

Mass Upsurge, 1969

Banglapedia

Mass Upsurge, 1969 started with the student unrest of 1968 against the tyrannical rule of Ayub Khan, President of Pakistan. The movement soon engulfed the whole of the then East Pakistan, peasants, artisans and workers joined the movement almost en masse. Due to continuous exaction of undue demands the laboring class of the industrial belts and low and medium income groups soon turned the movement into a struggle for economic emancipation. The racial repression and the deprivation of the Bengalis within the frame work of Pakistan and, to the contrary, starting from the language movement the feeling of separate identity together with struggle for autonomy had direct influence on the mass upsurge of 1969. Indeed, this mass upsurge was the greatest mass awakening ever since the creation of Pakistan.

The student agitation of 1968 turned into a mass upsurge when Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani asked his followers to besiege Governors House, and formulated and declared his other programmes. As a part of joint programmes the National Awami Party (NAP) of Maulana Bhasani, East Pakistan Workers' Federation of Toaha and East Pakistan Peasants' Association led by Abdul Huq arranged a public meeting at Paltan Maidan to observe the Repression Resistance Day on 6 December 1968. After the meeting was over, a huge procession 'gheraoed' the Governor's House. The Maulana declared a Hartal the next day following the clash between the people and the police. On the call of the main opposition parties namely two factions of NAP (Bhasani and Muzaffar), Awami league, People's Party, Nezam-i-Islam, Jama't-i-Islami etc a hartal was observed throughout East Pakistan on 8 December. Repression Resistance Day was very successfully observed throughout the province on 10 December at the call of Awami League (pro-six point). On the 14th the gherao programme was declared by the NAP (Bhasani). Accordingly the programme was launched with the gherao of the bungalow of the DC of Pabna on the 29 December 1968.

On 4 January 1969 leaders of the East Pakistan Students Union (Menon Group), East Pakistan Students League, East Pakistan Students' Union (Matia Group) and a section of the National Students' Federation formed the Students' Action Committee (SAC) and declared their 11-point Programme. The 11 Points included the Six Points of Awami League as declared by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman including provincial autonomy, the demands centering round students' own demands as well as the demands relating to the problems of the workers. As a matter of fact the step the student leaders took through the 11-Point programme was timely and appropriate. On the basis of these points the important opposition parties could be united on a minimum point of agreement to continue with the movement against Ayub regime. Moreover the demand for Sheikh Mujib's release and withdrawal of the Agartala conspiracy case began to get the utmost priority. Together with the Dhaka University Central Students' Union (DUCSU) the student leaders of SAC holding different

positions throughout East Bengal played a very important role in the 1969 mass upsurge.

Immediately after the 11-Point programme had been launched on 8 January 1969 eight political parties, including Awami League and NAP (Muzaffar) formed the Democratic Action Committee (DAC). They demanded Federal form of government, election on the basis of universal adult franchise, immediate withdrawal of emergency and release of all political detainees including Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Khan Abdul Wali Khan and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. They took the decision to invigorate the movement to achieve their goal. But some rightist parties in the DAC refused to support the 11-Point programme of the SAC. In spite of that the movement gradually got momentum and the spirit of 11- points reached every nook and corner of the province. Even a portion of the pro-government student front NSF came forward with their 22-point programme and openly opposed the government. To voice the protest against government repression the students arranged a meeting at the Dhaka University campus and resolved to bring out a procession. In the procession police opened fire and Asaduzzaman, a leader of the Students Union (Menon), was killed.

The death of Asad stirred the entire nation and the movement took the shape of a national upsurge. The situation of Dhaka went beyond control of the police when Matiur, a student of class IX, died of police firing on 24 January and Rustam was stabbed to death. Army was deployed in the city and curfew was imposed for an indefinite period. Indiscriminate firing of the army and the EPR caused death to a woman while sucking her baby. The incidence caused widespread repercussions in the socio-political arena. Sergeant Zahrul Huq, an under-trial prisoner in the Agartala Conspiracy Case, died of bullet injury in the Dhaka Cantonment on 15 February 1969.

The death of an under-trial prisoner was so provocative that Maulana Bhasani declared from a public meeting held that very evening that there will be no payment of taxes if the 11-point demands were not fulfilled and all political prisoners were not released within two months. He further declared, if necessary, Sheikh Mujib would be forcibly taken out of jail repeating what happened at the falling of the Bastille during the French Revolution. After the meeting people began to set on fire the houses of the ministers. On 18 February 1969 Dr Mohammad Shamsuzzoha, Proctor of the Rajshahi University, was bayoneted to death. The news spread like wild fire throughout the country. Thousands of people thronged the Dhaka streets and highways ignoring curfew.

The Shaheed Day of 1969 imbued the people with a new spirit of opposing tyranny. In a seminar arranged at the Teacher Student Centre and presided over by Professor Abdul Hye it was resolved that the movement for language based nationality would continue. Amidst strong popular demand Ayub had to give way and declare that he would not contest the next Presidential Election. The same day Sheikh Mujib and the

other accused in the Agartala Conspiracy Case and 34 political detainees were released.

In this struggle for democracy and endeavor to get rid of tyranny the toiling masses of the rural areas did not stop at merely chanting slogans against oppressive government but also raised their voice against the oppressing class or its representatives. The situation took such a dimension that in many cases the peasants, with the assistance of students, killed cattle lifters, burnt them or set their houses on fire, crippled the thieves and robbers and sometimes even killed them. In several places the students with the assistance of peasants put on trial the local tax-collectors, the subordinate police and their officers, circle officers and moved them around market places garlanding them with shoes. Students exacted from them the amount they had taken as bribes, sometimes they were fined. Students forced chairmen and members of union councils to resign, removed brothels and wiped out liqueur shops. In the urban areas corrupt officials were bodily manhandled, their record books ransacked and sometimes even set on fire. Low-income groups and mid-level employees chanted for their long cherished but unfulfilled demands and joined the processions in the highways, thousands of workers used the gherao movement as the fruitful means of achieving their demands.

In these circumstances Sheikh Mujib came out of jail and declared his intention to join the Round Table Conference (RTC) summoned by Ayub. He asked the people to maintain peace and order. Maulana Bhasani, on the other hand, refused to join the RTC and was dubbed as the 'prophet of violence' when he, as per his usual thoughts and principles, declared the 1969 upsurge as the struggle between the oppressor and the oppressed. In the long run the strongman of Pakistan, General Ayub Khan, had to hand over power to General Yahya Khan, chief of Pakistan Army. Martial Law was re-imposed, but simultaneously it was agreed that elections would be arranged soon on the basis of universal adult franchise, and parliamentary democracy would be introduced.

Fear of police and civil and military bureaucrats minimized to a very great extent from the minds of the people, and in the estimation of the people the bureaucrats lost much of their image and importance especially in the rural areas. Moreover, class consciousness grew and advanced a step forward. The demand for a separate state became stronger than ever before among the people of Eastern Bengal. Bangali nationalism became sufficiently strong to sustain during the war of liberation in 1971. [Mesbah Kamal and Arifatul Kibria]