

Introduction

The Idea of the Global Sixties and East Pakistan

The image of the sixties as a transformative, radical era has proved to be enduring. As Tor Egil Følrand points out, it is only the sixties, among all the other decades of the twentieth century, that has a journal devoted to its events.¹ This journal, in its 'Aims and Scope', boldly announces, as Følrand asserts, that it 'is the only academic, peer-reviewed journal to focus solely on this transformative decade of history'.² The key locution here is the word 'transformative'. The era has become associated with revolutionary and radical confrontations, between the forces of the establishment, the global insurgencies and experiments with alternative living in the advanced capitalist world. Throughout the world, successive generations of politicians and social activists have waged cultural wars defending or attacking the radical meanings of the sixties as well as their historical legacy. The decade began with the polarizing, but hugely successful, national liberation struggle in the Caribbean in Cuba. The Cuban Revolution of 1959 appears to announce the beginning of an era that would be volatile and unpredictable, for it did not follow any predetermined master narratives of revolutionary transformation. Intellectually, the global sixties began with the writings of Frantz Fanon,³ Che Guevara's *foco* theory⁴ and Régis Debray's *Revolution in the Revolution*,⁵ alongside Mao Zedong's *On Practice and Contradiction*.⁶ These texts became central to the art of making revolution and were even read in disparate locations, such as Palestine, Algeria, France, Congo and East Pakistan. Even Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist perspective on Marxism and Louis Althusser's ruminations on the development of Marx's thought⁷ became critical sources

for the debates that raged in the dingy and overcrowded ‘Madhu’s canteen’ in Dacca University (present-day University of Dhaka).⁸ The decade was marked by the Cultural Revolution in China, the Tet Offensive in Vietnam, a seemingly revolutionary coup and a reactionary counter-coup in Indonesia (culminating in genocidal events), student-led revolutionary activities in Pakistan, the victory of the United Front in West Bengal, combined with the rise of the Naxalite Movement in India, followed by the conclusion of the Algerian War. Furthermore, the beginnings of the Palestinian national liberation struggle; the Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia; the student uprisings in France, Mexico, the United States (US) and West Germany; the civil rights movements in the US; and, of course, the global peace movement, the anti-nuclear weapons campaigns and the rise of the ‘new left’ transformed the sixties into a decade of hope, protests and rebellion.⁹ It was also an era when the new aesthetics emerging in literature, theatre, film and musicals began to create spaces to forge a counter-hegemonic cultural domain among the youth throughout the world. Many among the youths, through such counter-hegemonic cultural discourse, raised questions about modes of governance and the existing ways of doing politics. Since the end of that decade, global approaches to the sixties, and considerations of the ‘Global 1968’, have become a critical point of intervention in the social sciences. The epistemology of the global sixties starts with Asia, Africa and Latin America. It is now widely accepted that a global analysis of the sixties is untenable without an extended conversation with the historical conditions of the Third World. Fredrick Jameson, a literary scholar, rightly locates ‘the beginnings of what will come to be called the 60s in the third world’.¹⁰

This book looks at the sixties from a location in the Global South. It examines a rather understudied revolution that began in the predominantly agrarian society of the lower Gangetic delta of East Pakistan. It seeks to provide a radical reading of the sixties in East Pakistan and further aims to situate it as an integral component of the global sixties. The story of the global sixties starts with the intellectual flirtations of Bengali student activists with contemporaneous revolutionary texts. In East Pakistan in 1968–69, among the socialist leaning but purely Bengali-nationalist ‘nucleus’ circle established by Serajul Alam Khan and Kazi Aref Ahmed, the texts of Che Guevara, Régis Debray, Vo Nguyen Giap and Mao were prescribed as essential readings.¹¹ For these nationalist student revolutionaries, there was much romance to be found in the idea of a Bengali nation state heralding an exploitation-free society.¹² As Jameson maintains, the supposedly

unclassified collective entities, such as students, played as much of a role in the making of the East Pakistani global sixties as in other locations. Yet Jameson's oft-quoted observation – that Marxist theory entered a crisis in the global sixties because 'active political categories no longer seemed to be those of social class'¹³ – is a generalization based upon a particular reading of specific events which took place in Paris and other Western locations. In fact, throughout the history of East Pakistan, labour unrest had defined the political contour of democratic movements. Unfortunately, much of the historical literature on this subject in Bengali also views these working-class unrests as a prefiguration of a nationalist awakening and thus confines them to the role of a mere appendage to the nationalist movement. However, in East Pakistan, the working classes rejected such a subsumption into a purely nationalist, constitutional autonomy project. They played a critical role as a collective entity in the 1969 mass insurrection, which transformed the general movement into a potent and threatening event against the ruling military junta.¹⁴ Alongside workers, the peasants were also mobilized along class lines based upon the emerging contradictions within the polity and economy, between the rich peasants and the middle peasants. Many among these rich peasants were also constitutionally selected to be power brokers by the military-bureaucratic elites and termed 'basic democrats'. These basic democrats had gained access to developmental funds, while other segments of the 'surplus farmers', namely the middle peasants, did not have access to them.¹⁵ Though admittedly the category of 'middle peasant' is tenuous in the East Pakistani context, Eric Wolf was not far off when he argued that the middle peasants constitute the 'pivotal' group in peasant rebellions of Mexico, Russia, China, Vietnam, Cuba and Algeria. According to Wolf, poor peasants and landless labourers, depending on landlords for their livelihood, have very little 'tactical power' and no independent resources to launch and sustain a rebellion. These middle peasants alone had the necessary 'minimal tactical freedom' to challenge the established order.¹⁶ It was their children who moved into schools, colleges and universities and participated in the radical movements in East Pakistan. Thus, class remained critical to political rebellion in the sixties. Yet it would obviously be simplistic to assume that these antagonistic class contradictions automatically led to a revolution. Hannah Arendt's observation – that the revolutionists watched the disintegration of society and took initiative once the revolution had broken out – is possibly true in the context of East Pakistan of the sixties.¹⁷ Moving a step further, De Nardo, another scholar of revolution, has rightly argued

that it was the strategists who had conceptualized the path of revolution, particularly in the case of China and Vietnam.¹⁸ In Pakistan too, a Jacobin-minded pro-Chinese radical Muslim theologian, Maulana Bhashani, played a critical role in the mobilizations of the sixties. He used red flags and red hats as symbols of peasant organization.¹⁹ Thus, the very symbols around which peasants gathered and organized themselves were associated with the communist movement. Class politics, even if the language was crafted by radicals, remained inscribed on the sixties in East Pakistan. Revolutionaries, like Bhashani, despite their own inchoate ideological formulations of Islamic socialism, remained committed towards a radical redistributive agenda.²⁰

The term ‘long sixties’ is conceptualized by Arthur Marwick in the context of what he calls a ‘cultural revolution’ in Germany, Italy and France, as well as in the United Kingdom (UK) and the US.²¹ The significance of this term lies in the acknowledgement that the sixties cannot simply be studied as that time which passed between a pair of historical bookends – that is, 1960–69. Rather, it must be studied in terms of the shared objectivity of a particular historical moment that stretched beyond, but incorporated, events in that decade. The long sixties in East Pakistan began in 1954 with an election that took place in the context of a spasmodic and rickety constitutional process. It was this constitutional process that led to the gaining of a modicum of political power by the politicians of the Awami League. This brief flirtation with ‘power’ in the Pakistani state led to a split in this pivotal local autonomist organization over questions of Cold War alignment.

For a brief period, when Awami League supremo Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy was the prime minister, Pakistan joined the US-backed military blocs of the Baghdad Pact and the South-East Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO). The decision to join such military pacts was guided by the security-related concerns of the emergent military-bureaucratic ruling class in Pakistan, but the League’s active support of such a decision led to an internal schism. Radicals, which included both communists and non-communist socialists such as Bhashani, questioned the necessity of a political alignment that violated the basic principles of the Non-Aligned Movement. More importantly, these radicals felt that when political actors and emerging national-liberation struggles in the Middle East and elsewhere in the Muslim world opposed such military blocs, it was imperative that Pakistan should stay away from such formations. Ultimately, these radicals formed a rival political organization, namely the National Awami Party (NAP), based upon a programme of opposition to ‘imperial’ alignment.²² The

close connection between Cold War military-political alignments and the rise of a pro-Western, supposedly 'modernizing' military junta in Pakistan defined a critical parameter of politics of the 'long sixties'. This parameter was the general tendency to question the cultural politics of national integration as championed by military-bureaucratic regimes. It was also a period marked by growing peasant protests and labour and student militancy in Pakistan. All these movements coalesced around an opposition to the capitalist modernization process, which had increased inequity along class, regional and ethnic lines. These protests were also matched by a deeper social transformation marked by ethnic cleansing, capital flight from the eastern province, the changing dynamics of class formation, the immiseration of the peasantry and the narrowing down of the democratic possibilities of accommodation.²³

In the sixties, the coup by pro-Western military dictator Ayub Khan gave birth to praetorian capitalism, whereby a garrison state steadily pursued a policy of foreign-aid-driven modernization. Military as an institution secured a pivotal role in the economic process and gave birth to an economy based upon both social inequality and regional inequality. Functional inequality as a necessary condition for economic growth was the new mantra of the regime. Politically, the military secured the loyalty of bureaucracy as a junior partner in the ruling coalition. Furthermore, through basic democracy, military strongman Ayub Khan built up a social coalition of incipient and dependent monopoly of industrial houses and bribed rich peasantry by providing them some control over developmental funds through a constitutional façade of basic democracy. Yet such social coalition did not include the vociferous middle classes, urban working classes and rural subsistence peasantry. More importantly, the suspension of democracy created a phenomenon of minoritization of the majority – namely, the Bengali-speaking population of East Pakistan. The people of East Pakistan could not translate their numerical majority into a parliamentary coalition, and their representation in the ruling military-bureaucratic coalition remained miniscule. They did not have representation among the monopoly industrial houses as well; this then created a situation of internal colonization. In their readiness to escape from a Calcutta-centric internal colonization, Bengali Muslims found themselves in a situation of another colonization where the new colonial rulers acted as distant sovereign, even replicating certain British colonial stereotypes about Bengalis.²⁴ As the global fifties and sixties witnessed the rise of West-sponsored dictators in Asia, from Syngman Rhee in Korea to Suharto in

Indonesia, there took place also wider resistance culminating in 1968–69 throughout the world, known as the ‘high sixties’.²⁵

In Pakistan too, over the course of these years, there arose a period of ‘high sixties’, in 1968–69, marked by students, workers and peasants openly revolting against the military-bureaucratic power edifice. Throughout the Global South and in the Muslim world, the global sixties had its repercussions.²⁶ So, when did this long period of revolutionary experimentation, cultural interrogations of the status quo and a politics of hope, which were never left unmatched by their dialectical antipodes – fratricidal violence, coups and military dictatorship, and Cold War violence – come to an end? By 1970, the idea of Bangladesh as the land of Bengalis had become more popular than the earlier nationalist notion of Pakistan as a homeland of Muslims.²⁷ On 26 March 1971, the military crackdown on the radical nationalist movement snowballed into a genocide of East Pakistanis, who were now identified mostly as Bengalis. The guerrilla war of 1971 conducted amid the tensions of the Cold War – with and, in some cases, without Indian assistance – culminated in the liberation of Bangladesh. This book concludes at the beginning of the armed national liberation struggle in 1971, perceiving it as an end of an era. Yet, as Bernardine Dohrn, in a review of a book on the sixties in the US, argued: ‘The sixties began in 1954 and the real news is that they’re not over yet.’²⁸

Contradictions and Contestations: Conceptualizing the Making of Bangladesh as a Product of the Global Sixties

The adumbration of the student revolution and the subsequent national liberation struggle in East Pakistan in relation to the global sixties requires a conceptual reordering of the story of so-called Bengali nationalism. The global frame of reference necessitates a new conceptual approach towards understanding local transformation within a transnational framework – one that is informed by the crosscurrents of multiple geopolitical, ideological, economic and cultural questions. These questions indicate the concurrence of a similar set of actions across diverse geographical locations. For South Asianists, the use of the term ‘global sixties’ involves an attempt at the thematic exposition of local anti-colonial and wider anti-imperial struggles. Various protest movements made attempts to mobilize class-based social configurations in the Cold War context. But the geopolitics of bipolar power configuration constricted, as it constructed, boundaries and determined the

conclusions of these attempts. Despite radical left movements, such as the East Pakistani NAP's efforts over the fifties to transcend the matrices of the Cold War, it was clear by 1971 that the resolution of the 'democratic question' would be unable to escape the whirlwind of geopolitical realities swirling around it. Garry J. Bass' *The Blood Telegram*²⁹ and Srinath Raghavan's *1971: A Global History of the Creation of Bangladesh*³⁰ aptly highlight the impact of Cold War alignments in the making of Bangladesh. Yet both these books, and in particularly Raghavan's, despite their strengths, delegitimize and ignore the critical role played by East Pakistani actors in their own liberation, against the backdrop of the multifarious concerns of different powers to Indian policy in the Cold War era. Other works, such as Richard Sission and Leo E. Rose's authoritative account,³¹ simply view the process of the birth of Bangladesh as a product of war between India and Pakistan – a perspective that ignores the agency of local actors.³² Indeed, historians are so dazzled by the gruesome events in 1971, such as genocide, sexual violence and war, that they do not move far enough to explore the evolution of politics in East Pakistan. Most of the insightful works about the birth of Bangladesh is limited to 1971.³³ Many scholars have provided accounts of Ayub Khan's regime ignoring the details of resistance to praetorian rule.³⁴ Many contemporary accounts merely view the history of Pakistan and Bangladesh through the prism of Islamism. The emphasis on the global sixties, Cold War and the politics of resistance in united Pakistan, in this book, goes against the contemporary perception that the history of Muslim-majority polities in South Asia can only be written through the prism of Islamism. As Saadia Toor has correctly asserted, the overwhelming emphasis on Islam and religious nationalism with Islamist orientations in writing the history of Pakistan blinds us to the complex development of popular movements geared towards securing social justice.³⁵

In recent years, new historical research on the making of Bangladesh and even Pakistan focuses primarily on 1971 as a landmark. In a thoughtful and engaging essay, Faisal Devji has called the emergence of Bangladesh as an end of post-colonial state. He points out that the emergence of Bangladesh gives birth to the depoliticized language of humanitarianism, and he puts the example of Kosovo and Bosnia and the question of humanitarian language and international intervention that it involves. He further argues:

This is not to say, of course, that Bangladesh possesses no political language or imagination, only that the circumstances of its founding have resulted in the emergence of a significant and anti-political

narrative there. This is only exacerbated by the ambiguity if not absence of any national narrative about Bengali Muslims struggling for freedom before 1971, and the problem posed by their participation in the movement for Pakistan before 1947.³⁶

Yet, in many ways, this conclusion erases the complex story of internal colonization and the idea of nationalitarian political language that informs the long transition of collective political identity of Bengali Muslims in East Pakistan. Anouar Abdel-Malek outlines in his concept of ‘nationalitarian’:

The nationalitarian phenomenon is one in which the struggle against the imperialist powers of occupation has as its object, beyond the clearing of the national territory, the independence and sovereignty of the national state, uprooting in depth the positions of the ex-colonial power – the reconquest of the power of decision in all domains of national life, the prelude to that reconquest of identity which is at the heart of the renaissance undertaken on the basis of fundamental national demands, and ceaselessly contested, by every means available, on every level, and notably on the internal level.³⁷

Unpacking this concept, Neil Lazaras quotes from Fanon, who has emphatically asserted that ‘[It] is the national liberation which leads the nation to play its parts on the stage of history. It is at the heart of national consciousness that international consciousness lives and grows.’³⁸

The very cultural imagining that led towards the formation of East Pakistan indicates the complex political imagining of freedom from both formal colonialism and internal colonization in 1947 and international consciousness. While formal colonialism had a negotiated end in South Asia, internal colonization did not end. Neilesh Bose has captured the cultural dynamics of the story of the formation of Bengali Muslim cultural identity in late colonial era.³⁹ Indeed, the imagining of East Bengal as a Muslim land with its own cultural autonomy and political economic vitality was dashed to ground through another set of internal colonization involving political, identitarian and economic modes of management in Pakistan. To revisit Devji, in his important work on the ‘Muslim Zion’, he also misses the idea of sense of belonging of Bengali Muslims to their land and environment that informed their Pakistani nationalism in the forties. He sweeps this under the carpet because he views Pakistani nationalism solely from the perspective of M. A.

Jinnah and the Muslim League's all-India executive committee.⁴⁰ In 1947, at the very moment of the birth of Pakistan, Muslim League leaders in Bengal, Suhrawardy and Abul Hashim, also floated a proposal of united Bengal. Indeed, 1971 was a culminating point of a political journey that started long back. Though in no way such journey was unilinear and unidirectional, it assumed a complex form with various twists and turns. Obviously, no birth of a nation is a process strewn with certitude.

This book engages with this history within a particular global context of the sixties. Pioneering Marxist historian Badruddin Umar⁴¹ has provided a part of this story, and subaltern historian Ahmed Kamal has engaged with the period of the fifties highlighting subaltern anger in East Bengal with insensitive bureaucratic state.⁴² Umar's masterly account of the language movement in East Bengal in Bengali provides an analysis of the events in East Pakistan between 1947 and 1952.⁴³ Furthermore, Tariq Ali has provided an enriching chronicle of the student uprising of 1968–69. He also mentions the local and global contexts of the perennial crisis of legitimacy of the Pakistani state and the political and economic reasons for the same.⁴⁴ Nurul Kabir, a well-known Bangladeshi journalist, has written a monograph on the sixties uprising in Bangladesh.⁴⁵ Though their treatment is episodic, these texts help us to understand the underlying political events and implicit imagination of student actors in such movements. Three Bangladeshi scholars – Lenin Azad,⁴⁶ Morshed Shafiqul Hasan⁴⁷ and Shekhar Dutta⁴⁸ – have produced nuanced and complex accounts of events in the global sixties explaining the role of political economy in such crisis. In addition, Hasan has analysed the intellectual origins of various ideas that informed the process of the making of Bangladesh⁴⁹. As these accounts were in Bengali, they are not readily available to international readers. Given the politics of language in global academia, unless translated, these accounts would remain unknown in the international scholarly circle. Thus, the understanding of a crucial aspect of the global sixties and South Asian history of nation-formation in the post-colonial era would remain a rather skewed, whereby Bengali Muslims would remain in exile to their own history, political imagination and cultural predilections. More importantly, ideological contestations over the implications of the global sixties would remain unknown. This book thereby engages with these aspects.

Indeed, a critical characteristic of the global sixties is the complexities of ideological struggle within the left which took place under the shadow of another 'cold war', namely the Sino-Soviet rivalry. The critical impact of

the Chinese Revolution on ideological debates within the left remains an understudied subject. Although China's foreign-policy reach was limited, its critique of Soviet positions had far-reaching effects. Beginning in the late fifties, numerous activists, politicians and intellectuals travelled to China from East Pakistan. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was one of them. He has recalled his visit to China in elaborate detail in his unpublished autobiography and a travelogue.⁵⁰ Bhashani met directly with Zhou Enlai and was deeply impressed by China's agrarian revolution.⁵¹ Indeed, in the fifties, the NAP, of which the Communist Party of Bangladesh was the principal clandestine constituent, emerged as a major alternative to the Awami League, the pivotal advocate for East Pakistan's regional autonomy. However, the NAP lost its efficacy to some degree when the party split in 1967. The seemingly pro-Chinese Bhashani wing of the NAP played a critical role in organizing peasant protests during the 1969 struggle. But the division within the left among the pro-Soviet and pro-Chinese wings, and later, the further fragmentation of the pro-Chinese left into several rival political formations, such as the Communist Party of East Pakistan (Marxist–Leninist) and the Communist Party of East Bengal (Marxist–Leninist), profoundly influenced the outcome of the global sixties in East Pakistan. The internal schisms within the left and, particularly, the pro-Chinese left's growing distance from the nationalist upsurge created a political vacuum within the protest movement. Meanwhile, the pro-Soviet Communist Party became closely aligned with the regional autonomy movement, but the party had no decisive influence due to its relatively smaller membership and instead acted as a battered remnant of the earlier robust, but clandestine, communist network.

Due to the internal paralysis of the left, the Awami League could establish a hegemonic position within the pro-democracy movement. The revolution of 1969 opened up an opportunity to further radicalize the political agenda of Bengali nationalism. However, the left's confusion, arising from their conflicting interpretations of the implications of Chinese geostrategic manoeuvrings in South Asia, rendered them ineffective during the liberation struggle. In post-liberation Bangladesh, Cuba's own contribution to the ideological critique of Soviet Marxism was similarly profound. Many nationalist-minded Bengalis were inspired by Cuba's autonomous brand of Marxism, though they never followed its direct dictum or had links with the Cuban Communist Party. These independent Marxists