Though people were reported floating alive offshore three days after the cyclone, the Pakistani navy was

---

9 Ibid, 459.
http://www.hurricanescience.org/history/storms/1970s/greatbhola/
never ordered to search for survivors. Some 500,000 tons of grain were stock-piled in East Pakistan warehouses, but the 40-odd Pakistani army helicopters that could have air-lifted them to the delta sat on their pads in West Pakistan... Yahya Khan waited a total 13 days before making a formal visit to the area...  

Yahya, quoted in a later *Time* magazine in response to a question on the slow aid to East Pakistan after the cyclone, coldly stated, “My government is not made up of angels.” The elections were delayed until December, but the anti-West Pakistan sentiment to which Mujib and the Awami League had been appealing during the campaign was heightened drastically by the merciless stance of the West Pakistani government during the cyclone.  

The results of the December elections reflected that outrage. The Awami League won 167 out of 169 seats in the East while the Western 144 seats were split up between competing parties. The Pakistan People’s Party, under Bhutto, (the favorite of Yahya) had only secured 87 out of the 144 seats designated for the West. This effectively placed control of the Pakistani government in the hands of the Awami League, and for the first time, there was a chance of a government that was controlled by East Pakistan. According to the original plan that Yahya had put forth when planning the elections, the next step in the transfer to civilian rule would be for Yahya to designate a time for the Assembly to meet and it would then have 120 days to draft a constitution.  

What followed instead was a renewal of the fierce debate between Mujib and Bhutto over the use of the Six Points as the basis for the constitution. Bhutto and Yahya took the position

---

16 Ibid., 13.
that basing a constitution on this program would lead to a split in Pakistan. The old excuse that
the Awami League was trying to secede resurfaced and Bhutto and Yahya both made several
public vows to assure Pakistan would stay united. After several rounds of failed negotiations, n
March 2, 1971, Yahya decided to postpone the calling of the Assembly indefinitely.¹⁷

This postponement was interpreted by the vast majority East Pakistan as a way for West
Pakistan to deny their right to control the government. Mujib gave a speech on in protest, n
which e stated “I have mentioned many times the fact that a conspiracy is going on in this
country. There was a general election and the people have elected us and we have a
responsibility towards them. But in spite of the clear verdict in our favor the conspiracy has
struck at its root.”¹⁸ He also called for a general strike that shut down large parts of East
Pakistan and advocated a massive non-cooperation movement until Yahya called the Assembly
and ended martial law.

Students on Dhaka University exploded with anger at the news. The Pakistan Observer
reported,

Immediately after the announcement was read out in a special
radio broadcast on Monday, the students from different residential
halls of Dacca University and other educational institutions of the
city and the people from all walks of life…came out on the roads
brandishing bamboo sticks ad iron rods and chanting various
slogans in protest of the postponement.¹⁹

Jahanara Imam lived near Dhaka Univeristy during the years preceding and during the war, and
both her son and daughter were student activists on the campus. Rumi, her son, was killed in the

¹⁷ Sisson and Rose, War and Secession, 53-110.
¹⁸ Majumdar, Ramendu, Bangladesh, My Bangladesh. Orient Longman Ltd: New Delhi, 1972, 77.
war. Her memoir, *Ekatturer Dinguli* (The days of Seventy One)\(^{20}\) is perhaps the most widely circulated and read account of the war period from the campus perspective. In her entry for March 2\(^{nd}\), 1971, she describes the flurry of activity in the wake of the postponement,

After finishing his tea Rumi said: ‘I’m going to the University. The Students League and DUCSU are holding a meeting under the Banyan tree [the Amtolla of past mobilizations].’ I protested, ‘Why do you need to walk all the way there? You are not even a member of those parties? Why do you have to attend these meetings?’ Rumi replied, ‘Things are no longer confined to any party, Mother. Now the fire has spread everywhere.’…I glanced through the newspapers. All the student, labour and political parties have called meetings today. The East Pakistan Student League and the Dhaka University Central Student Union have called a joint meeting under the banyan tree at the University at 11 o’clock and at 3 o’clock at the Paltan. The NAP will hold a meeting at the Shaheed Minar…[it] enjoys the support of the East Pakistan Student Union…the newly formed Forward Students Block will also hold a meeting at Baitul Mukarram at 4 o’clock. All the meetings will end in protest marches. By postponing the parliament session, President Yahya has disturbed a hornet’s nest.\(^{21}\)

The choice of meeting spaces such as the Amtolla and the Shaheed Minar reflected the centrality of the campus space to the protests. As one Dhaka University librarian recalls,

There were so many people who gathered and occupied the school for many days. Every day, I could not see any grasses in the yard, because they were so loosely packed. Those people who not come into the school overflowed in the streets around the school. I have never seen so many people gathered together in my life.\(^{22}\)

\(^{20}\) Imam, *Ekatturer Dinguli*.


\(^{22}\) Quoted in Kitamura, *The Student Movements in Bangladesh*, 136.
The protests grew in size and fury. By March 4th sixteen students had been killed by police.23 The reports of injuries in across the Eastern wing numbered in the hundreds in only a few days.24 Despite the scattered violence that flared up between police and protesters however, the movement was largely non-violent.25 Students however, were anxious to see change and growing impatient. Hassan remembers that “We were ready to finish what had begun in 1969. We were ready for independence. Mujib had to be convinced.”26 Dhaka University students of all of the major student organizations held a public meeting on March 6 with the express purpose of convincing Mujib to escalate the situation and declare an independent Bangla Desh (as the name had come to be rumored) the next day at his planned speech at the racecourse. The students urged Mujib to set up a provisional government and appealed to the international community to recognize that their movement was for justice and freedom.27

The next day, the students’ influence on Mujib was clear. While he stopped short of fully declaring secession, Mujib noticeably catered to the outrage of the students. In his famous speech, attended by over 300,000 people, he declared a full boycott of all government institutions and economic activity. He said,

...now, with great sadness in my heart, I look back on the past 23 years of our history and see nothing but a history of the shedding of the blood of the Bengali people. Ours has been a history of continual lamentation, repeated bloodshed and incessant tears. We gave blood in 1952, we won a mandate in 1954. But we were still not allowed to take up the reins of this country. In 1958, Ayub Khan clamped Martial Law on our people and enslaved us for the

24 Umar, The Emergence of Bangladesh, 293.
25 Events in E. Pakistan, 22.
27 Kitarmura, The Student Movements in Bangladesh, 139, Umar, The Emergence of Bangladesh. Volume 2, 293-295.
next 10 years. In 1966, during the Six-Point Movement of the masses, many were the young men and women whose lives were stilled by government bullets. After the downfall of Ayub, Mr. Yahya Khan took over with the promise that he would restore constitutional rule, that he would restore democracy and return power to the people. We agreed. But you all know of the events that took place after that...

Mujib’s references to the movements that had been lead by students positioned these victories as precursors to the current struggle. He tapped into the sense of trajectory that the students themselves felt in their outrage. He continued to connect his position to the youth recalling the Agartala Conspiracy Case and the student campaign to free him, stating,

… What I want is justice, the rights of the people of this land. They tempted me with the Prime Ministership but they failed to buy me over. Nor did they succeed in hanging me on the gallows, for you rescued me with your blood from the so-called conspiracy case. That day, right here at this racecourse, I had pledged to you that I would pay for this blood debt with my own blood. Do you remember? I am ready today to fulfill that promise!

Mujib’s reference to the day he declared he had a blood debt was a promise he made specifically to students, on the day that Tofail Ahmed had embraced him and him called him Bangabondhu. In asking “Do you remember?” Mujib was effectively asking the students if they recalled their alliance. Finally, although Mujib declared early in the speech that he hoped that there was still a possibility for a united solution of autonomy, he ended his speech with the declaration, “The struggle this time is for emancipation! The struggle this time is for independence!” Some students interpreted this as a declaration of independence; others saw it as a mild threat with

---

29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
insufficient force. Imam describes that among students, including her son Rumi and his friends, debates on the issue of autonomy versus independence were common in days following the racecourse speech. She claims that there was no real consensus among the students, although she depicts a revolutionary influence in the tone of the conversations, recalling, “Karl Marx, Engels, Lenin and Mao Tse Tung are the subjects of the constant discussion. Jami [the younger brother of Rumi who listens in on the Dhaka University students’ conversations] has not read their works but Che Guevara seems to interest him a lot.” Either way, whether Mujib had been pushed by the radical students to move toward independence or if he still believed a united solution based on autonomy was possible and added the threat to appease the demands of students, the political influence of students is clear.

The days that followed were filled with tension. Yahya declared that meetings would be held with the intention of seating the government on March 25th. Negotiations between Mujib, Bhutto, and Yahya held in Dhaka were no success. Mujib’s non-cooperation campaign was successfully causing economic ripples in the West, and the two sides seemed to be at a standstill. Then suddenly, without explanation, Yahya abruptly broke off the meetings on March 25, 1971 and flew back to West Pakistan.

Operation Searchlight: The War and Dhaka University

As Yahya left Dhaka and ended the negotiations, a new approach was on the horizon. No longer was Yahya content to find a civil solution, and instead he turned to what he knew best: a military approach. Over the course of the night the nature of the situation changed irreversibly as
West Pakistani soldiers moved across the city in the military attack known as Operation Searchlight. *Time* magazine described how the night unfolded as Yahya left,

> Five hours later, soldiers using howitzers, tank, and rockets launched troop attacks in half a dozen sections of Dacca… Swiftly Yahya outlawed the Awami League and ordered the armed forces to ‘do their duty.’ Scores of Awami politicians were seized, including Mujib… on charges of treason.\(^{33}\)

There were numerous accounts of the atrocities that followed as part of the military “crackdown” on East Pakistan. Stephen Shalom Rosskamm described how “In the center of Dacca, the main city in East Pakistan, the army set fire to 25 square blocks and then mowed down those trying to escape.”\(^{34}\) In another account, an American working in a rural area of East Pakistan described the carnage,

> The Army simply loosed a reign of terror against all Bengalis on the theory that if they were sufficiently savage and brutal, they would break the spirit of Bengali people, and not only stop the rebellion, but ensure that it would never happen again. In the beginning this reign of terror took place in and around the cities. Prime targets of the army were anyone who were or could be leaders; Awami League politicians, professors, students, businessmen. But any Bengali was fair game for a soldier.\(^{35}\)

The concentration of violence on the night of March 25\(^{th}\) was particularly focused at Dhaka University and the students. As the Army moved to make a statement of force, the recognition of the symbolic importance of the campus as a space of contentious politics is clear. As Sarmila Bose has argued,

---

\(^{33}\) *Time*, 2 August 1971.


\(^{35}\) *Events in E. Pakistan*, 24.
If there is a single event in the military action that has captured the imagination of critics around the world as symbolizing ‘a night of infamy’ it is what happened in Dhaka University during the night of 25-26 March 1971. The spectacle of a military regime sending the army to crush a ‘rebellious’ university put the conflict in the starkest possible terms for most people and earned the regime lasting condemnation.36

Although the campus had been closed officially for several weeks due to the continued political unrest, and many students had gone from the campus to their village homes, there were still many students remaining, particularly the most radical of activists, many of whom had been training militarily and arming themselves for just such an invasion. Just as Mujib had advised them to “make every home fortress,” students had erected barricades at all of the entrances to the campus. As troops crossed the campus barricades, the reality of what military warfare really meant hit home for the students. *Sunday Telegraph* reporter Simon Dring wrote of the invasion,

> In the capital, the students, reckoned to be the militant hard core of the Awami League…talked endlessly of fighting to the death. But they had nothing more than a few rifles…equally ancient pistols, and some homemade bombs…Once the shooting started, the jeering, the shouting, the open defiance of the military might of the Pakistan Government died a quick death.37

Dring hits on an important consideration in his assessment. The students, while versed in the repertoire and ideology of revolution, had never been faced with actual warfare. At the worst points in past mobilizations, students had faced gunfire from police, but never outright military invasion and systematic attack. The result was a slaughter.

Dring described the carnage in another article, painting a gruesome image of the fate of the unprepared students,

36 Sarmila Bose, *Dead Reckoning*, 50-51.
37 Quoted in Bose, *Dead Reckoning*, 52.
Caught completely by surprise, some 200 students were killed in Iqbal Hall, headquarters of the militantly anti-government Students’ Union, I was told. Two days later, bodies were still smoldering in the burnt out rooms, others scattered outside, more floated in a nearby lake, an art student sprawled across his easel. The military removed many of the bodies, but the 30 bodies still there could never have accounted for all the blood in the corridors of Iqbal Hall.38

Dr. Nurul Ullah, a professor in Engineering at Dhaka University witnessed the attacks first-hand on the night of Operation Searchlight. He recalls,

At midnight, though, we woke up to the sound of an explosion. After a little while there were the sounds of mortar and gunfire. We all took shelter from the bullets in the passage between our bedroom and the bathroom. Feeling curious, I crawled to the window and tried to peek outside to see what was happening. At the time I was living at Fuller Road, opposite the Assembly hall [at Dhaka University]. It was a four storied flat for University professors of Engineering. From my window I could see Jagannath Hall, where there were usually a lot of students, and the large field. That night was pitch dark, even then I could feel that the Jagannath Hall Hostels and the roads around were covered by military. Then I saw some rooms in the hostels were set ablaze. In that light I saw soldiers with flash lights searching all the rooms. I couldn’t dare to stare for long. Coming back to the corridor I spent the rest of the night sleepless.39

The next morning, Ullah reports, the field in front of Jagannath Hall was covered in bodies and he set up a small video camera to record another incident in the massacre. He describes that,

.. those people on nearing to the dead bodies, the soldiers who brought them moved slightly to the east and aimed rifles at them.

38 Daily Telegraph, March 30, 1971, quoted in Umar, Emergence of Bangladesh, p.322.
For a moment everything was quiet. I saw a bearded man, kneeling down begging for life. Then the firing started. Rounds after rounds of bullets and people were falling on the ground, and bullets piercing bodies, hitting the ground, raising the dust. When the firing stopped, I saw the bearded man still alive, seemed like no one fired directly at him. The man with clasped hand was begging for his life. One soldier kicked him on the chest trying to lay him on the ground. But the man was still on his knees. Then they fired on him. His body merged with the other dead bodies. The soldiers who stood in line on the north side now they marched away. Those who killed were circling around the dead intently and fired to be absolutely sure that they were dead.\textsuperscript{40}

Another professor, Dr Muhammad Anisur Rahman, who was on the campus has recounted his experience on the campus that night as well. He describes,

We were in Flat 34C in a faculty apartment house opposite Jagannath Hall...At around 10pm we heard some noise outside, peeped through a window of our bedroom...and saw students putting up barricades on the crossing...Shortly before midnight Dora [his wife] and I woke to noise outside...and saw truck and jeep loads of military armed with rifles and light machine guns. They got off right in front of our house, lined up against boundary wall and took position facing Jagannath Hall...after a few minutes there was a mortar sound from a distance, and the sky roared with guns all around. The military had started firing fiercely at the dormitory...and our building shook repeatedly with the sound.\textsuperscript{41}

Rahman goes on to describe how he could hear the gunfire and cries as several professors staying in other flats of his building were next rounded up and systematically shot. He was spared because he had returned from a trip abroad the same day and everyone thought his apartment was

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid.
empty. Across the campus, each of the residence halls was swept and the students inside were gunned down.

The US Consul General in Dhaka, Archer Blood, sent an official telegram the Department of State on March 28, 1971 in which he stated:

Here in Dacca we are mute and horrified witnesses to a reign of terror by the Pak [sic] military. Evidence continues to mount that the... authorities have a list of Awami League supporters whom they are systematically eliminating by seeking them out in their homes and shooting them down...

The next day Blood sent another telegram, this time describing more specific events, perhaps in hopes of stirring up an emotional response from the US. He described having seen a “tightly packed pile of approximately twenty five corpses. Was told this was last batch of bodies remaining, others having been disposed of by army” at Dhaka University. He further described the grim scene that had unfolded:

Major atrocity took place Rokeya Girls’ Hall, where building set ablaze and girls machine-gunned as they fled building...Girls had no weapons, forty killed. Estimated 1,000 persons, mostly students, but including faculty members resident in dorms, killed... At least two mass graves on campus...rain [on] March 29 exposed some bodies. Stench terrible.

This account is corroborated in the memoir of a West Pakistan soldier in Dhaka at the time. Syed Shahid Hussain writes,

Troops set the hostel known as Rukayya Hall ablaze and machine gunned the girls in their rooms, including those that tried to flee. I

---

42 Ibid, 31-34.
44 Department of State, Telegram, Marc 30, 1971 National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 79, 2002
45 Ibid.
found confirmation of this crime in a verbal account given to me by Major Saeed Jung of the Pakistan Army some years later, who claimed to have participated in the carnage. He described the horror of the massacre and said there was blood all over the rooms of Rukayya Hall. No one was allowed to escape. The boys had weapons but the girls had nothing.\textsuperscript{46}

Blood’s sent two more telegrams shortly thereafter. In the first he informed the State Department that casualties in Dhaka up to that point were estimated at 4,000 to 6,000.\textsuperscript{47} In the other cable he recounted reports of systematic assassinations of students and other East Pakistanis, and described “truckloads of prisoners seen going into …camp at Peelkhana. Steady firing heard in area yesterday and today…approximately 1 shot per ten seconds for thirty minutes.”\textsuperscript{48} In addition, Blood gave more gruesome details of the atrocities occurring at the University. He described that he “saw six naked female bodies at Dacca U. Feet tied together. Bits of Rope hanging from ceiling fans. Apparently raped, shot and hung from fans.”\textsuperscript{49} Witness accounts of the atrocities on campus the night that Operation Searchlight was launched abound, and all illustrate voracious and merciless attack on the students unlike any the campus had seen before.

In Operation Searchlight, Dhaka University, above all other places in East Pakistan, was designated at the main priority for West Pakistani military control.\textsuperscript{50} The symbolic importance of the place is confirmed in the ferocity of the military attack, as not only students, but the important places on campus were destroyed. The meeting place of many movements past, the

\textsuperscript{46} Hussain, \textit{What Was Once East Pakistan}. 175.
\textsuperscript{47} Department of State, Telegram, Marc 31, 1971 \textit{National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 79}, 2002
\textsuperscript{48} Department of State, Telegram, Marc 31, 1971 \textit{National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 79}, 2002
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{50} Bose, \textit{Dead Reckoning}, 50-61.
"Amtalla was lit on fire by troops. The Madhur Canteen, another important site of student collective meetings and gatherings that had been a main gathering place during the anti-Ayub canteen, was set on fire, and the owner, Madhusudan Dey, and his wife and children were dragged into the road and shot.\textsuperscript{51} In a particularly pointed recognition of the importance of the place in the hearts and minds of East Pakistan, soldiers were ordered to destroy the Shaheed Minar. Bose interviewed Capt. Sarwar of 18 Punjab, a West Pakistan soldier, and he described his encounter with the destruction of the memorial,

\begin{quote}
His wanderings during the night brought him to the Shahid Minar, which was being demolished. It took some time to bring down the Shahid Minar—an act of vandalism that added fuel to Bengali rage, and a pointless waste of time and resources, it would seem, as there was no military reason to demolish a memorial to the language movement of the 1950s.\textsuperscript{52}
\end{quote}

Jahanara Imam recounts driving past the destroyed monument, and confirms the effect of fueling the outrage suspected by the West Pakistani soldier Bose interviewed. Imam describes,

\begin{quote}
Rumi slowed down in front of the Shaheed Minar. The broken pillars had been totally leveled to the ground. Only the foundation of the pillars could not be uprooted. I cried, ‘Oh Shaheed Minar, we shall take revenge for this indignity someday.’ I could see Rumi’s jaw hardening and lips tightening in silent resolve.\textsuperscript{53}
\end{quote}

While there may have been no military reason to attack the symbolic spaces of the campus, it reveals the symbolic importance of the campus places in the imaginations of both the students and the government.


\textsuperscript{52} Bose, \textit{Dead Reckoning}, 58.

\textsuperscript{53} Imam, \textit{Of Blood and Fire}, 49.
As the days passed, the violence escalated and the war spread across the entire city, and into the rural areas. The campus was secured militarily, and the students that had been there were either dead or had fled to safety in nearby villages. The systematic nature of the killing was also become more clear and the war took on chilling dimensions. Robert Payne gives the testimony of an eyewitness describing the process,

The place of execution was the river edge, or the shallows near the shore, and the bodies were disposed of by the simple means of permitting them to flow downstream. The killing took place night after night. Usually the prisoners were roped together and made to wade out into the river. They were in batches of six or eight, and in the light of a powerful electric arc lamp, they were easy targets, black against the silvery water. The executioners stood on the pier, shooting down at the compact bunches of prisoners wading in the water. There were screams in the hot night air, then silence. The prisoners fell on their sides and their bodies lapped against the shore. Then a new bunch of prisoners was brought out and the process was repeated.\(^{54}\)

The war spread from the city into the countryside. No longer a matter of political mobilization, the situation was now a full scale war. Students and their political identity transitioned from activists waging street demonstrations to soldiers training for combat. The war waged for nine months and during that time, the idea of “student” seemed like a thing of the past. A poem written by Sufia Kamal, a former Dhaka University student activist and leader in the women’s cultural movement, captures the transition from youthful hope to hardened warrior that many students were forced to undergo:

There’s no more laughter in blossoming girls, or in young widows.  
Their mouths and lips are firmly pursed in strong resolve.  
Restless now, like the sharp edge of a sword  

Are the tender eyes, now piercing and raised.
Not like the frightened doe are these eyes anymore.
They are searching, like a hunting hawk.
Their bitter hearts have turned cold, savage, hard
To take revenge on the brute ravagers.55

In her historical fiction novel based on Imam’s autobiography, Tahmima Anam also provides a depiction of the moment when a young student turns from idolizing revolutionary figures to joining the forces himself,

In the afternoon Rehana watched as he packed his bags. Her fingers itched to help him so she focused on something else. The books on his shelf. The posters on the wall. Mao Tse-Tung. Che Guevara. Karl Marx. He wouldn’t tell her when he was leaving, or how he was planning to get out of the city. ‘It’s better if you don’t know,’ he said.56

As the war escalated students faced a new reality and many joined the military force fighting the West Pakistani troops. Students trained alongside peasants in rural camps along the Indian border and battled for the next nine months in a guerilla war of intense causality and brutality.

Guerilla War and the Birth of Bangladesh

As a result of the widespread of massacres, millions of refugees fled East Pakistan and flooded into neighboring India. Time magazine estimated the flow of refugees into India at 50,000 a day.57 The report by the International Commission of Jurists on the matter described the refugee situation,

56 Anam, A Golden Age. 83.
57 Time, August 2, 1971.
Faced with the mounting flow of refugees, the Pakistan Government declared variously that they were lured into India by false promises, that they were prevented by India from returning to Pakistan, and that only 2.2 million of the people in the camps were refugees, the rest being homeless Hindus from the streets of Calcutta. Dr Homer Jack… particularly investigated these claims and found them all to be without foundation…All the refugees left their homeland because of killings and lootings.58

India’s Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was increasingly concerned over the millions of Bengalis that now fell under her jurisdiction. In a public speech, Mrs. Gandhi declared that India was “fully prepared to fight” if provoked too far. Indian ambassadors also warned that India might have “no choice” but to act in its own self interest in response to the flood of refugees.59 The Pakistan government declared that India was fomenting the resistance and aiding the muktibahini.

Mayur, a student at Dhaka University who had left campus before the invasion, went to India at the outbreak of the war. He then travelled to the border where he was trained to use a rifle in a camp run by Bengali military officers.60 Adnan, a Chatro League student who trained in the camps explains the relationship with India as he understood it,

They did not train us or give us arms. But they had these barracks on the border and at the last minute they decided they did not need those there. So they left them empty and we used them to train. So it was never officially given by India. It was sort of clever.61

Hassan, who had been attending Dhaka Medical College at the outbreak of the war, stated forthrightly that he had been trained in India, although he did not state explicitly who provided

58 Events in E. Pakistan, 40.
60 “Mayur” Personal Interview, 2010.
the training. “When the war broke out,” he explained, “I went to India where I learned to fight and then I returned and did my duty to fight.” 62 There were also interesting rumors among the young students that reflected remnants of the global imagination of the campus period. Adnan had heard, along with several other interviewees, that “Fidel Castro was building a training camp for young people to go to Cuba and learn the methods of guerilla war.” 63

While Castro may or may not have had interest in the ongoing war, many others did. The brutality of the west Pakistani military had gained international attention from both political and cultural figures. Indira Gandhi was also growing more and more frustrated with the continued flow of refugees and the accusations of war-baiting from Pakistani officials. Finally, in the midst of a complex period of international negotiation and posturing on behalf of the United States, the Soviet Union, and China regarding foreign involvement in the war, the threat of the India-Pakistan War came to fruition on December 3, 1971. 64 Yahya Khan launched an air strike against several Indian airbases, one of which was located 330 miles inside the Indian border. 65 Yahya cited Indian aggression as the reason and argued that the attacks were in self defense. India responded predictably and invaded Pakistan on both the eastern and western fronts. At the same time, India officially recognized Bangladesh as an independent state on December 6. 66

63 “Adnan” Personal Interview, 2010. This rumor that Castro was a supporter of the muktibahini was mentioned in casual conversation with several interviewees, and seemed to be common knowledge among many others I encountered, however I could find no verification of the rumor in any way other than hearsay. As it is, even with no means of verifying the claim, it is an interesting testimony to the global imagination of the students at the time.
64 For a detailed analysis of the international dimension of the war, see Sisson and Rose, War and Secession.
65 Events in E. Pakistan, 43.
66 Ibid.
Though the situation had the potential to escalate enormously, the war between India and Pakistan only lasted twelve days.\(^67\)

Just two days before surrender, however, in a last effort to punish the students and intelligentsia of Dhaka University, on December 14, 1971, West Pakistani troops in Dhaka launched a campaign to seek out and kill the leading intellectuals of Dhaka. Over 900 former professors and intellectual figures were rounded up, killed and buried in a mass grave near the edge of town. A memorial now stands in the place of the grave listing the names and academic disciplines of the victims.\(^68\) The Pakistani military still denies the accusation of the systematic killings on the eve of surrender although there are numerous accounts of witness and the proximity of the event to the end of the war made covering it up virtually impossible. The Liberation War Museum collection includes numerous photographs of the killing field. The vicious attack on the intelligentsia was undoubtedly an attempt to cripple the new nation by destroying its intellectual infrastructure, but it illustrates the continued place that the campus held as the origin of the spirit of defiance that the West Pakistani military had not been able to squelch.

Pakistani troops surrendered unconditionally on December 16, 1971 to Indian troops.\(^69\)

In January 1972 Sheikh Mujib was released from prison and took the helm of the new nation Bangladesh. Students could finally return to their beloved campus and did so in jubilation. Students-turned-\textit{muktibahini} gathered on the steps of the former Shaheed Minar and raised their rifles in victory.

\(^{67}\)Ibid.
\(^{69}\)Ibid.
Figure 5.1: Mujahidul Islam Selim, right, a leader of the Communist Party of Bangladesh enters Dhaka via Demra, at the end of Liberation war.\(^7^0\)

Figure 5.2: Students embrace on Dhaka University campus after independence.\(^7^1\)

\(^7^0\) Copyright Rashid Talukder. Bangladesh Old Photo Archive. Permission for non-commercial use.

\(^7^1\) Image by © Christian Simonpietri. Bangladesh Old Photo Archive. Permission for non-commercial use.
Conclusion

As Mujib began to establish the infrastructure of the new nation, student leaders were called into a new role, filling the spaces of murdered intellectuals at university positions and in political offices. Mujib quickly established a government that was dominated by the Awami League, and the national myth of the nation was increasingly tied to the victory of students. The Shaheed Minar was rebuilt, along with many other monuments to the national heroes of student activism, and Ekushe celebrations were transformed into celebrations on independence as much as culture. Student political activism, and the legacy of mobilization, was increasingly tied to political parties, rather than an identity of contentiousness. Yet the Liberation War, and the violent attacks on the campus provides important validation for the campus and a politically important place. The state’s focus on the intellectual elite, and the campus as their physical place, confirms the importance of the place for not only the inhabitants, but for their foes as well.

The fledgling nation struggled for the next several decades with a continued quest for democratic governance, with corruption, coup d’états and assassinations. While many accounts of student activism end with the war as the culmination of student power, there was another battle on the horizon that demonstrates the ongoing power of contentious politics the campus represented for students occupying it. The next chapter will extend the story into the campaign against the military dictator General Ershad as a resurgence of student political identity, and demonstrate that it was still a potent force for mobilization and still intensely tied to the legacy and symbolic spaces of the campus.
CHAPTER 6

Ritual and Resurrection: Students and the Campaign Against General Ershad

The night of March 24, 1982, it was announced by radio that General Hussain Muhammad Ershad had seized power by a military coup d'état in Bangladesh. In response, a small group of Dhaka University students formed an ad hoc demonstration and carried banners in the streets protesting the take over and demanding democratic elections. Tosbih, a student studying for his Master’s at Dhaka University at the time, recalls, “We knew we had to do something…it was totally against democracy. We knew it was important that we go out that night, not wait for a committee to form. It was urgent to make a statement that the students would not allow this.”1 The reaction in other parts of the campus reflected a similar feeling of urgency. In his memoir of the period, Mohammad Khushbu describes that all across the campus students “burst into fits of anger.”2 Recognizing the tinderbox that student outrage presented for his consolidation of power, Ershad declared Martial Law, instituted a national curfew, and ordered military forces to raid the campus to re-establish order. Posters calling for resistance were torn down, walls of campus halls whitewashed, and within a week, five students were arrested for putting up posters and swiftly sentenced to seven years imprisonment. Even so, within hours of removal, walls were being re-plastered with new posters denouncing Ershad’s takeover.3

Thus began the eight year struggle against the military regime of General Ershad. This chapter explores the student movement against the autocratic government of 1982-1990 and the

3 Ibid.
ways in which it reflects an extension of the movement culture of Dhaka University established in the pre-independence period. By reviving the master narratives of students as protectors of democracy, and recreating rituals of resistance established in previous campaigns, students at Dhaka University effectively tied their new campaign to the victories of the past. By drawing on cultural referents and familiar rhetoric of past student mobilizations such as the *Bhasha* Andolan, the Anti-Ayub campaign, and Liberation War, students legitimated the resistance against Ershad. This was particularly remarkable as the two major political parties floundered in the face of the regime. The oral testimony of student participants in the anti-Ershad campaign also particularly demonstrates the ways in which the space of Dhaka University, and the conceptions of the place as the site of student democratic politics, asserted a pressure onto students, compelling them to resist the Ershad government by virtue of sharing the same space and role as previous contestants to un-democratic governments. In the course of the movement against Ershad, the campus functioned as an autonomous zone, never fully integrated into the military regimes hold. Within this zone, students asserted their political independence from the nationalist rhetoric of the dictatorship and articulated a culture of resistance through massive political mobilizations and cultural expression.

While the contest for power between the students and Ershad is a topic of some consideration, it is quite limited. S.M Shamshul Alam, Badruddin Omar, and Talukder Maniruzzaman have all put forth accounts arguing for the centrality of students in the campaign to bring down the autocratic dictatorship. As these examinations all agree, at no point during Ershad’s regime was he ever able to secure the campus area, physically or psychologically. The

---

student community, particularly focused at Dhaka University campus, under a variety of organizational headings, organized massive demonstrations, hartals, and at times, outright riots in a prolonged effort to oust the Ershad junta. In fact, the antagonistic relationship between Ershad and the DU student community is one of continued legend; a common joke among contemporary students of DU reflects this: General Ershad was known for wearing his hair very short, and the joke asks “How does Ershad’s barber get his hair cut so close?” The answer is “Easy – his barber simply tells him there is a group of Dhaka University students outside and when his hair all stands on end, he snips it close.”\(^5\) This nervousness is reflected in Khushbu’s account as well, and he points out that in the first days of power, Ershad could regularly be seen riding to the office on his bicycle, “but within months he had taken to a helicopter for all travel, even to attend mosque.”\(^6\)

**The Context of Ershad’s Coup**

Ershad’s uneasiness with regard to his physical security mirrored his anxieties over the legitimacy of his regime. Ershad had come to power as direct result of instability leading towards, and then in the wake of, President Zia’s assassination. Discontent in the military had been brewing since independence and had reached a fever pitch during the Zia regime in the form in several unsuccessful attempted coups. Harsh reprisals on the part of the Zia regime had only further deepened the cleavages within the military ranks. Following Zia’s assassination by dissident military officers on May 31, 1981, Ershad mobilized a strong following in the military, consolidating many former rivals behind him, that enabled him to take power in the bloodless

---

coup. Once in power, Ershad made sure his efforts to stabilize his military backing were not lost. He kept the military happy with political and economic favor and turned his focus toward establishing civil stability.

In April 1982, Ershad gave a lecture to the Dhaka District Union Parishad and Municipal Chairmen. He declared, “I will set up such a democracy that it will go down in history as a unique event.” This goal, however, would be an increasingly elusive prize for Ershad. Maniruzziman explains, “the nearly nine year regime of Ershad can be described as Ershad’s attempt to conquer the civil society which ultimately ended in the destruction of his authoritarian regime.” Yet in April 1982, it was perhaps not so clear to Ershad how difficult establishing his legitimacy would prove to be. From his point of view, standing before his audience in April 1982, there had been some political resistance and arrests already, but the major political parties were remarkably (and conveniently) cautious in expressing their opposition. Ershad expressed confidence that he could bring these parties together, just as he had rallied his supporters in the

---

7 The main factions in the Bangladesh army actually mirrored that of Bangladesh’s power elite. The two main factions in the army consisted of former muktibahini, usually with Left leaning political sympathies concerned with completing revolution that was thought to have been lost under the Zia regime, and the second faction of “repatriated” soldiers, who had been in West Pakistan during the war and returned in 1973-74 following Zia’s coup and were typically conservative and business oriented. The second faction, as characterized by Maniruzziman, was tired of what they saw as an unfair monopoly on nationalist pride held by the faction of muktibahini (because they’d been in the war). The repatriated soldiers, under Ershad, combined with officers that had joined after the war to aggressively articulate a re-claiming of patriotism and assert their legitimacy as leaders of the nation. The Sattar government, which had been elected in the period following Zia’s assassination, put up little resistance, for reasons subject to great speculation, virtually handing power to Ershad in 1982. For more detailed analysis of the military political backdrop, see Talukder Maniruzziman, “The Fall of the Military Dictator: 1991 Elections and the Prospect of Civilian Rule in Bangladesh.” Pacific Affairs, Vol. 65, No. 2, Summer, 1992, pp. 203-224; Baxter, Bangladesh from a Nation to a State, and William B. Milam, Bangladesh and Pakistan: Flirting with Failure in South Asia. (New York: Columbia University Press) 2009.
8 Quoted in Khushbu, Bangladesher Chattra Andoloner Itihash, 2.
9 Maniruzziman, “The Fall of the Military Dictator,” 205.
10 The Awami League and the BNP were certainly not silent with regard to the coup, but both parties were likely caught by surprise (as was almost everyone) by the sudden coup only four months after previous government was seated. As a result of the surprise factor, combined with brand new leadership in both, the response in the first few months of Ershad’s takeover was not well organized and unclear. For more detail on the political climate of Ershad’s takeover and the condition of the political parties, see Peter J. Bertocci, “Bangladesh in the Early 1980s: Praetorian Politics in an Intermediate Regime” Asian Survey, Vol. 22, No. 10 (Oct., 1982), pp. 988-1008.
Alongside the strong arm tactic of curfews and Martial Law, Ershad launched a campaign of civil and administrative reforms that constituted a program to create what Lawrence Ziring calls, “not a politically integrated society, but a relatively unified one.”

Prior to Ershad’s coup, during Zia’s period of rule, Zia had emphasized the party structure of politics. He created his own political party, the Bangladesh National Party (BNP), and in doing so, had also produced a political system dominated by competition between two major parties—the Awami League and the BNP, and a multitude of smaller parties, spanning from the Islamists of the far Right to the Maoists and Soviets of the far Left. Both the Awami League and the BNP (Bangladesh National Party) were taken aback by the coup and failed to formulate a comprehensive response. In both parties, there was new leadership. Sheikh Hasina, the daughter of Sheikh Mujibar Rahman was the party head of the Awami League, dedicated to “rescuing” the legacy of Bangabandhu’s vision for Bangladesh from the devastation of the Zia’s regime’s rightward shift. After Zia’s assassination, leadership of the BNP was taken over by his widow Khaleda Zia. That the two parties held animosity toward each other is an understatement of great proportion. Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia both had long standing, and personal grievances against the other that ultimately translated into guiding principles of the parties themselves. As head of the Awami League, Sheikh Hasina refused to cooperate with the BNP,

---

13 Although Zia had periodically outlawed several of the Left political organizations (and at points, all political activity), and his retaliations in response to the many Leftist inspired coups during his reign had decimated the numbers of Leftists in the military, his reach had been far less effective in clearing the campus of the Leftist influence. On Zia’s creation of the BNP as an attempt to civilianize the military regime (a tactic also employed by Ershad) see, Syed Sirajul Islam, “The State in Bangladesh under Zia (1975-1981) Asian Survey, Vol. 24, No. 5 (May, 1984), pp. 556-573 and Nizam Ahmed, “From Monopoly to Competition: Party Politics in the Bangladesh Parliament (1973-2001),” Pacific Affairs, Vol. 76, No. 1 (Spring, 2003): 55-77, as well as Ziring, *Bangladesh from Mujib to Ershad* and Milam, *Bangladesh and Pakistan*. 
under charges they had killed her father. Similarly, Khaleda Zia claimed on several occasions that she suspected Ershad was responsible for her husband’s death, and implied, sometimes more subtly than not, that the Awami League had been complicit in his murder. Thus at the point in which Ershad became a mutual opponent, the political rivalry and hatred between the two groups had become such defining features of the parties that their shared political position was obscured. This rivalry (for lack of a stronger word) utterly prevented the two parties from forming any kind of alliance in the face of the Ershad take over. In fact, as several analysts have argued, the strength of the Ershad regime, and the explanation for how he was able to suspend democracy for so long, lay not in any effective control on his part, but in the lack of the oppositional parties to form agreement in their campaign against him. The two parties formed separate alliances with smaller organizations, made separate (usually competing) statements, held separate demonstrations in opposition to the regime, and actively forbade the student wings of their parties from cooperating with their rivals.

In a similar fashion as national politics, campus politics under Zia’s regime had also become increasingly party oriented. The hall based structure remained, but it had changed into a competition among different student groups for control of the halls, rather than the halls as a site

---

14 Sheikh Mujibar Rahman, was brutally assassinated with several other family members in a 1974 coup that preceded the rise to power by General Ziaur Rahman, the founder of the BNP, and husband of Khaleda Zia. General Zia ruled Bangladesh from 1974 until his assassination in 1981. Zia ruled as head of the military government until he was elected president in 1977.


16 A good illustration of the competing positions can be seen in the daily newspapers of the period. In both The Daily Star and Prothom Alo, for example, the standard front page throughout the period consisted of one column presenting the statement by Sheikh Hasina, and a separate column presenting the statement by Khaleda Zia. A single related image between the two was sufficient however, as the content of the statements was generally identical - the criticism of Erhsad did not vary in any measureable way between the two parties. For more discussion of the party animosity see Milan, Bangladesh and Pakistan and Alam, “Democratic Politics and the Fall of the Military Regime.”
of identity themselves. Dhaka University student community was now organized primarily into
groups that were student branches of the political parties. While Dhaka University Central
Student Union (DUCSU) remained a student-oriented entity and was not directly linked to a
single party, all of the members of DUCSU were members of student wings of an established
party. Thus while the DUCSU was non-partisan in the sense that it was a body elected by all
students, it was comprised of party members from various student wings. Indeed, it operated
more as all-partisan, rather than non-partisan. At the time of Ershad’s coup, students involved in
politics on the campus then would identify themselves, for example, by the student designation
and party designation. Chatro League, was the still student wing of the Awami League, and
Chatro Dal was the student wing of the Bangladesh National Party. Other political parties all
had student wings as well; JSD, the socialist party, and CPB (Communist Party Bangladesh) in
particular had fairly sizable student wings, although the degree of control the parties exerted over
the student actions varied group to group. In addition to DUCSU, there were alliances among
various student organizations that included the student wings of the parent parties that had
formed alliances.  

The strong and overt connection to political parties was a significant structural shift from
the previous periods of student mobilization on Dhaka University. In the campaigns of the 1950s
and 1960s, students organized into groups primarily associated with ideological positions.
Although there were party alliances and some students were members of political parties, student
activists with no political party membership were also active in several student organizations,

---

17 There was also a smaller contingency of Islamist party student groups that remained supportive of Ershad, but
these groups were fairly politically isolated on the campus and not represented in DUCSU. As the conflict increased
over the next 8 years, the relationship between the groups loyal to Ershad and those in opposition was increasingly
militant, with armed conflict and individual fights between the student group members occurring fairly frequently.
particularly DUCSU. Even in Chatro League, which was the student wing of the Awami League, the distance between party and students was wide. According to a major student leader in the Chatro League of the 1960s, the group was, “neither a student front of the Awami League nor was it an associate leader, rather it was an independent organization lead by the students for the welfare of the students. We were not allowed to deliver speeches with the national leaders, nor did the national leaders come to our programmes.” Of course, the BNP had not yet been formed and thus Chatro Dal did not even exist in previous mobilizations. The change in the relationship to political parties was a key shift in the nature of student activism; this new scheme more closely tied system created multi-layered obligations on the part of students.

When Ershad came to power, elections for DUCSU had just taken place in 1981. The Vice President and General Secretary were both members of the student wing of *Bangladesh Samajtantrik Dal* (BASAD) a communist party not affiliated with either of the major national party alliances. All of the major and minor parties had representatives in DUCSU, and by and large, the students of the party wings were somewhat autonomous on campus issues but expected to represent the party on national issues. Rafiq, a student member of Chatro Dal recalls, “Before Ershad, BNP was not very concerned with the issues on Dhaka University. It was not a focus of the party. There were bigger issues at hand. The role of Chatro Dal was to support BNP.” Tosbih, a member of the JSD student organization echoes this distance between the parent party and the students, “We had our agenda. The students had the same ideas as the party –we were in the party – but we had our own focus.” In his observation, however, Chatro Dal and Chatro

---

League both had considerably less autonomy than the Leftist parties, “They [Chatro Dal and Chatro League] were under more control. They had to ask permission, but generally we did as we wish and the leaders trusted us.”\textsuperscript{21} Thus student activists operated within a dual position – balancing varying degrees of party interest and their own student interests.

Rafiq recalls the party meetings before Ershad as an environment where he was expected to “stay quiet and learn from the leadership… at that time, it was not clear how important Chatro Dal would be.”\textsuperscript{22} Following Ershad’s takeover, the ability of Chatro Dal and Chatro League to act autonomously was significantly reduced. In response to the political crisis of the coup, Awami League and BNP formed separate alliances. The Awami Leauge took a leadership role in the 15 Party Alliance, and the BNP created the 7 Party Alliance. These alliances quickly became de facto competing parties in of themselves, with Hasina and Zia as spokesperson for each alliance as well as the parties. As the regime settled in, students in the student branches of these parties were thus faced with a dilemma. On one hand, the student community had expressed, through a variety of small skirmishes and meetings and a shared cultural environment of anti-Ershad propaganda covering the campus, a sense of shared responsibility to protect democracy, but on the other hand, they had direct orders from the party to exclude their political enemies. In addition, the student body, by and large, was anxious to respond quickly and forcefully, while the parties were much more interested in preserving their self-interest, and in many cases, in framing the other party in a poor light.

\textsuperscript{21} “Tosbih,” Personal Interview, 2010.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
The Symbolic Power of Education Reform and the Student Response

The strain between the student party members’ roles came to the fore with Ershad’s first major reform campaign. In September, 1982 Ershad announced a plan for education reform. The plan placed Dr. Majid Khan as Education Minister and made significant changes to the structure and requirements of primary, secondary, and higher education. Among the most symbolically powerful issues, however, was the plan’s requirement that English and Arabic would be compulsory in primary education and that Dhaka University admission would be limited and scaled back to only “highly qualified” entrants. As Maniruzziman describes, “The students interpreted the new education policy as a long-term plan by the government to create a small ruling class.”23 The limitation of university admissions, according to Ershad, was to re-invigorate competition in the school system and to bring the employment ratio into greater balance. Students saw this an attempt to reduce access to education and as part of the larger destruction of democracy.24

Ershad’s motivation for the language requirement was a more bald, partisan attempt to shore up support from the religious Right of the country. The introduction of Arabic into the curriculum was coupled with Ershad’s declaration that he wanted to make the constitution based on Sharia Law. Whether Ershad saw the symbolic value of the language issue or not, the students certainly did. Farzana was studying for her B.A. in Economics at the time. She recalls, “I cannot believe –I could not believe then –that he would be so foolish. The country was born in a battle for the right to speak Bangla! That Ershad would force a foreign language on us proved that he

23 Maniruzziman, “Fall of a Dictator,” 205.
was no different than the Pakistani military dictators of the past.”25 In a similar characterization, Milon, who was waiting to begin his first year at Dhaka University in November 1982, recalls,

> I was nervous. I wondered if it would mean that I needed to know Arabic. My English was bad then and I was already worried that I lied on my entrance papers that I spoke it fluently! I remember feeling like, did we have Bhasha Andolan or not? Why do I have so much tension about speaking all of these foreign tongues?”26

Thus, for students, Ershad himself provided a powerful framework linking their position to students of the past. By invoking the Bhasha Andolan, students articulated a justification for their opposition that was legitimized by the historical legacy of the student-centered movement. Importantly, the tactics of the Bhasha Andolan had not been political negotiation or legislative motion - it was a massive mobilization of street demonstrations. Thus, students reacting to the Education Reforms of Ershad, took the model of political protest as the normative model for opposing policy in what felt, for many, to be a natural response.

There were several small processions and skirmishes with police in the months immediately after Ershad’s announcement, and the antagonism between Ershad and the students became more intense as the days went on. Despite Ershad’s declarations that he was making progress in establishing order, the campus area continued to plague his regime and threaten the civil order he desperately wanted to achieve. In November, 37 students and teachers of Dhaka University were arrested for demonstrating against the regime and the campus was shut down for

three days. Ironically, the campus shut downs served the opposite of Ershad’s intent. Rajeesh, who described that before Ershad he was not particularly political at all, remembers,

They kept shutting down the campus. We hardly ever had class. I knew then there would be a session jam. Even when the campus was open, nobody seemed to be going to class. I only got involved because there was nothing else to do. I was not going to join up with the [Islamist] fundamentalists, so I started going to all of the little meetings. It is actually quite funny that I ended up in any position of authority.28

Sensing a need to respond to Ershad in a meaningful way, students from fourteen different student groups formed an umbrella organization called Chatro Sangram Parishad, or Student Action Committee, in late November 1982.29 They called a press conference and declared that November 29 would be Student Demand Day.30 In response, Ershad authorized the police to raid the campus.

The raid garnered wide media coverage and captured the imagination of students even outside of Dhaka. Tafique, who was a student in another district, heard rumors that the police had captured the students and tortured the leaders.31 For him, this attach only proved that Dhaka

27 Maniruzziman, Bangladesher Chattra Andoloner Itihash, 205-206.
28 “Rajeesh,” Personal Interview 2010. “Session jam” occurs in the Bangladesh education system when the school closes (due to hartals, conflict, or some other reason, so often that the students do not attend a minimum number of days to qualify as a school year. Session jam either means students will have to take additional classes and graduate later, which is a common explanation for why students often take 6 or more years to attain degrees, or students may be given supplementary classes during the next year. The latter scheme is not employed at higher education, only in the primary and secondary levels.
29 Chatro Sangram Parishad operated separately from DUCSU, but not particularly in competition. Chatro Dal was not an official member of Chatro Sangram Parishad, as it was forbidden by the BNP. Despite this, many members of Chatro Dal supported the group as a symbol of student autonomy from the parties. On the other hand, some students complained that the group was evidence of the factionalism of the campus.
University was the heart of resistance. “I was proud,” he said, “that they fulfilled their duty. My father had been at the University in ’71, and so I knew that it was not a place to tolerate dictatorship. I knew the students would fight back.”

On the campus itself, students were shocked by the raid. Within the outrage among Dhaka University students were two major components: first the treatment of the students had been harsh and uncompromising. Students seen demonstrating (or even simply in the area of ad hoc demonstrations that sprang up in response to the police incursion) were sprayed with colored water that marked them as dissidents even if they escaped immediate capture. The police blocked off exits and students were seen climbing over the walls of the university area as police dragged them down and beat them. The second point of anger among students was the violation of the campus space. Milon recalls, “They came into our area. Many of the students were not doing anything, but they beat them with lathis and the ends of the rifles. They had no right to enter [Dhaka University] actually. There was no special provocation.”

Rajeesh remembers the raid and the police behavior as “wild,” adding that the police were,

knocking things over to be big men. I think they were instructed to have it as a statement. Or perhaps they were mad on their own power. I saw them heading towards the women’s dormitories, but I do not know if they went in. They kept calling us anarchists, but they were the ones that seemed like that. They looked at every student the same. I saw then that we were going to have to fight this man [Ershad] with more than words.

---

33 The cover of The Bangladesh Observer on the day following the raid pictured a fog of smoke at the campus southern gate and the single word headline “Juddho” (War). Bangladesh Observer December 5, 1982. Bangladesh Press Institute Archival Collection).
As he recalled the raid of 1982, Rajeesh made another connection too, “You know, I think the police came in the same route as the Paki’s.”

Many students were unprepared for the violent attack on their space. Following the raid, students met to discuss how to keep the police off the campus. In these conversations, students of both alliances agreed that they needed to protect themselves. They devised a series of plans to secure arms, from both parties and independently, and took tally of who was trained in using them.

Barricades at the major gates were constructed and every incursion into the campus area after the 1982 raid was met with harsh, often armed, resistance. Implicit in the conversations following the raid was an agreement among students that the campus was a place that they were entitled to control, and that the police were not entitled to enter. Just as Ershad had provided a linkage to the past with the issue of language, by authorizing a campus raid, Ershad created a space in the imagination of Dhaka University students that positioned them as parallel with the defenders of the campus from the Pakistani invasion of 1971.

*Chatro Sangram Parishad* planned a massive demonstration to be held on January 11, 1983 in which students would march from the campus to the Education Bhaban (government office) and protest the minister and the new policies. Posters for the event were printed off and there was widespread excitement in the campus that this was going to be a major turning point.

Farzana recalls the build up, “This was going to be a really big event. The campus was alive with excitement. The posters were everywhere. I think every wall on the campus had a poster on it -

---

36 “Rajeesh,” Personal Interview, 2010. It should be noted that it is somewhat apparent in the course of this interview that the connection between the two events may be projected back from his current sense of the events. Certainly, it is still illustrative of the campus as a symbolic space. I was not able to confirm whether this observation was correct, in particular because the raid seems to have taken place in several parts of the campus and none of the accounts or newspapers regarding the attack mention the exact route taken by police onto the campus.


Imagine it! I can’t explain how much anticipation we had."³⁹ However, at the last minute as students gathered on campus, the political parties (both Awami League, BNP, and several left parties, including CPB) suddenly told their student wings not to participate. Tosbih explains, “We were ready to go. We had so many people behind us, and the parties said ‘no. It was not the time to engage in direct confrontation with Ershad, until we knew more.’ They told us to ‘Go Slow’ so that the movement could be controlled.”⁴⁰ Rafiq recalls, “We were so disappointed, but we had to listen. They were in charge, not us.”⁴¹ Tosbih realized the demonstration had to be directed somewhere or it was going to be unstoppable and he was torn between letting it go and following party orders,

Many students cried that it was unfair and we had several representatives discuss it, but it was all very confused. We had a big group and it was continuing to grow. People were arriving that had not heard the news, and there were fights breaking out about who was supposed to be going where. What were we expected to do? We decided—but I should say I do not know who decided, you could say it was just known—that we would go instead to the Shahid Minar.⁴²

Farzana remembers,

I don’t know who said go the Shahid Minar. I know the parties said do not go to the Education Bhabhan. I think they wanted it to be their event, not the students’. But when we went to the Shahid Minar, of course, we were giving in to the party demands, but the message was also to the parties. We are students of Dhaka University and we have always protected democracy!⁴³

⁴² “Tosbih” Personal Interview, 2010.
Tosbih recalls his frustration that afternoon, “We had put so much energy into the event. Why did they wait until the day of the march to stall it? It was, for me, a sign that we as students were one body, and they [the parties] were another.”\textsuperscript{44} In his memoir, Khushbu describes the march to the Shahid Minar as the “first day in our chapter of the heroic lore of youth with a zestful, ardent desire for freedom from oppressive rule.”\textsuperscript{45} So while the decision to move the march to the Shahid Minar was somewhat spontaneous, with the spontaneity it reflects, and reinforced a sense of collective identity both with each other and with students of the past. That collective identity was rooted to the symbolic space of the Shahid Minar.

The event was rescheduled for February 14, 1983 under the more clear organizational heading of the 15 Party Alliance. The student party of the BNP was forbidden to participate because the student party of the Awami League was to be present. The police opened fire on the demonstration, killing 4 students and arresting hundreds more. The event, for students, was seen as a failure, and a bitter illustration of the injustice of the cancellation of the original march. Tosbih remembers, “I was angry then. I am still angry to tell the truth. Those that died in that early February [1983] did not only die because of Ershad. The parties had a hand. Of course they never saw it, but we [the students] did.”\textsuperscript{46}

As the years went on, the student community continued to struggle violently with the Ershad military, but under three separate alliances formed on the part of the major parties. The third of the 3 alliances consisted of the far Leftists organizations such as the JSD, and in many cases in the campus context, they served as a mediator between the two other alliances. Tosbih,

\textsuperscript{44} “Tosbih,” Personal Interview, 2010. 
\textsuperscript{45} Khushbu, Bangladesher Chattra Andoloner Itihash, 26. 
\textsuperscript{46} “Tosbih,” Personal Interview, 2010.
who was the third alliance recalls his irritation, “If Chatro Dal wanted to speak then Chatro League would say ‘we are leaving.’ It was the other way too. We could not have one event with the two groups. [My party] was less worried about it, so I usually went to both. Unofficially, I know many students attended events that were against the party though.”

Regarding the violence of the early years, Rajeesh recalls, “We were at war, basically. It was a very violent time for students and many gave lives. We had to arm ourselves when they attacked the university. They sent in plants to cause disruption to our plans and they [the plants] raided the dorms with destruction. It was terrible and it went on and on for years. But still we struggled.”

The student leaders also continued to struggle with party impotence. There was an obvious opposition to Ershad, but it was ineffective and fragmented. Ershad was able to paint the opposition as partisan and self-concerned and claimed he was the true representative of unity.

**Contentious Culture on Campus and Secret Solidarity**

In contrast to the political fragmentation, the campus itself, during the Ershad period, become more unified in its sense of shared identity and culture. As the campaign dragged on, the campus was transformed into a hive for the resistance to Ershad. Omar, a former student who had already graduated when Ershad came to power, returned to the campus in order to organize with students against Ershad. He remembers, “Everywhere you looked was some kind of flyer or poster. Some were quite funny – Ershad was easy to make fun of. He was a classic bad man – he was a philanderer, he was stealing money, he had the big forehead, and they made drawings of him. Sometimes he was a snake, or a dog, I remember.”

---

48 “Rajeesh,” 2010
In one such poster, Ershad’s face was drawn into the form of an illustration that was a famous war time poster. The original image was a black and white cartoon face of a vicious-looking Pakistani soldier that read “Destroy the Pakistani monsters.” The version with Ershad in it read “Destroy the Dictator.”\textsuperscript{51} This was clearly an intentional reference to the past struggle, and it was one of many in which students used cultural artifacts from the past and reframed, or adjusted them to fit the Ershad campaign. In a printed political booklet called “Cry Out” from the

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{figure6.1}
\caption{Images of Ershad made into a villain\textsuperscript{50}}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{50} Bangladesh Press Institute collection, n.d. and photo from wall of Dhaka University, 2010.
\textsuperscript{51} DUCSU Collection Center, n.d.
campus, the cover depicts students in front of the Shahid Minar holding signs with Bangla letters on them. The reference is a common illustration to the Bhasha Andolan, and frequently used in the annual celebration of Ekushe, but in this case, the content of the booklet was specifically regarding the illegitimacy of the Ershad campaign. The booklet contains poems by student poets, drawings, and short essays on topics such as Education reform, Martial Law, and the different student groups. One essay is a report from the Women’s Organizing Society, in which it says “Just as women have always stood on the front lines in Bangladesh, we will fight for democracy and freedom like our sisters and aunts before us.” It has a photo, also quite commonly reprinted, of women students of Dhaka University dressed in white saris and marching with rifles in training during the Liberation War.

Figure 6.2: Women marching at the time of Liberation War, also the same image reprinted in the anti-Ershad campaign.

53 The location of the original photo is unknown, but the image is widely reprinted. A copy of the photo hangs in the collection of the Liberation War Museum in Dhaka, but the museum staff is not sure if it is an original print or not.
Within this pamphlet, the imagined linkage of the Ershad campaign to both the *Bhasha Andolan* and to the campus mobilizations before the Liberation War are clear.

A reporter from the *Economist* was on Dhaka University campus in 1984, and he described the scene as “hardly like an educational institution at all.” He remarked that the walls were “covered with political graffiti” and that students talked of nothing but politics. The reporter’s idea that this was out of place for the campus of Dhaka University only shows the reporters lack of historical background on the matter. Students, however, had a strong sense of the legacy the campus held, particularly after the first few years and the realization that this was a truly long term project. Indeed, many of the murals painted on academic and residence halls depicting student protestors still remain today.

As the years went on, students finished their studies, but stayed on the campus to continue organizing as student activists. Tosbih completed his Masters degree in 1986, he explains, “I could not just leave the campus. I had a responsibility to stay until the task was complete. We all stayed to organize from Dhaka University because we were the ones that would defeat Ershad.” Similarly, Omar, who had graduated one year before the Ershad coup, was called back to the campus by his political party to work with the students. Omar had no doubts why he was called to the campus, “They needed a fighter. When I was there I had been a leader, but we did not face the same problems. I had a good job, actually, and I only left it because I knew Ershad had to be taken down and only the students could do it.” He also explains, “Even though we had parties, and groups had alliances, for me it was never about politics. It was about

---

55 Ibid.
56 “Tosbih,” Personal Interview, 2010
57 “Omar” Personal Interview, 2010
taking Ershad down. It was the same for many students. We liked the cultural aspects and the camaraderie. It felt like we were fighting in a war – we thought we were the new freedom fighters."

Rashid recalls the cultural transformation as well. He describes, “There was always something happening on the campus. Poets and music and cultural activists all provided materials. We held programs for everything.” Songs of Rabindranath Tagore were particularly popular, and held a symbolic significance as well. The Ayub Khan government of the early 1960s had banned the performance of songs by Tagore and the public performance of the songs was a common form of cultural resistance during the campaign of that time, particularly by Dhaka University students. The resurrection of these songs in a public political context thus linked the Ershad movement, even in abstractly, to the prior resistance.

In 1984, Ershad attempted to instill legitimacy into his regime by creating a political party, Janadal. He announced that elections would held in 1986 and that he would run for election under the party. The Awami League, the BNP, and most other major parties immediately rejected the plan, arguing that it was impossible for the elections to be fair. The Awami League, however, decided later that it would participate, claiming it was the best chance to reinstall a democratically elected government. Omar recalls, “It was a complete betrayal. She [Sheikh Hasina] only did it to try to and capitalize on the situation against [Khaleda] Zia. She thought that if BNP boycotted that Awami could steal the election.”

This analysis is echoed by analysts as well. The BNP took no moment’s hesitation to use the opportunity to characterize the

58 Ibid.
59 “Rashid” Personal Interview, 2010
62 “Omar,” Personal Interview, 2010
Awami League as in alliance with the Ershad regime. Students in Chatro League were exasperated. Tosbih recalls somber meetings on campus with Chatro League members in which they expressed shame. “He [the Chatro League student] was so angry that Hasina was sitting in the election. Everyone knew it was a bad decision. What was he supposed to do? Some of the Chatro League wanted to leave the organization all together.” Once the elections were over, and Ershad’s party had won an overwhelming victory, Sheikh Hasina announced that she rejected the results and re-instituted her party’s boycott of the regime.

The victory for Ershad, however, only further fueled the resistance. The elections were overwhelmingly believed to have been rigged, even by outside observers. Hori, who was living in a district near Dhaka for the elections recalls,

> It was my first job. You take the box, you take the ballot for Ershad, you put it in. It was a stack of ballots and I got paid for each one that went in the box. Ershad, Ershad, Ershad [motioning the ballots going into a box]…so when Ershad won the election [laughs] I think I won too. It was little [Hori] that was proud that day – imagine it.

The students were not laughing however, and the vacillation of the Awami League in the face of the elections had a profound impact on the makeup of the student alliances. Chatro Dal surged to front of the movement, on the platform that the BNP was the only organization truly opposing the regime.

Following the elections, the protests reached unprecedented size and the movement of the campus began to spread much more rapidly across the country. Tawfique, who was at a

---

63 Milam, *Bangladesh and Pakistan* 105. For more on the election and Awami Leagues decisions, see Alam, “Democratic Politics and the Fall of the Military Regime in Bangladesh.”
64 “Tosbih” Personal Interview, 2010.
university in a nearby city recalls that even as the movement spread, it was anchored at Dhaka University. “I went to the Dhaka University,” he recalls, “at least twice a month we travelled there. It was less traffic then so it took less time. But when I was on the Dhaka University I always felt so glad. I knew it was the place that democracy was always protected. I felt like I was part of history when I was there.” For Tawfique, visiting the place of Dhaka University validated him as a “real” student organizer. He was an active student in politics before visiting the campus, but he felt compelled to visit when the campaign against Ershad was taking place, almost in as a rite of passage. Others perceived this rite in the same terms. He recalls,

Once I started going [to Dhaka University] I became a sort of hero. I was quickly the main leader because I knew what was happening there. Everyone would ask when I returned, ‘What did they say? What did you do? Did you battle the police?’ I think they thought it was a total battle! It was like going to the front lines.

The place that Dhaka University occupied in the minds of students both on and off campus stemmed from an idealized past of student activism and the lore of Dhaka University students as warriors. The opportunity to perform a similar role was both exhilarating and daunting. Farzana recalls,

Often I got discouraged. It seemed so much harder for us. I sometimes felt we were not up to the task like our leaders before us. Then I could walk through the campus, and look around, and think ‘They did it here, from this place. We can too. We have to,’ and I would feel a bit encouraged…just by being there, you know? I could feel the spirits of the student around me.

67 Ibid.
The sense of obligation and its connection the place of the campus is dominant in the memories of student activists.

In 1988, Ershad modified the Constitution to make Islam the state religion of Bangladesh. Both political alliances opposed the move and vowed to resist it. Farzana recalls that the move was a rally cry for women, “We joined our group with some other women’s group. We were almost all Muslim women—it was not that we opposed Islam. We did not want it in Ershad’s hands though…so we came together. I spoke to many women that were nervous to oppose it like we were anti-Islamic, but when everyone else condemned the move, it was easier.” Ershad’s popularity had reached an all time low across the entire nation, and several scandals involving his marital affairs and questionable investments had degraded his platform of moral righteousness. He was losing in virtually every corner of popular perception, yet he maintained control. He continued to claim his regime was the only thing keeping law and order in the country as the parties still refused to cooperate in opposing him. The political parties all continued to issue separate statements and wage discrete campaigns – often competing for the same organizational alliances.

The students were struggling to keep hope with the drawn out battles, political bickering and exhausting daily meetings. *The New York Times* describes the state of the campus,

As the leading educational institution in the country, closed repeatedly by the Government and preparing students for jobs that do not exist, the university is breeding ground for hopelessness and anger…Its students, despairing of their future, trot about its pathways in small groups, raising their fists and chanting anti-Government slogans. Since its founding in 1921, the university has been the cradle of opposition. Today its 22 fractious political groupings are united in one

goal: to oust the government of President H.M. Ershad. ‘Everything emanates from here,’ said Forshad Shahrian, 21 years old and the leader of a political group. ‘What starts here spreads through the Government. It is the basis of national politics.’

In November of 1990, a major procession resulted in the death of a highly popular Chatro Dal student leader and faithful allegiance to the party had lost its appeal. One student remembers, “I was there when Jahad was killed. I didn’t care if he was Chatro Dal, he was Chatro.” In this moment, the two roles of student and party came into direct competition, and student took the foreground. Students organized demonstrations on a scale of new measure. Former student activists from the campaign of the 1960s came to speak at memorial for the slain student, Jahad. Tofail Ahmed, who had been the face of student resistance in the Mass Upsurge campaign and was now a prominent figure in the Awami League, stood next to the bloodied shirt of their fallen comrade and implored all of the students to “pledge to carry on the fight in the name of all of the students who have died defending freedom in Bangladesh.” He spoke that day though as a former student activist, not on behalf of the party. “I felt as though Dhaka University was party of all of us. It did not matter that Jahad was Chatro Dal.” In the same spirit, Tosbih and a group of young organizers, mostly from the smaller Left party groups met secretly to discuss the issue of student unity. He recounts,

After Jahad was killed we knew there were two currents on the campus. So then there was from the student community, some kind of urging that if these 2 currents could come together in a united front, then there is the possibility to overthrow the army dictator. .. So… we just had to come up with some common platform. We took the initiative that we will make the platform as All Party Student Unity (APSU). We would make a banner with APSU and go out in procession. We would bring Ershad down as students. Then we told these two

---

72 Tofail Ahmed, Personal interview 2011.
73 Ibid.
[Chatro Dal and Chatro League], *all* the other students organizations are with us. If Chatro Dal does not come then they will be lost. If Chatro League comes and all the other students organizations come here, then Chatro Dal gets left out. We said the same thing to Chatro League. If you don’t join, you are left out and the other will join anyway. Then in this way, both these two organizations came into the umbrella. And finally it took the shape as All Party Student Unity. And it had both Chatro Dal and Chatro League.74

For the first time, and out of both fear of being left out and a general student solidarity, the two student organizations participated together in an action. Rafiq recalls, “I didn’t care anymore. I didn’t care if it was a problem because we could bring down Ershad. And once he came down, it would be ok with everyone.” Rajeesh, a senior member of Chatro League remembers, “I went to the party meeting to report that if we did not join the alliance, then Chatro League would be totally excluded. I told them, with all due respect, so would the Awami League. I think they saw that the students were right, and they said, ‘Go. Form the alliance.’”75

---

Interestingly, Jahad was not the first student killed, but he was the first death framed, by the movement, into the role of martyr. Following his martyrdom, the memory of other students in the campaign that had been killed was resurrected, and a list of martyrs was circulated around the campus. Much like the Language Martyrs, the faces of the students who had died fighting against Ershad became highly emotional points for movement participants. Farzana remembers seeing a pamphlet with a photo of the event in which Jahad’s shirt was sworn upon, “I looked at the bloody shirt of Jahad and I knew that I would die to bring down Ershad. Nothing else mattered to us anymore. We were so passionate –like never before. It was something deep in our hearts. I would even be a martyr.”

Following the students’ lead, a few days later, a three party alliance including the Awami League and the BNP was announced. For the first time, the two major parties presented a united

---

opposition to Ershad. There is every indication that this is the direct result of the formation of APSU, and the pressure from the students. Once the opposition united, the downfall of Ershad was imminent. From November 1990 onward, the united movement brought the country to a standstill, unlike any of the opposition mobilizations before it. Journalists and television stations shut down in protest. Professional organizations of lawyers, workers, doctors, all joined the united opposition. The entire faculty of Dhaka University resigned in protest. Ershad made some last ditch efforts to maintain control, but in the face of such unified opposition, he was no longer able to claim any legitimacy to his government. The writing was on the wall. Ironically, in the last days of his regime, he accused the now united opposition political parties of instigating and manipulating the students, a claim that could not have been more backwards. As the momentum of the united resistance reached a fever pitch, on December 4th 1990, Ershad announced he would step down and hand over government to a caretaker until elections could be held.

Conclusion

The December 7th edition of The Bangladesh Observer captures the two successes of the student resistance of 1982-1990 side by side. In the top headline is “Ershad Goes.” And just below, in only a slightly smaller headline, is “Mass Upheaval Brings Khaleda, Hasina Closer.” The second of these two articles reads, “The darba hall of the Bangabhaban, the seat of power, witnessed a historic moment on Thursday when the two top Opposition leaders, Sheikh Hasina and Begum Khaleda Zia, sat side by side exchanging greetings and listening to the Acting President Justice Shahbuddin Ahmed, whom they nominate to head the caretaker government…” The article goes on to describe, in detail, the arrival of Zia, then Hasina, and how the two sat next
to each other. “Leaders of their political alliances, and other political parties, stood up in respect and greeted this historic occasion.”

Yet this did not render APSU irrelevant. In fact, fearful of the breakout of renewed partisan bickering, the government turned to the only body it knew of that could keep the two parties’ unity from falling apart. It appealed to APSU to help maintain unity and facilitate elections as agreed. In terms of the big picture politically, the cooperation between the AL and BNP was fleeting, and the current political climate of Bangladesh as a contest between Zia and Hasina is evidence of that. But the success of the student movement in pushing these parties to work together in the anti-Ershad campaign is in some ways only made more remarkable by the ease with which these parties fell back into old patterns of behavior absent of student intervention.

---

The case of Bangladesh’s student movement, and the ways that it simultaneously circumvented and forced the actions of the parties, is a valuable demonstration of how even seemingly intractable partisan differences can be overcome by true popular mobilization and how such mobilization can exert pressure on traditional party politics. It also demonstrates the pervasive power of student identity in Bangladesh. As the movement reached high and low points, students drew from the past for both tactical models and emotional support. The place of Dhaka University served as a physical manifestation of student power and as a site of connected movement culture in the imaginations of students in the Ershad campaign. The importance of the physical space of the campus is clear in the actions of students following Ershad’s resignation. Tosbih recalls, “I left the campus finally and became an organizer with a labor organization. Once Ershad was gone I could focus on the labor class.” Omar similarly recalls, “Once Ershad was done, I was able to leave the campus. It was not sad – it was joyous.” In her memory, Farzana places the campus space, and her identity as a student, in a co-dependent framework. She explains, “If I had not gone to Dhaka University, I might not have cared so much. But I did go, and as a result, I became a student fighter. How could you live in this place, with so much history in these walls, and not become that yourself?” In his memoir, Khushbu argues, “Students got involved from a youthful dream for a free society and out of keen desire to uphold the legacy of heroic martyrs from the past. Students put to end another era of autocratic rule and salvaged the nation from the parties’ ineptitude. The story of students is long and proud.” The power of the idea of the student, and the campus, as seen in the campaign against Ershad, is thus a culmination of decades of student agitation in the region. It is both a reflection of popular

82 Khushbu, Bangladesh Chattria Andoloner Itihash, 166.
sentiment, and as we have seen, an agent in motivating students to act politically. The ways in which the shared symbols of protest, and the shared space of the campus came together to connect the campaign against Ershad with previous mobilizations is illustrative not only in the case of Bangladesh’s student identity, but also the more general power of historical memory connected to spaces to continually shape the present.
CONCLUSION

The history of student politics in Bangladesh is celebrated in numerous monuments both on the Dhaka University campus and throughout the city. *Ekushe* remains one the largest celebrations of the year and annual processions to the Shaheed Minar are accompanied by heartfelt public remembrances of the sacrifices made by students in the development of the nation. The Dhaka University campus area is adorned with murals, statuettes, and mosaics depicting the martyrs of the Bhasha Andolan, Mass Upsurge, and the Liberation War. In the center of campus, just across from Modhur canteen, which has a monument to “Shaheed Madhu” out front, the DUCSU office space now houses a museum and archive collection center celebrating the accomplishments of students in the national history. The museum even has on display the salvaged stump of the Amtolla tree that was destroyed in Operation Searchlight. The legacy of student achievement is everywhere in the city of Dhaka, and the centrality of Dhaka University in that legacy is clear.

In tracing the emergence and consolidation of Dhaka University students as a distinct political class in East Pakistan, this dissertation has demonstrated that the place of the Dhaka University campus and student political identity are intimately bound together in a historical process of identity formation and postcolonial political negotiation. In the early postcolonial period, the campus provided space for the articulation of a Bengali regional identity that was rooted in language and culture. Students emerged as an important voice in the early period of Pakistan, and the *Bhasha Andolan* confirmed the power of political mobilization in the new state and the campus was established as an important physical hub to which the students could anchor their identity.
As the Pakistani state struggled to find a cohesive political identity, the sense of Dhaka University grew stronger, as it became defined as a place of political and cultural expression for the newly empowered students. Students explored and expressed this newly signified community in both local and international terms. Indeed, the campus offers a unique place in that it translates easily into multiple geographic scales and there are similar codes and meanings applied to the notion of campuses and campus communities, *vis a vis* student identity. In the Global Sixties, the campus serves as a portal to both perform and experience solidarity with campuses across the world. The idea that students constituted a political class in Dhaka was augmented by media coverage of students making similar movements in other national environments. The shared political space was mirrored by a shared imagined community of cultural experimentation and expression. In the transnational public of the Global Sixties, rock and roll was as important to youth identity as was revolution, but both were prominent in the worldview of many young students that swore solidarity with one another across borders and despite national demarcations.

The importance of democracy was a key component to international conceptions of the New Left and in student politics and on Dhaka University campus. Ayub Khan’s suspension of democracy positioned Dhaka students to establish themselves as the protectors of democratic freedom, and to mark the campus as a place free from the influence and coercion of the state. Students claimed the campus as a place of their own by carrying on traditions rooted in the places of past mobilizations, such as the *Shaheed Minar* and the Amtolla, and continued the legacy forward by creating newly important spaces such as Modhur canteen.
In a dramatic example of student power, at the height of student power and influence across the globe, Pakistani students mobilized to successfully overthrow the government—a goal shared by many revolutionary minded activists throughout “1968”. The revolutionary success and monumental effectiveness of the mobilizations against Ayub Khan is an important example of student power that has received far too little attention in the narrative of the Global Sixties. The student victory was quickly squelched however by the violent war of 1971. The West Pakistani invasion of the campus, and the focused attacks on students and the campus place, belies the symbolic importance of Dhaka University as a politically powerful place in East Pakistan. The brutal war forced the students to set aside their cosmopolitan identity as Global Sixties youth, and take on the role of revolutionaries fighting for survival.

Following the war, students became celebrated heroes of nationalist pride, and the campus an important physical monument to the struggle and determination of the newly formed Bangladeshi nation. Students became important symbols of the nation and while the student community had no major mobilizations and the campus was quiet in the years of new statehood, it was not sublated to the new state any more than it had ever been. When General Ershad suspended democracy, the true nature of student identity was mobilized against the very state government it was instrumental in creating, demonstrating that the root of the student political identity was a sense of duty to democracy and popular representation, not to any nation-state.

The implications of this study extend beyond the local history examined here however and suggest new consideration of the interdependent relationship between space, identity, and social movements. The history of student mobilization on Dhaka University also demonstrates important aspects of scale in movements and challenges the bounded conceptions of “national”
movements versus “international” phenomenon. Understandings of the Global Sixties will benefit from this example of how youth revolt did not function in a binary of local or global, but in a fluid and frequently undefined sense of scale that worked in both physical and imagined terms. In this way, the history of student politics in Bangladesh cannot be written into an exclusively nationalist narrative, nor can it be understood in purely international terms.

In recent years, a new discourse of “student politics” has emerged in Bangladesh that is less celebratory. Dhaka University is plagued with violence as factions of student organizations battle violently for control of limited dormitory space and resources. The campus is frequently closed and classes cancelled due to violent warfare between student groups. In an expose on the campus violence in 2010, Daily Star reporter Ershod Kamol described the conditions of student political activity,

So is it the legacy of past student leaders that motivates the students these days to be involved with student politics? In most cases the answer is 'no'. In many cases students are forced to be involved in order to survive. It is not the hall authorities but the ruling student leaders who allocate the seats in the dormitories. To be able to live in any room of eight students, a first year student needs to develop a link with a student wing and participate in the processions. Moreover, they are bound to attend the meetings with the student leaders every day from 10pm at the guest rooms. Examinations or classes are not acceptable excuses for avoiding these activities.

But what do the leaders preach at these meetings? Do they motivate the students with their ideology? When making money through terrorist activities is the ideology, what can be the nature of motivation? According to a student preferring anonymity, there is a specific way that new entrants are initiated.

"The leaders first look for those students who did not participate in the previous night's meeting. If they can trace one they will demand the reason for his absence. If there is no specific excuse, the leaders force him to either live in the common room with more
than 20 students or to leave the hall. If they accept examination as an acceptable excuse, they hurl a few abuses and tell him that in the universities there is no need to study daily as done in the schools." The student further discloses the nature of motivation by the 'leaders'.

"Never make eye contact with your leaders. Always give salam whenever you meet. While moving with the leaders outside the dormitories always stand creating a circle centring the leader. If any student has any kind of encounter with students of other dormitories, he must beat him. If anybody returns to the dormitory after being assaulted, he will be kicked out. And those who want to come to leading rooms must dedicate their life to politics and keep 'machines' (small weapons) or any sharp weapon," the student adds.¹

The national discussion of student politics reflects this dark chapter in the campus, but it is still understood as only one moment in a larger legacy of student victory. Former student leaders, now often occupying political seats, frequently bemoan the tragedy of the campus political chaos, but also offer hope that in a moment of real crisis the students will emerge to reclaim the legacy of the past. Indeed, during the 2006 Emergency students did mobilize and resist the suspension of democracy; in fact they were one of the only groups to effectively demonstrate against the Caretaker government. Given the history of success traced in this dissertation, there is little reason to despair. Student identity has maintained a place in the imagination of Bangladeshis for over sixty years, and the public discourse over the rightful way to honor the legacy is a hopeful indication that students will one day re-emerge as a positive force of political change in the nation.

¹ Ershad Kamol, “The Tragedy of Student Politics” Kamol was nominated for the UNESCO Journalism Award in 2010 for the article. He was also sent numerous personal threats following the article’s publication. Ershad Kamol, Personal Interview, 2010.
REFERENCES


Hill, Patricia Walton. *In the Moon Bazaar,* unpublished memoir from the personal collection of Christopher V. Hill, Colorado Springs, CO.


Rathore, Naeem G. *The Pakistan Student: His Desire to Study in and preconceptions of the US; his problems and evaluation of his Experience in the US and upon Return to Pakistan.* New York: American Friends of the Middle East, 1958.


