

“Kaam Bandh Karo, Pakistan Zindabad”:  
A micro-history of the Karnafulli Paper Mill and Adamjee Jute Mill riots and its  
neighbourhoods in East Pakistan, c. 1954

In 1954, East Pakistan experienced some major political upheavals, namely the dramatic, overwhelming and somewhat unanticipated victory of the popular Jukto-Front over the incumbent Muslim League, and then its swift dismissal through the imposition of Governor's rule - the first instance of it in a post-colonial and a newly-independent Pakistan. This autocratic high-handedness of the Central Government in Karachi over the seemingly wayward East Wing was to become a portent of the future conflicts between the province and the state, all the way up to the 1971 war.

Much of the academic work on this conjunctural point in the history of East Pakistan have been focused on tensions at the top, belying the tensions at the bottom, which came in the form of two of the worst industrial riots in the history of a United Pakistan. The Karnafulli Paper Mill riot and Adamjee Jute Mill riot of 1954 resulted not only in the death of hundreds (Adamjee riot singlehandedly had an estimated death count of 500-800 within the space of two hours) and arrest of thousands of workers, but had major industrialists decrying East Pakistan as a backward province and threatening the withdrawal of capital, the newly-installed governor Iskander Mirza ordering the arrest and exile of Maulana Bhashani, the breaking up of unions and the militarisation of industrial neighbourhoods, and then, finally, the CIA Director landing in Dhaka to investigate 'red-baiting' in the course of the riots.

This paper provides a detailed, textured and layered micro-history of the events that preceded, occurring during and after both of these riots. In particular, the paper discusses the role of the neighbourhood as a discursive, symbolic and practical space for labour organising and political mobilisation amongst urban workers. Using Special Branch and Central Investigation Department documents, court judgements and witness testimonies obtained from multiple archives in Bangladesh and then correspondence, briefings and memos sent by the UK and US embassies on these riots, I interrogate and dismantle the conventional thesis that these riots were 'Bihari'-Bengali riots, conspired by the political elite to undermine Pakistan.

This paper explores and critically analyses worker agency and consciousness to interpret issues of space, relations of production and political mobilisation in this period of accelerating urbanisation and industrialisation. Some of the questions asked in this paper are: why were machines left 'unharmd' and human labour not in these two riots? Why did shopkeepers and sampan walas get involved in these factory struggles? What was the relationship of the neighbourhood to the factory before, during and after these riots? How and where did the calls for 'Kaam Bandh Karo' and 'Pakistan Zindabad' meet and depart from each other? Who is Maulana Bhashani and how did he matter? This paper ultimately questions and tries to answer how urban workers imagined and experienced industrial neighbourhoods and factory struggles and how this connected to wider political activity and imaginings of postcolonial state.

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