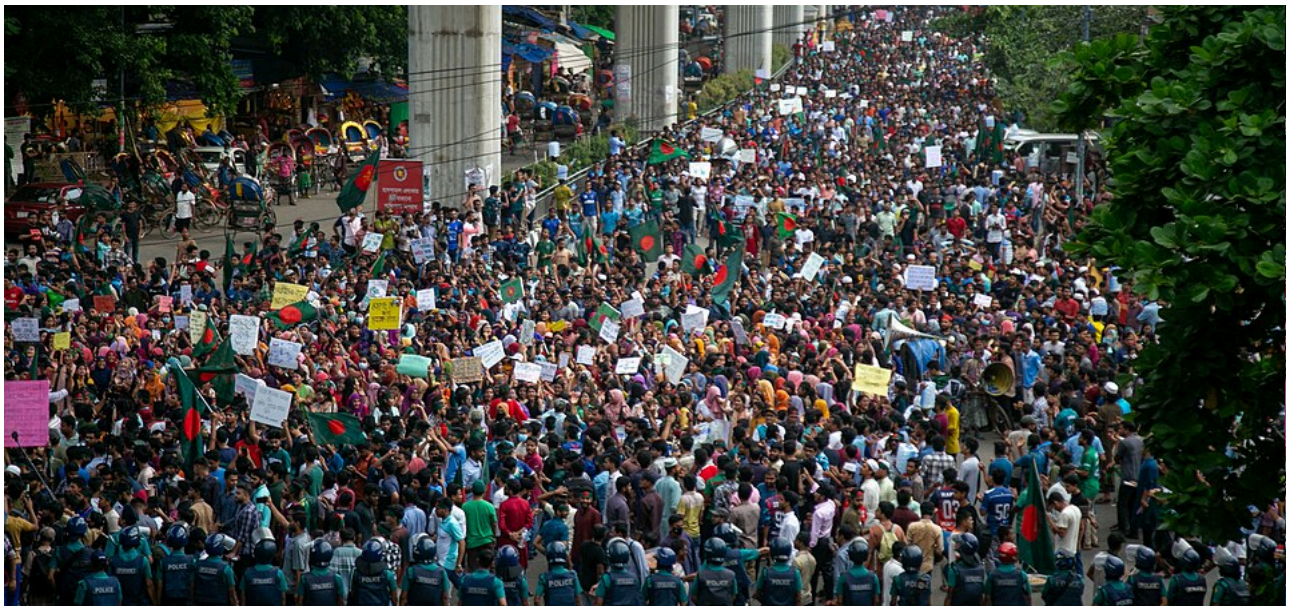

Bangladesh: Identity and Class Conflict

Posted on July 18, 2025 by Aparna Ghosh

[**Nearly a year has passed since widespread protests in Bangladesh led to the ousting of Sheikh Hasina. Student-led movements sparked the uprising, which culminated in her departure to India on 5 August 2024. Following this, Muhammad Yunus, the Nobel laureate, formed a caretaker government with the intention of restoring order and reinstating democratic institutions. However, despite the initial transition offering hope for a return to relative stability, the current regime shows scant signs of upholding those commitments.**

This article, originally published in January 2025 in a Bengali literary magazine, *Watchtower*, reflects on the history of Bangladesh, tracing its journey from East Bengal to East Pakistan and ultimately to the establishment of an independent nation. The narrative is marked by authoritarian rulers, popular revolts, and military coups, all of which

have shaped its struggle for democracy. This ongoing journey stands as a testament to the quest for justice and highlights the brutal domination by authoritarian regimes, which has perpetuated a new cycle of conflict. -ed.]

Bangladesh Bangladesh

Bangladesh Bangladesh

When the sun sinks in the west

Die million people of the Bangladesh

The story of Bangladesh

Is an ancient one

Again made fresh

–**Joan Baez**

When the new state of Bangladesh emerged in 1971, steeped in the blood of martyrs, was its fate—characterised by recurrent upheavals and bloodshed—already predetermined by its political destiny? More than fifty years later, this question continues to hold deep significance—not only for Bangladesh but for the entire subcontinent. This young nation has shed considerable blood in its quest for democracy, yet the fundamental socio-economic grievances of its populace remain unresolved.

From its inception, Bangladesh has grappled with the vulnerabilities inherent in a nascent state, which more powerful neighbours and global forces have readily exploited to pursue their own geopolitical interests. This external interference has introduced additional layers of complexity to internal conflicts. Issues such as religion, communalism, fundamentalism, and nationalism—coupled with the emotionally charged politics of linguistic identity—have all converged, resulting in a multi-layered and escalating crisis.

To date, Bangladesh has experienced the establishment of five caretaker governments, highlighting the ongoing fragility of its democratic institutions. Since the inception of the state, its citizens have faced the challenges posed by institutional weakness. They have persistently risen in defiance.

Most recently, in June 2024, a student-led anti-discrimination movement emerged, initially demanding reform of the public service quota system. What began as a specific policy request rapidly transformed into a broader resistance, driven by a deep yearning for democratic rights and justice. This escalation ultimately resulted in widespread bloodshed and martyrdom, leading to the ousting of the Hasina government, which had been entrenched in power for 15 years and had increasingly adopted authoritarian measures.

One cannot confine the student-led movement to a mere demand for quota reform. It quickly broadened beyond specific policy issues, bringing together various segments of society and uniting diverse, often conflicting forces. This collective momentum inevitably propelled the movement towards calls for regime change. Amidst this tumultuous backdrop, the general population has been grappling with escalating inflation, a decline in law and order, and rising communal tensions—issues that have been exacerbated by the interventionist

policies of external powers, particularly the Indian state.

This unfolding reality reveals a distinct pattern: in Bangladesh, popular uprisings have turned regime change into an almost ritualistic response. Despite the inherent limitations and procedural flaws of liberal democratic elections in Bangladesh, authoritarian takeovers have consistently undermined this minimum. Time and again, the military has re-entered the political sphere with disproportionate influence, often in tandem with a resurgence of communal forces. While these forces have never fully succeeded in shaping social consciousness, they have persistently obstructed the total institutionalisation of democracy.

The people return to the streets repeatedly.

To understand the origins of this cycle, one must examine Bangladesh's brief yet turbulent history. Emerging from a colonial context, the nation bears the lasting weight of socio-cultural and economic issues inherited from colonial rule.

Preamble: The Colonial Nation-Building Project

In the discourse surrounding the Partition of India, the Hindu-Muslim conflict and the Two-nation theory often dominate popular debates. However, beneath this surface lies a more profound structure of colonial power and social hierarchy. In pre-colonial society, the dominant Hindu upper-caste Brahminical elite—whose authority largely remained intact and, in some respects, even expanded under Mughal rule—naturally aligned themselves both economically and culturally with the colonial rulers. They retained

advantageous positions within the new administrative framework of the empire.

In contrast, the lower-class labouring masses—particularly in Bengal—were predominantly Muslim agricultural workers—many of whom had historically converted to Islam as a result of systemic caste oppression. Within this hierarchical order, the Muslim working classes were relegated to the lowest positions, subjected to both economic and extra-economic forms of coercion. It is noteworthy that due to centuries of Muslim rule in this region, there was also a parallel class of Muslim feudal aristocracy and gentry. Nonetheless, the dynamics of Indian caste had infiltrated the Muslim community as well.

With the 1871 census, the numerical strength of the Muslim population became increasingly apparent, along with their positioning in relation to social and economic power. Over time, the British colonial authorities strategically used the census as a political instrument, gradually merging class distinctions within the Muslim community into a singular religious identity. Various surveys served imperial interests and elevated the social otherisation to a political level.

A significant catalyst for this transformation was the 1857 Rebellion, which prompted colonial authorities to focus more intently on the mapping and management of communal identities. South Asian Studies scholar Nicholas Dirks, reflecting on the 1901 census conducted by Herbert Risley, observes:

"*Risley's anthropology worked not so much to retard nationalism as to render it communal. In so doing it also left a bloody legacy for South Asia that continues to exact a mounting toll*."

In the context of religious identities, it was, of course, the colonial state that reaped the dual-edged benefits. The working classes—both Hindu and Muslim—were compelled to partake in the toxic consequences of this communal engineering. Over time, the Muslim League emerged as the representative body for all Muslims, overshadowing regionally rooted, class-based platforms such as the *Krishak Praja Party*, which had previously commanded significant mass support in Bengal.

Similar to the Indian National Congress, the Western-educated elite dominated the leadership of the Muslim League. Ironically, the Muslim elites, who had in the first phases of the British Raj distanced themselves from colonial education and culture, now relied on British power to challenge Hindu political dominance. The strategic reliance on colonial patronage significantly shaped the League's trajectory.

If the marginalised Dalit communities of Bengal had politically aligned with the disenfranchised Muslim peasantry, they could have formed a formidable alliance. Instead, what unfolded was a tragic descent into religious conflict and bloodshed. During the Great Calcutta Killings in 1946, numerous impoverished Muslim labourers fell victim to communal violence. That same year, in Noakhali, Hindu zamindars (landlords) and elites, along with impoverished, marginalised Dalit Hindu peasants, became targets of violence.

On 14 October 1946, Jogen Das, MLA from Chandpur wrote a letter to Jogendranath Mandal, expressing his concern over the situation. Mandal had long advocated for unity between Dalits and ordinary Muslims. However, his faith in the Muslim League ultimately led to his political downfall—a tale that is well known. In the meantime, both the Congress and the Hindu Mahasabha

employed inflammatory communal rhetoric to defeat Mandal in the 1946 election, effectively marginalising voices that sought unity among lower-class Hindus and Muslims. Much like Mandal himself, the issue of caste oppression in Bengal gradually lost its political significance in the broader context.

To truly understand the structural drivers behind this religious politics, we must look beyond the surface. What was the economic situation in the subcontinent just before the transfer of power from colonial authorities to local ruling classes? In what ways did the material basis of class conflict influence the communal question? And under what economic conditions did religious identity emerge as the most significant axis for power negotiation during the process of decolonisation?

The *Tebhaga* Movement emerged within a fraught communal atmosphere, advocating for the implementation of the Floud Commission's recommendations. In late 1946, under Communist leadership, Hindu and Muslim peasants in Bengal united in their struggle. Meanwhile the *Hajong* community from northern Mymensingh was engaged in a similar struggle. The *Tebhaga* movement faced intense police repression on one side, while the other contended with a rapidly worsening communal environment— instigated by the incendiary propaganda of the Hindu Mahasabha in the lead-up to the Partition in March 1947. These developments ultimately undermined the momentum of the *Tebhaga* struggle.

It is essential to remember that the Muslim League, which had never gained significant popularity in Bengal, gradually strengthened following the Lahore Resolution of 1940. This development ultimately led to its position as the principal representative of the Muslim community. However, it is important to

note that these developments did not mean that the Muslim peasant classes were inherently religious fanatics who supported the demand for a separate state solely on theological grounds (without a plebiscite on the partition of India and Bengal, it's hard to know how much the Muslim peasantry of then-East Bengal supported it). Their support stemmed from a material hope: that a new state of their own could free them from the oppressive grip of a feudal order dominated by Hindu zamindars. Within this religious context, it was fundamentally a class struggle. During the Second World War, the Great Bengal Famine wreaked havoc on rural East Bengal, during which the Hindu zamindar class became particularly exploitative.

Their role was deeply condemnable: hoarding grain to sell at extortionate prices, extracting exorbitant rents even during famine, and manipulating rural markets to inflate prices—these exploitative practices became normalised amidst a backdrop of mass starvation. It is crucial to note that Muslim landlords, when present, also fell victim to these oppressive practices. However, in East Bengal, the zamindar class was predominantly Hindu.

In the civil bureaucracy and higher professions, nearly all roles were predominantly occupied by Hindus. These economic and structural hierarchies, disguised as religious identities, formed the fundamental basis of the political polarisation of the era.

Partition of Bengal: 1905 and 1947

History often twists in ironical ways. When Bengal was administratively partitioned in 1905, it would be inaccurate to claim that the British acted with noble intentions. However, what followed—the vehement reaction and anti-

partition movement led by the wealthy, upper-caste Hindu elite—was driven not just by nationalist sentiment or emotional impulse but more materially by their vast landholdings and entrenched social dominance in East Bengal.

Although the rhetoric initially invoked Hindu-Muslim unity, the movement gradually veered toward Hindu revivalist nationalism. In constructing this nationalist narrative, they chose to glorify historical figures who had fought against the Mughal Empire, casting Hindu-Muslim political conflicts as a long-standing civilisational struggle, framing it as a Hindu nationalist uprising against Muslim rule.

One of the key initiators of the anti-partition agitation, Rabindranath Tagore, who later grew disillusioned with its communal turn, sharply critiqued the movement in his essay *Lokohito* (For the Public Good). He observed:

"*In matters of simple social relations, if we cannot accept someone as our brother, how can we, merely out of political necessity, enact the performance of brotherhood with calculated theatricality and expect it to succeed*?"

This is exactly what the Hindu leadership of the movement attempted—and it is no surprise that they failed to win support from the Muslim population. Tagore carefully documented in his novel *Ghare Baire* (The Home and the World) how, under the banner of "*Swadeshi*" and "boycott", poor Muslims were subjected to economic coercion and violence.

The Muslim reaction to this exclusionary nationalism emerged shortly thereafter. In 1906, the All India Muslim League was established, signifying the onset of a distinct trajectory in South Asian politics—a separate Muslim

political identity evolving as a counterbalance to the Congress-dominated Hindu nationalism.

Barely four decades after the first partition of Bengal in 1905, a notable reversal occurred within the upper-caste Hindu leadership. During the transfer of power in 1947, when the prospect of an independent and undivided Bengal emerged, these same leaders shifted their stance in favour of Bengal's partition—driven by a common fear of becoming a minority in a united Bengal and losing their long-established socio-economic dominance.

The non-Bengali industrial elite in Calcutta, who aligned with the Hindu Mahasabha and the Indian National Congress, further intensified this anxiety. They actively opposed any arrangements that could potentially result in Calcutta being outside Indian territory.

The infamous Radcliffe Line was drawn, affecting countless ordinary people. The legacy of the partition—marked by communal riots, mass killings, rapes, and the trauma of displacement—overshadowed class dynamics and economic factors, placing religious identity and communal antagonism at the forefront of historical memory.

While India's emerging bourgeoisie exhibited disproportionately low Muslim participation in industry and commerce, there were notable exceptions. In the textile industry of Western India, Muslim entrepreneurs were indeed competitive. The 1921 Census indicated that in Muslim-majority regions such as Bengal and Punjab, Muslims were primarily engaged in rural agriculture. Punjab also boasted a significant educated Muslim middle class. Conversely, in Muslim-minority areas like Bombay or Ahmedabad, a growing class of

Muslim capitalists was emerging.

It is now understood that both Hindu and Muslim capitalists, albeit for different motivations, supported Partition, thereby reinforcing the Two-Nation Theory through the dynamics of competing capital. However, despite these economic realities, the prevailing narrative surrounding the birth of Pakistan remained rooted in religious identity.

This identity would soon face further challenges—specifically through the language question, ultimately leading to the significant rupture of 1971.

The Language Movement and 1971

Just a few years after the creation of Pakistan, the state's decision in 1948 to declare Urdu as its sole national language sparked massive unrest in East Pakistan, where the majority of the population spoke Bengali. The demand for Bengali to be recognised as a state language quickly gained traction, and on February 21, 1952, the streets of Dhaka were soaked in the blood of student protestors from Dhaka University.

This agitation was spearheaded by the Awami Muslim League, which would soon evolve into the Awami League—a transformation symbolically significant, indicating a political shift from religious identity to regional and secular aspirations. In 1956, Bengali was finally granted official language status, but the tensions between East and West Pakistan did not subside.

The language issue was not merely a matter of cultural pride—it was deeply economic, tied to employment, education, and administrative access for the

educated classes of East Pakistan. However, the resolution of the language question did little to alleviate the deeper socio-economic problems faced by the working masses of East Bengal. Class conflicts persisted.

As previously discussed, sharp class differences characterised East and West Pakistan at the time of Partition. Bengal's Muslims were predominantly agrarian, whereas West Pakistan boasted a wider base of educated elites and aristocratic Muslim families. Naturally, the power centre moved to the west.

This systemic inequality—and the political demands it generated—were sharply summarised by the historian and political commentator Tariq Ali, whose writings captured the economic and ideological fault lines that eventually led to the creation of Bangladesh in 1971.

"*In 1947, the predominantly Hindu trader and landlord class of East Bengal migrated to West Bengal, which was and is a part of India, leaving their businesses and lands behind them. From the start this vacuum was filled by Bihari Muslim refugees from the United Provinces of India and non-Bengali businessmen from the Western portion of Pakistan. The economic exploitation of East Bengal, which began immediately after partition, led to an annual extraction of some 3 billion rupees (approximately $300 million) from the East by West Pakistani capital. The most important foreign-exchange earner was jute, a crop produced in East Pakistan that accounted for over 50 percent of exports. This money was spent on private consumption and capital investment in West Pakistan. The sums granted for development projects by the central government offer an interesting case study of discrimination. Between 1948 and 1951, $130 million were sanctioned for development. Of this, only 22 percent went to East Pakistan. From 1948 to 1969 the value of*

the resources transferred from the East amounted to $2.6 billion. The West Pakistan economy was heavily dependent on East Bengal, partly as a field for investment, but above all as a mine of subsidies and as a captive market. The Six Points demanded by the Awami League included both political and economic autonomy and directly threatened the immediate business interests of West Pakistani capitalists and their supporters embedded in the military and the civil service. The Six Points were:

1. A federal system of government, parliamentary in nature and based on adult franchise. 2. Federal government to deal only with defense and foreign affairs. All other subjects to be dealt with by the federating states. 3. Either two separate, but freely convertible, currencies for the two parts of the country or one currency for the whole country. In this case effective constitutional measures to be taken to prevent flight of capital from East to West Pakistan. 4. Power of taxation and revenue collection to be vested in the federating units and not at the center. 5. Separate accounts for foreign-exchange earnings of the two parts of the country under control of the respective governments. 6. The setting up of a militia or paramilitary force for East Pakistan."

From Linguistic Identity to Liberation Struggle

Public consciousness predominantly perceives the economic inequality that culminated in the events of 1971 as a language movement. Between 1947 and 1971, the trajectory of identity politics shifted from religious identity to linguistic identity. However, the language movement fundamentally represented a struggle of the oppressed classes, echoing their cries and aspirations.

In the absence of a definite class-political direction, this struggle for identity consistently encountered its limitations. The bourgeois leadership, for its part, consistently impeded the movement from advancing beyond critical thresholds.

Turning Point: The Liberation Movement

The 1970 general election yielded significant results: while Bhutto emerged victorious in the West, the Awami League dominated in the East, securing 160 out of 162 seats. Yahya Khan mediated discussions between Bhutto and Mujib based on the Six-Point Plan, which ultimately proved unsuccessful.

The leftist forces in East Pakistan consistently urged Mujib to declare independence immediately and advance the struggle. In anticipation of unrest, West Pakistan initiated military mobilisation. Interestingly, Mujib adopted a unique middle path: while he called for non-cooperation, he simultaneously continued negotiations for a resolution within a united Pakistan.

The non-cooperation movement garnered substantial popular support, solidifying the Awami League's dominance in East Pakistan. It also fostered the enduring myth that equated the Liberation War solely with the Awami League's leadership, thereby overshadowing the contributions of leftist factions and other political groups. The uprising in 2024 may have effectively dismantled this myth for good—this prevailing political narrative.

The ordinary people of Bangladesh do not reject the ideals of the Liberation War. Their forebears sacrificed blood, lives, hopes, and dreams for that cause.

What they have turned away from is the Awami League's official narrative of that war—and it is crucial to acknowledge this distinction.

In any case, on 3 March 1971, a declaration for the proclamation of independence was made at Paltan Maidan. Following this, Mujib delivered his iconic speech at Suhrawardy Udyan on 7 March, leaving an indelible mark on collective memory:

"*This time, the struggle is for our liberation; this time, the struggle is for our independence*."

And Then, History Unfolded

What followed is now largely understood: a sovereign Bangladesh emerged from the bloodshed and struggle of countless individuals. The intervention of Indira Gandhi's government undoubtedly secured Bangladesh's victory; however, it is important to note that the massive influx of refugees into India, prompted by the Pakistani military's crackdown, had precipitated a severe economic crisis, rendering India's entry into the war a strategic necessity.

India's rapid military victory over Pakistan in just 13 days transformed Indira Gandhi into the "Liberator of Asia"; however, it is farcical that she would later impose emergency within a mere four years. From a geopolitical perspective, the strategic aim was to weaken Pakistan by dividing it and ensuring that the newly formed Bangladesh remained within India's sphere of influence.

India's involvement in the war received strong support from the Soviet Union, which positioned itself in opposition to the United States, a principal ally of

Pakistan. The U.S. was one of the last major nations to recognise Bangladesh, while China—another ally of Pakistan—exercised its veto against Bangladesh's admission to the United Nations in 1972.

A Question That Remains

Beyond the high-level power struggles among state actors, let us return our gaze to the workers, peasants, and ordinary people—those who, driven by a desire for democracy and liberation, gave everything to bring the dream of Bangladesh to life.

What did they receive in return?

Autocracy

After the tenure of the Provisional Government (1971–1972)—a part of which was spent in exile in Kolkata—the Awami League formed a government with an overwhelming public mandate in the 1972 elections. Mujib took oath as the second Prime Minister of Bangladesh. His name was etched in history as the Father of the Nation and a national hero. A new constitution was adopted, echoing the ideals that had surged through the waves of the Liberation War—democracy, secularism, nationalism, and socialism.

These ideals were reflected in the Constitutional Proclamation, but as G.K. Mathieu pointed out in his 1976 article "*Palace Revolution Continued*" (published in Economic & Political Weekly), there were valid reasons to question the sincerity of the journey towards a socialist society. Citing the First Five-Year Plan (1973–78), Mathieu clearly exposed the gap between

rhetoric and implementation:

"*The ideal of socialism cannot be translated into reality as easily or as quickly as the other three principles of state policy. In Bangladesh today, it remains a vision and a dream*."

In a society far from socialist, segments of the working class, often unaware of their full impact on the economy, continued to fight for wage increases. Meanwhile, the Planning Commission, with its socialist rhetoric, was offering recommendations that effectively pushed working people into austerity, cloaked in the language of national development:

"*The phenomenon where [one] is trying to reap benefits guided by sectarian economic interests must be discouraged. There should be the will and the determination to transform a society with traditional values to a production-orientated society where work, discipline and savings are the basic tenets of economic activity*."

This policy guideline clearly indicates that the populace's right to demand their fair share is being undermined, with citizens being coerced into accepting austerity measures while being urged to maintain existing class hierarchies under the guise of upholding "traditional values". As a result, the level of income inequality has steadily increased.

The subsequent section will provide two reports that compare income and various economic indicators in the agriculture and industrial sectors from 1969 to 1975, further highlighting the structural inequality that was entrenched during this period.

TABLE 1: INDEX OF PRICES AND WAGES

Annual Average	Wholesale Price		Official Wage Level	
	Agriculture	Industry	Agriculture	Industry
1969-70	100	100	100	100
1972-73	187	255	180	250
1973-74	251	320	230	275
1974-75	444	549	290	300

Source: "Economic Indicators of Bangladesh", Statistics Division, Government of Bangladesh

From the above data, it becomes evident that, relative to inflation, the real income of workers and peasants declined year by year after independence.

TRENDS IN INDUSTRIAL PRODUCTION BETWEEN 1969-70 AND 1974-75

Product	Unit	1969-70	1972-73	1973-74	1974-75	Change overthe Period(percent)
Jute	Tons	5,87,487	4,46,308	5,00,167	4,42,000	-24.76
Textile yarn	Lakh yards	1,056	818	915	913	-13.54
Textile cloth	Lakh square yards	558	590	796	845	+51.43

Sugar	Tons	88,000	19,295	88,556	98,500	+11.93
Fertilizers	Tons	94,000	2,12,000	2,85,000	72,900	-22.45
Paper	Tons	44,000	21,748	23,768	57,700	-27.85
Newsprint	Tons	36,000	27,351	26,588		
Cement	Tons	64,000	32,000	53,000	89,900	+40.47
Cigarettes	Lakh sticks	1,77,290	64,461	1,18,950	1,04,436	-41.09
Chemicals	Tons	12,930	13,400	14,500	14,500	-12.14
Tea	1000 lbs.	68,000	54,000	65,000	65,000	-4.41
Matches	1000 boxes	13,393	5,911	6,089	5,627	-57.99
Oil products	Tons	10,705	9,562	NA	NA	-10.68
Steel Ingots	Tons	54,138	66,881	72,600	NA	+34.10
Total: Production Index	–	100	65.34	84.92	80.75	-19.25

Source: Government of Bangladesh Publications.

A look at the second table clearly indicates that production has decreased across vital sectors of the economy, resulting in an overall reduction in goods output. It is apparent that the Bangladeshi economy is experiencing a systemic production crisis.

What the official indicators revealed was already dire, yet the reality for the working masses was even more bleak. In any newly established state, it is

common for the populace to endure hardships as part of the transformation process. However, the true significance of this suffering becomes apparent only when it leads to a fundamental restructuring of society. Unfortunately for the working people of Bangladesh, that opportunity for a turn of fortune never materialised.

From 1973 onwards, the government became entrenched in nepotism, corruption, and an unquenchable thirst for power. Concurrently, the economic downturn made class conflict and the emergence of leftist forces inevitable. In response to these developments, Mujib abandoned democratic principles. On December 28th, 1974, he declared a three-month state of emergency, which signalled the onset of the suppression of democratic forces and facilitated the rise of ultranationalist and fundamentalist factions.

The famine of 1974 and the subsequent epidemics that caused countless deaths revealed the complete inadequacy of both the distribution system and Mujib's economic policies. Consequently, Bangladesh had embarked on a path towards authoritarianism.

BAKSAL

Even before the conclusion of the three-month state of emergency on 25 January 1975, the Fourth Amendment to the Constitution was enacted, establishing a one-party system. All political parties, including the Awami League, were forced to dissolve and merge into a single national party, over which Mujib was granted complete control through this amendment. Mujib exercised his authority by founding the Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League, commonly referred to as BAKSAL.

This organisation became the sole national party of Bangladesh, with all powers—ranging from appointing executive committee members to selecting cabinet ministers—concentrated in the hands of President Mujib. He coerced government officials, professionals across various fields, and even trade union leaders into joining BAKSAL. It is worth remembering that Akhtaruzzaman Elias, despite facing immense pressure, refused to join. Most leftist communist parties also declined to comply. Ultimately, all opposition parties were banned outright.

Under Mujib's rule, with the support of the *Jatiya Rakkhi Bahini* and the police, it is estimated that around 30,000 political activists, including prominent opposition leaders, were extrajudicially killed. Many others simply disappeared. The government suppressed all newspapers, allowing only those under its control to operate. Freedom of speech and civil liberties were significantly restricted under stringent state oversight, rendering the judiciary effectively defunct.

Against the failure of parliamentary democracy, this was the so-called "Second Revolution" proclaimed by Mujib and orchestrated by the Awami League. For good reason, G.K. Matthieu termed it as "*The Palace Revolution*." The two reports mentioned earlier offer extensive details about the conditions faced by workers and peasants during BAKSAL's rule.

BAKSAL left behind a lasting scar on Bangladesh's political future:

1. The democratic institutions of the newly formed state experienced significant damage from the outset. The natural progression of parliamentary democracy was hindered—an institutional cost that Bangladesh still bears to

this day.

2. During the Liberation War, military power was understandably central. However, in the aftermath, BAKSAL's authoritarian shift further entrenched the military's social dominance. A faction within the army, opposed to Mujib, orchestrated his brutal assassination along with that of his family in August 1975. Martial law was declared immediately afterwards, marking the onset of military rule. In 1983, Ershad initiated a second round of martial law. Since then, the presence of military leaders in Bangladeshi politics has become normalised, a trend that continues to be evident even in the post-2024 era.

3. The initial sparks of class struggle that had emerged during the Liberation War were stifled, confined within the restrictive boundaries of a linguistic-nationalist ideology rooted in the Language Movement.

4. The democratic space diminished, rendering it impossible to adequately tackle the existing communal and fundamentalist tendencies within the social structure. Subsequently, successive rulers would manipulate these very tendencies to advance their own agendas.

Anti-Discrimination Student Movement

Continuing in the tradition of authoritarian rule, Sheikh Hasina's Awami League government has administered Bangladesh over the past fifteen years with unchecked plunder and exploitation. Under the global neoliberal regime, the oppression and exploitation of the common people have intensified, and the safety nets of social security are crumbling worldwide. Bangladesh is no exception. Alongside this, the Hasina government's farcical elections; the

stripping of democratic rights; illicit capital flight amounting to billions; rampant nepotism and corruption; police brutality; enforced disappearances and killings; the exile of political opponents; and, above all, severe economic hardship have driven people to the streets.

Student movements have historically played a glorious and pivotal role in Bangladesh's political landscape. From the Shahbagh uprising in 2013 to subsequent protests led by students, many of these movements garnered widespread public support. These leaderless movements often draw in participants from various social strata, creating a broad political space. While such movements may lead to some systemic reforms at the macro level, their strength lies in initiating a slow transformation of consciousness at the micro level of the society. However, they typically lack the organisational capacity or ideological clarity to channel class conflict into a full-scale systemic overhaul. This is not unique to Bangladesh—globally, the Left and communist traditions have lost their vigour; mainstream leftist parties have largely settled for token reforms. But that's another discussion occasion.

The key point is that Bangladesh's current socio-political structure is writhing in the birth pangs of a new order, yet the political direction needed to give it form remains absent. In its historical trajectory, Bangladesh has achieved a full circle of nationalist identity through political and cultural assertion. The glorious side of the story has been the people's ceaseless, often bloody struggle for their rights—rich in emotion and sacrifice, incomparable in its magnitude. However, as previously discussed, distorted democratic growth has bred toxic political degeneration too.

Context of Anti-India Sentiment: India-Bangladesh Bilateral Relations

As Indian citizens, particularly with our national pride closely linked to India's support during the Liberation War, it is deeply unsettling to encounter the pronounced anti-India sentiments expressed by the common people of Bangladesh. The vitriol exchanged on social media illustrates how the nationalist projects of both nations thrive on this manufactured animosity, providing sustenance to their respective regimes. However, without recognising the profound and structural ways in which Indian-Bangladesh relations have influenced the daily lives of Bangladeshi citizens, one cannot fully grasp the essence of this so-called "anti-India sentiment".

The initial period of cooperation between India and newly independent Bangladesh was short-lived. Despite the optimistic rhetoric of mutual respect and reciprocity found in the March 19, 1972 Indo-Bangladesh Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Peace. India—being the larger state—failed to honour that spirit in practice. The Farakka Barrage, which operationalised on 21 April 1975 without a formal treaty with Bangladesh, serves as a prominent example of this. Even prior to Bangladesh's independence, the Farakka issue had been contentious; once it was implemented unilaterally, it was widely viewed in Bangladesh as Sheikh Mujib's surrender to Indian interests. The underlying objective of the barrage was to safeguard the Kolkata port, with little regard for the potentially devastating impacts on Bangladesh's agriculture and ecology.

Following Mujib's assassination, India continued to unilaterally divert the majority of the water until 1977. In response, the esteemed Maulana Bhashani warned Indira Gandhi about the potential for a "Long March to Farakka", stating in his correspondence to her:

"*… Personally intervene and work out a solution yourself, which could be acceptable to Bangladesh. If this was not done, I shall be compelled to follow the path of struggle I have learnt from your forefathers and Mahatma Gandhi….*"

Much water has flowed down the Ganges since that time. Despite the signing of numerous agreements and memorandums of understanding, a 2016 report in Bandung: Journal of the Global South highlighted:

"*… The water scarcity has brought much misery and hardship to the people of the affected south-western parts of Bangladesh that has resulted in disruption of fishing and navigation, brought unwanted salt deposits into rich farming soil, adversely affected agricultural and industrial production, changed the hydraulic character of the rivers and brought about changes in the ecology of the Delta. Due to the Ganges diversion the minimum discharge of the river Padma at the point of Hardinge Bridge in Bangladesh fell far below. The groundwater level in the highly affected area went down particularly in the district of Rajshahi, Kustia, Khulna and Jessore. The south-west region had been facing the critical problem of salinity intrusion from the Bay of Bengal because of the drastic reduction of fresh water flows in the Gorai river which is the major distributary of the Ganges in this part of the country…*"

Over the past 54 years, economic relations between India and Bangladesh have been predominantly characterised by Indian dominance and control, often in an exploitative form. Indian capital has consistently targeted Bangladesh, resulting in significant trade imbalances. During the immediate post-war period, Bangladesh's infrastructural challenges may have contributed to these trade deficits. However, even decades later, there is no

evidence of any reduction in this trade imbalance.

With the rise of neoliberalism in the 1990s, Indian corporations began to invest significantly in sectors such as textiles, pharmaceuticals, and infrastructure. As Indian investment increased, so too did Bangladesh's trade deficits, despite Bangladesh being India's largest trading partner in South Asia. A series of bilateral agreements have deepened India's access to Bangladesh's markets and labour, often to the detriment of the host country's interests. Infrastructure projects—including power plants, railways, and highways—have frequently overlooked their adverse effects on local communities and ecosystems. The Bangladeshi governments have exhibited little regard for the welfare of their citizens. Reports of poor working conditions and low wages in Indian-run textile factories are widespread. Additionally, the scale of loans taken from India to finance these projects poses a risk of exacerbating Bangladesh's debt crisis.

India's economic and political dominance in South Asia has significantly influenced these bilateral relations, resulting in detrimental effects for Bangladesh. In summary, this partnership has repeatedly compromised Bangladesh's environmental integrity, worker's rights, and trade sovereignty.

Reassessing the 2024 Movement in Light of History

We must analyse the 2024 student uprising through a variety of intertwined historical and geopolitical perspectives, as discussed above. It is important to note that during Hasina's reign, India has been under the influence of a fascist, fundamentalist force—a virulent Hindu nationalism disguised as neoliberalism. Indian expansionism has become increasingly aggressive. This

trend is evident not only in Bangladesh; India's relations with nearly all its comparatively weaker neighbours have deteriorated. For instance, in the Maldives, anti-India slogans have emerged as a successful electoral strategy.

Hasina's submissive alignment with the Indian state has only intensified popular resentment. Her choice to seek refuge in India has further amplified public anger. In a society devoid of democratic education and political space, this frustration is manifesting in the limited ways available to its citizens. Not a single representative of workers or peasants is included in the interim advisory government. Workers' protests are being undermined and dismissed as mere extensions of the Awami League. Minority communities—specifically Hindus, Buddhists, and indigenous peoples—continue to face targeted discrimination. While many of these issues were initially characterised as law-and-order problems or as consequences of political affiliations, this does not absolve the caretaker government or political parties from their responsibilities. These problems remain unresolved, and there is a growing sense of concern regarding the political will of the new government.

Analysing these events in isolation will lead us nowhere; only a rigorous historical analysis can illuminate the deeper systemic roots and provide a viable path forward. This essay represents a modest attempt to navigate that challenging terrain. Failing to do so and labelling every upheaval as "Islamic fundamentalism" or a "colour revolution" merely serves to strengthen conservative forces and dismiss the legitimate grievances of the people against Hasina's autocratic regime.

Across the Left, Right, and Centre, we are all—consciously or not—becoming entangled in the BJP's ultra-nationalist ideological project. In this divided

Bengal, it seems we have forgotten our shared historical past. The media fosters hatred on both sides, and we find ourselves complicit in this. The BJP's IT cell has systematically spread fake news and videos, rendering Jamaat seemingly insignificant by comparison, while we remain engulfed in hysteria, fixating on the significance of flags. Hopefully, we will regain our composure, even if the ruling class does not permit it.

Let us remember that Hasina's tenure was never genuinely secular. Minorities suffered during that period, just as they do in India today. The emergence of a more organised fundamentalist opposition during and after the July revolt has exacerbated violence. In India, the increase in anti-minority persecution since the BJP assumed power is glaringly evident. How has our social consciousness normalised this reality? It is a question deserving of contemplation. We must seek answers to this troubling paradox, for the ruling party here ideologically condones minority persecution through its affiliates, such as *Bajrang Dal* and the *Vishwa Hindu Parishad* (World Hindu Council). By banning *Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami* without fostering democratic resistance, Hasina has only enhanced their legitimacy. Additionally, she had empowered groups like *Hefazat-e-Islam Bangladesh* to serve her agenda. Currently, the interim government is being pressurised by *Jamaat*, and social resistance is mounting in response. It is essential that we examine all of these issues objectively, free from any preconceived notions.

To date, the persecution of minorities is still far from being normalised in the country's political mainstream. It is crucial for us to reflect on the reasons behind Hasina's decision to seek refuge in India, the significance of "Jai Shri Ram" slogans being proclaimed by certain Hindus from Bangladesh, and the implications the situation holds for the year West Bengal assembly elections

of 2026.

Who Will Determine the Outcome?

The evolution of the state is a gradual process. The return of parliamentary democracy is merely a step on the long road towards liberation from exploitation for the working people of Bangladesh. On this journey, the working masses have consistently demonstrated their resilience and determination. The recent student-led uprising, although it garnered support from the working populace, suffered from a lack of leadership drawn from within their ranks. Even the advisory committee established in its aftermath does not include members from trade unions or working-class backgrounds. It is evident that Muhammad Yunus, a microfinance entrepreneur and ardent advocate of neoliberal policies, is not the appropriate individual to address their concerns. Furthermore, we have repeatedly observed him yielding to reactionary forces.

The people of Bangladesh express profound regret over the unjust arrests, the attempts to suppress class-based movements, and the silence surrounding the announcement of future elections. However, it is important to recognise several key distinctions. Communalism and fundamentalism are not synonymous. Bangladesh has yet to experience a religious fundamentalist government akin to that of India. This distinction is significant and highlights a crucial aspect of the country’s social consciousness.

Despite the global decline of the left, leftists in Bangladesh have played a vital role during this period. They have endeavoured, within their capabilities, to counter the rise of communal forces. Their analysis—that the Indian state

poses a threat not only to the Indian populace but also to the people of Bangladesh—merits serious consideration. It is essential to look beyond nationalist perspectives to understand the essence of this assertion. The concepts of ‘patrie’ and ‘state’ are not synonymous; likewise, ‘patriotism’ and ‘nationalism’ differ fundamentally.

The spirit of the July Movement will only become genuinely transformative when Bangladesh’s working class and other oppressed groups transcend religious and ethnic divisions to assume leadership in the struggle.

Ultimately, it is the masses who will determine the outcome.

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About the Author

Aparna Ghosh

Author

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