

A Microhistory of a Mass Mobilisation:
Peasant Agency and Solidarity in the 1990 Anti-Shrimp Movement
of Polder 22, Khulna

By

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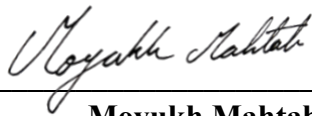
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Declaration

It is hereby declared that

1. The thesis submitted is my own original work while completing the degree at Brac University.
2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
4. I have acknowledged all main sources of help.

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Ethics Statement

The key ethical concerns relevant for this thesis are in terms of my professional affiliation and the interview process of the participants.

The landless peasants who participated in the movement against shrimp aquaculture and continue to conduct mobilisation activities in various areas in Khulna are organised members of Nijera Kori. I am currently employed in the Information and Communication Team of the organisation. This is a potential conflict of interest. However, the study is not commissioned by Nijera Kori, no funding has been taken from the organisation for it, and there has been no suggestion from the organisation guiding me towards any specific conclusion. Any error of analysis or fact are my own.

In terms of the interviews of landless members, the priority was to do no harm and be open about the purpose of the interviews. Since interviews were taken over phone, verbal consent was ensured before recording narratives of interviewees. The concerns were however largely mitigated by the fact that the informants were all experienced with working with researchers who have analysed the events from various perspectives since 1990. The concern of unintentionally putting them at risk by publishing their names and narratives was negligible, and no informant had any objection to being quoted by their real names.

Abstract

Karunamoyee Sarder was killed in November, 1990 while leading a protest against shrimp aquaculture in Polder 22 of Paikgacha, Khulna, Bangladesh. Karunamoyee and other landless protestors were attacked with guns and bombs by goons hired by a local shrimp farm owner. Following her murder, the continued mobilisation of the peasants of Polder 22 evolved into a mass movement against shrimp aquaculture. To date Polder 22 has remained a shrimp-free zone and thousands of peasants continue to gather each year to commemorate her as a martyr. Using oral and textual sources, this microhistory of the movement highlights the complexities of peasant agency and solidarity, aspirations and motivations, that constitute their initial act of resistance. It also demonstrates how wider alliances with political parties and civil society organisations, within the specific context of 1990s Bangladesh, propelled the local resistance into a mass movement. Through these, it explores how Karunamoyee and the movement have today become symbols embodying peasant rights and struggles beyond the immediate context of the movement for the people of Polder 22.

Keywords: peasant politics and protests; shrimp aquaculture; social mobilisation; microhistory; peasant agency and solidarity; coastal Bangladesh

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Besides his crucial help in collecting the documents, posters and songs that I have used for this study and in arranging the interviews with the people of Polder 22, Rezanur Rahman from Nijera Kori supported me throughout the process by ensuring flexible working hours and clarifying the details about the shrimp industry I was not familiar with. The invaluable feedback from Amiya Dhara Halder and Shamsuddoza Sajen, who read the drafts of this study, is reflected in the final output. I also thank Sushmita S Preetha, who first suggested that I should consider doing my research on Karunamoyee Sarder.

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List of Acronyms

ADB	Asian Development Bank
AL	Awami League
BNP	Bangladesh Nationalist Party
BWDB	Bangladesh Water Development Board
CDP	Coastal Development Partnership
CPB	Communist Party of Bangladesh
DDP	Delta Development Project
DC	Deputy Commissioner
EJF	Environmental Justice Foundation
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
IMF	International Monetary Fund
JP	Jatiya Party
NEERI	National Environmental Engineering Research Institute
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
NK	Nijera Kori
SIDA	Swedish International Development Agency
SP	Superintendent of Police
UNO	Upzila Nirbahi Officer (Upazila Executive Officer)
WB	World Bank
WP	Workers Party of Bangladesh

Glossary

<i>Chingri gher:</i>	Shrimp farm
<i>Khas land:</i>	Government-owned land which, in policy, is supposed to be distributed among landless peasants
<i>Hari:</i>	Payment to landowners in lieu of obtaining lease for shrimp aquaculture
<i>Mahajani:</i>	In the context of colonial and post-colonial Bengal, <i>mahajan</i> refers to moneylenders who would lend money to peasants at exorbitant interest rates. <i>Mahajan</i> is also used to refer to—in contrast to peasants—those who control the inputs for production and the marketisation of produce. <i>Mahajani</i> refers to this system or context of moneylending and control over the production processes by <i>mahajans</i> .
<i>Uta tebhaga:</i>	Literally, reverse Tebhaga; the Tebhaga movement in Bengal was a demand by peasants for the rent to landowners to be reduced to one-third. The practice of <i>uta tebhaga</i> , on the other hand, demands that the rent paid to landowners is two-thirds of the produce.
Union:	Union or union councils are the smallest administrative units in Bangladesh.
Upazila:	Sub-district; each upazila is divided into multiple unions.

Chapter 1

Introduction

The year 1990 in the grand narrative of Bangladesh's national history marks the end of military rule and the restoration of democratic processes. After years of military dictatorship, a period which saw continued liberalisation of the country's economy, on December 6, 1990, HM Ershad was compelled to step down in the face of a mass movement. Nostalgically, it is also remembered as a time that saw the unlikely alliance of major political parties, including the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) against Ershad.

For the people of Polder 22 in Paikgacha, Khulna, however, the last months of 1990 are the markers of a different movement. While lost in the grand narrative, the resistance against commercial shrimp aquaculture by the landless peasants of Polder 22 is no less significant—in terms of what it can tell us about the local impacts of global capital, top-down government policy, state repression, and the politics and responses of those living on the margins. This study seeks to explore the narratives of the participants of this act of resistance—which grew into a mass movement, drawing a diverse range of supporters—to highlight the complexities of peasant politics, agency, identity and solidarity within the broader structural contexts of the period.

1.1 Outlines of a local resistance

On the morning of November 7, 1990, two processions of landless men and women from the villages of Polder 22 in Deluti Union of Paikgacha, Khulna started marching towards the embankment at Harinkhola village. The previous night, a shrimp farm (*chingri gher*) owner based in Khulna, Wazed Ali Biswas, had arrived at Harinkhola with his hired goons, armed with guns and homemade bombs. Their plan was to cut the embankment to let saline water into the polder, and thus start the process of introducing brackish shrimp farming there.

The adverse effects of shrimp farming, which had started commercially around the mid-1980s in Khulna, were already evident in the surrounding polders. The industry's impacts on people's livelihood opportunities and the environment, not to mention the human rights abuses associated with its operation, had resulted in a strong anti-shrimp discourse in Polder 22. The primary means of livelihood of the people in the polder were as wage labourers, sharecroppers or fishermen. Many people of the polder were also members of landless groups organised by Nijera Kori (NK), a social mobilisation focussed Bangladeshi NGO. These groups were organised in the early 1980s by NK as part of the Dutch-funded Delta Development Project (DDP), which was underway at the time, with Polder 22 as one of the principal project areas. The groups—responsible for construction and maintenance of the embankments and entitled to use of the acquired land adjacent it—had contributed to a certain organisational solidarity among the people of the polder.

The news of Wazed Ali's arrival had spread within the night from village to village. As the two processions (mostly consisting of, but not limited to, organised members of the landless groups) started approaching Harinkhola, chanting slogans against shrimp farming, Wazed Ali's men started throwing bombs and shooting at the crowds.

One of the women leading the processions, Karunamoyee Sarder, a landless widow from Bigardana village of the polder, was murdered. Her body was taken away by Wazed's men, never to be recovered. At least 40 people were injured (up to a hundred by some accounts), some very severely.

This was not the first time that shrimp farming had led to violence or death. Yet, the act of resistance on November 7 soon grew into a mass movement, drawing supporters from civil

society groups, political parties, activists, journalists and most importantly, people affected by the shrimp industry, who till then had not been able unite against it on a mass scale.¹



Figure 1: Mural at Harinkhola, Polder 22, depicting Karunamoyee Sarder and landless peasants marching against shrimp aquaculture. Courtesy: Nijera Kori

Polder 22, three decades later, remains shrimp-free. A mural (Figure 1) stands at Harinkhola today depicting Karunamoyee and her fellow protestors, and November 7 is celebrated each year locally and by Nijera Kori as *Karunamoyee Dibosh* (Karunamoyee Day). To the people of Polder 22, she has become a martyr and is venerated as *Ma Karuna* (Mother Karuna).² For surrounding areas, some of which have been subsequently freed from shrimp aquaculture through similar movements, Karunamoyee and Polder 22 remain potent symbols of resistance.

¹ This brief summary draws from the multiple interviews conducted for this study. Throughout this study, I refer to its principal actors, including Karunamoyee Sarder and Wazed Ali Biswas by their first names or the names they are referred to by interviewees and not necessarily their last names.

² Priscilla Raj, “Ma Karuna Returns.”

1.2 A microhistory of peasant politics

While the details surrounding Karunamoyee's death and the subsequent mass movement have been documented in parts in the broader context of shrimp aquaculture's impacts, there has been no detailed historical analysis of the narratives of its participants or of the complexities that accompany social mobilisations. That is, the politics of the landless peasants who participated in the movement is subsumed under broader narratives, such as that of the environmental impacts of commercial shrimp farming globally. The movement has featured in advocacy-focussed reports by international organisations such as the Environmental Justice Foundation (EJF) in highlighting how the global push towards shrimp production has affected local populations. In academic studies, the movement has been analysed in relation to food sovereignty, capital accumulation, globalisation and gender relations, and human security, some of which do engage with the politics of the movement's actors tangentially. Besides these, there have been two documentations of the movement—by a journalist who had covered and supported the movement at the time, and by an NGO professional—which provide detailed chronologies of the events as they unfolded from 1990 till 2000.³

The story of Polder 22 is at once one of peasant agency and solidarity in the face of an existential threat, as well as that of state priorities and repressions at a time when shrimp production for the global market was strongly encouraged and patronised, ignoring its impacts on the lives of many. It is also one case among many of local resistances against the impacts of a global industry, promoted and funded by international institutions, including the World Bank (WB) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB).

This study seeks to explore the complexities of agency, motivation, identity and solidarity of the people of Polder 22 in the context of landlessness, NGO-led social mobilisation and the

³ These reports, studies and documentations have been used as sources of information throughout this study, and are cited in detail in the following chapters.

multi-faceted impacts of shrimp aquaculture. It presents a microhistory of the anti-shrimp movement of Polder 22—zooming in on the resistance of November 7, 1990—to explore the motivations and aspirations of the movement’s principal actors. It seeks to understand why the events of November 7 and Karunamoyee’s death proved to be so decisive in triggering a mass movement, how and by whom it was led, and the roles of its various actors including Nijera Kori, the DDP, the police, political parties and journalists, as the movement continued after her murder. That is, it is an exploration of why and how these men and women mobilised against Wazed Ali and the introduction of shrimp farms, and continued to do so after November 7, even after Karunamoyee’s murder, in the face of constant insecurity, arrests and threats.

The study also tries to understand how Karunamoyee is remembered today: her afterlife as a symbol of resistance almost three decades later. Trying to answer these questions, I engage with the broader national and international contexts that necessarily shaped the politics and actions of the people of Polder 22. But the focus remains on a historical analysis, informed by a microhistorical approach, of the events of November 7 and its immediate aftermath.

1.3 Chapter outline

In the preceding sections, I have attempted to, first, present a brief outline of the protest of November 7, 1990, and second, specify the purpose of my thesis. In the next chapter, “Theoretical Frameworks and Methodology”, I elaborate on why microhistory is the chosen methodological approach for this study. I highlight how microhistory’s scale of observation and analytic approach to details can answer complex questions about peasant agency, solidarity, identity and politics which are difficult to engage with at a macro scale. I also elaborate on the academic literature, from history and anthropology, on peasant politics and social movements, that have informed my assumptions, understanding and analysis of the oral

and textual sources that I use. Lastly, I elaborate on the interviews that were conducted for this study and the key texts used as primary sources.

In chapter 3, “Background to the Protests”, I contextualise the events of Polder 22 from a global and a local perspective to set the background of the movement. I highlight how the global rise of demand for shrimp, accompanied by funding from donors and international institutions, led to the introduction of the industry in Asian and Latin American countries. Drawing from academic and advocacy-focussed studies, I briefly present the major environmental and socioeconomic impacts associated with the industry, as well as the human rights abuses that has accompanied its expansion, particularly in Bangladesh. A brief sketch of local resistances, particularly over access to land, that the expansion of the shrimp industry has prompted in these shrimp producing countries is also presented. Lastly, the interviews conducted for this study have been used to set the specific socioeconomic context of Polder 22, that is, the immediate context within which its inhabitants decided to protest against the introduction of shrimp farming in their polder. The narratives of those interviewed highlight how the decision to resist Wazed Ali was primarily in response to the threat of a subsistence crisis. However, they also highlight other crucial factors—access to land, social insecurity, relationships with local leaders, organisational structures that they were part of—which shaped the decision to resist.

Chapter 4, “The Makings of a Movement”, constitutes the principal focus of the study, a microhistory of the events—up to November 7—constructed through oral and textual records. Testimonies of participants, and Nijera Kori and DDP staff, complemented by textual records inform the narrative presented. I look at how personal motivations, aspirations, existing organisational structures and alliances shaped the leadership and strategies through which the decision to protest developed, rather than presenting a chronological record of the events, which is in any case already available from existing documentations.

In chapter 5, “Repercussions and Resilience”, I take up the story after Karunamoyee’s murder. The attack on the people of Polder 22 was followed on one hand by persecution from the police, while on the other, by widespread publicity, support and new alliances. This was also a time when the movement against Ershad’s military rule was reaching its peak nationally—this, I argue, was a decisive factor contributing to support for the anti-shrimp movement from mainstream political parties, if only for a time. The same issues of agency, networks and solidarity are highlighted in this phase of the movement, as it reached its critical mass. I also look at the lasting importance of the protest and Karunamoyee as symbols of resistance—not only for the people of Polder 22, but also in inspiring similar movements in surrounding areas and in the formation of transnational activism against shrimp aquaculture.

Lastly, in the concluding chapter, I highlight the key findings of this study in terms of how certain structural contexts, social mobilisation activities, and personal and collective agency shaped the anti-shrimp movement of Polder 22, and how Karunamoyee continues to resonate with people’s aspirations, as a symbol laden with political values and demands, to this day. I also briefly reflect on how this study can contribute to further research on social mobilisation, empowerment and peasant politics; this remains, however, an exercise with significant limitations, aimed at identification rather than generalisation.

Chapter 2

Theoretical Frameworks and Methodology

Methodologically, this study approaches the events of November 7, 1990 through a microhistoric analysis. While the central act of resistance and the subsequent movement it spawned are parts of larger stories, they also embody in action the politics of landless peasants, their organisational structures, potential for leadership, ideas about right and wrong, and the processes through which their identities and solidarities were constructed. A microhistory is useful in exploring the roles played by NK and DDP staff, local politicians, the police and administration as the movement progressed—the alliances, networks and constraints that shaped the events. However, a microhistory is not necessarily defined by its spatial or temporal dimensions, but as Carlo Ginzburg writes, shifts the focus constantly from “close-ups to extreme long-shots”.⁴ So, throughout this study, the narratives of the movement’s actors are contextualised within the broader socioeconomic and political environments of the time.

At the same time, while primarily focussing on writing a microhistory of the anti-shrimp movement of Polder 22, I also draw on theories and studies on peasant politics and social mobilisation to inform my reading of the events, without limiting myself to one specific framework or model for explanation.

The subsequent sections of this chapter briefly review the methodological and theoretical frameworks that are pertinent to this study. They explain the rationale of a microhistorical approach and highlight studies, from multiple disciplines, which informed my understanding of peasant politics and which I have found useful in my analysis. Lastly, I elaborate on the specific methods employed for primary data collection, the textual sources used as primary material and the scope and limitations of the study.

⁴ Carlo Ginzburg, “Microhistory: Two or Three Things That I Know about It,” 193-214.

2.1 Microhistory

Classics of microhistory, such as Ginzburg's *The Cheese and Worms* and Natalie Zemon Davis' *The Return of Martin Guerre*, highlight how lives of peasants who lived a very long time ago, who have themselves left very little records behind, can be reconstructed in narrative form.⁵ This in turn, can tell stories not only of the complexities of individual lives, but about the contexts in which they lived and with which they interacted. Ginzburg's portrayal of the Friulian miller, Domenico Scandella, is a story of a sixteenth century peasant's life and beliefs, his interpretations of books he had access to, and of his interactions with the Roman Inquisition which charged him with heresy. Through "micro"-historical readings—in the sense of microscopic analysis—of Roman Inquisition trial records, Ginzburg reconstructed an episode of peasant agency and beliefs in clash with religious authorities in the context of the Counter-Reformation in Italy.

Matti Peltonen writes of microhistory as an approach which draws from both history and anthropology in its "reduction of scale of examination" and use of "thick description" to study the "potential importance of the exceptional"—events such as "revolutions and natural disasters"—which disrupt everyday life and can reveal "social structures that are relevant on a larger scale than the person or locality under review".⁶ Microhistories, as Ginzburg explains, can be thought of as extremely detailed case studies, employing a thorough analytic approach.⁷ This is similar to what Sanjay Subrahmanyam does in *Three Ways to be Alien*, where he focusses on individual figures to portray broader political-economic realities of the Early Modern period.⁸ While, he does not speak of his approach as microhistory as such, his

⁵ Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and Worms*; Natalie Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre*.

⁶ Matti Peltonen, "What is Microhistory?," 111-112.

⁷ Serious Science, "Carlo Ginzburg – Microhistory," *YouTube* video.

⁸ Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Three Ways to be Alien: Travails & Encounters in the Early Modern World*.

“connected histories can be interpreted as one possible productive encounter of global and micro-history.”⁹

Central to microhistory as an approach is its focus on agency, “the individual’s ability to resist and shape the larger forces of history”.¹⁰ One recent example of this—which has been very important in how I approach this study—can be found in Layli Uddin’s paper on the workers’ riots in Adamjee Jute Mill and Karnaphuli Paper Mill in 1954, where she demonstrates how a microhistorical reading can reveal complex pictures of solidarity, agency, identity and politics that unfold through events of collective behaviour, which can be easily overlooked from a broader, grand perspective.¹¹ “Enemy Agents at Work” explores how “close-up analysis of the riots as they unfolded, spatially and temporally, offers multiple fine-grained images of workers in action”—such a reading of narratives of historical actors can yield complex, “multiple readings” of historical events and provide insight which otherwise get “obscured by high politics”.¹² Particularly for my study, where both Hindu and Muslim peasants participated in the movement, a microhistorical approach can also be useful to analyse their experience and motivation in terms of intersectional factors—specifically, religious identity—and how solidarities were formed beyond communal lines.

2.2 Peasants and politics

Throughout this paper, I refer to the movement’s key actors as peasants. Thus, first a clarification is due about how I employ the terms “peasant” and “politics”. The rich body of historical and anthropological studies on peasant life, politics and movements is full of definitions of peasants—as a universal social category, a remnant of the pre-industrial

⁹ Francesca Trivellato, “Microstoria/Microhistoire/Microhistory,” 131.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 127.

¹¹ Layli Uddin, “‘Enemy Agents at Work’: A Microhistory of the 1964 Adamjee and Karnaphuli Riots in East Pakistan.”

¹² *Ibid*, 7.

world or in terms of their economies.¹³ However, most of these definitions have some specific characteristics in common. To take two: Teodor Shanin defines peasants as “small agricultural producers” engaged in subsistence farming with simple tools and occupying a certain position in the social and economic hierarchy.¹⁴ For Eric R. Wolf, peasants are defined by their existential involvement in agriculture, their power relations vis-à-vis landlords, and their incomplete access to the market.¹⁵ What emerges from such definitions is the centrality of land to peasant livelihood and their relatively inferior political, social and economic positions. Taj Hashmi in *Peasant Utopia*, in speaking of peasants of East Pakistan, starts with Wolf’s definition, adding that landless wage labourers and sharecroppers of the region should also be identified as peasants.¹⁶

Studies of peasants in Asia have further attempted to classify peasants as rich, middle, and poor.¹⁷ However, for the purposes of this study, where the actors were mostly engaged in subsistence farming, working as sharecroppers and wage labourers, such stratifications are not very important. What is important is the centrality of the peasant’s access to land for survival. Moreover, given that most of the movement’s actors from Polder 22 identify themselves as landless members of the landless groups supported by NK, the terms landless peasant and peasant are used throughout to refer to them.¹⁸

So, what then do we mean by the politics of peasants? Depending on how broadly we define politics, we can see political acts in everyday lives, or only when peasants begin to engage with political parties, or we can even dismiss peasants as pre-political. This is also a question of

¹³ For these discussions on defining peasants and peasantry, see Teodor Shanin, “Peasantry as a Political Factor”; Sutti Ortiz, “Reflections on the Concept of ‘Peasant Culture’ and Peasant ‘Cognitive Systems’.”

¹⁴ Shanin, “Peasantry as a Political Factor,” 240.

¹⁵ Eric R. Wolf, “On Peasant Rebellions.”

¹⁶ Taj Hashmi, *Peasant Utopia: The Communalization of Class Politics in East Bengal, 1920-1947*, 2-4.

¹⁷ Hamza Alavi, “Peasant Classes and Primordial Loyalties.”; and Hashmi, *Peasant Utopia*, 3.

¹⁸ Nijera Kori and the members of landless groups refer to the organised groups collectively as the landless organisation (*bhumiheen shongothon*). It is, according to NK, an organisation which is their (members’) own, and decisions of which are taken by members collectively, with NK’s role being to support them in their conscientisation and mobilisation activities. See nijerakori.org for more information.

agency: can peasants act for their own needs or are mobilisations necessarily elite-led? These questions have been answered by scholars of peasant studies from a range of theoretical and ideological frameworks, from Marxist class theory to economistic rational choice explanations. This study takes a broad view of what constitutes politics, posited by Eric J. Hobsbawm as “the relations of peasants with other social groups, both those which are their economic, social and political ‘superiors’ or exploiters and those which are not, workers, for instance, or for that matter other sections of the peasantry, and with more comprehensive institutions or social units—the government, the national state.”¹⁹ While, for Hobsbawm, peasants are largely pre-political in the sense that their engagement with modern political institutions remains limited, his conception of politics outlined above does give us room to engage with peasant politics in a broader sense.

Thus, defined as relations, necessarily of power and influence, peasant politics is intrinsically linked to their sense of agency, identity, and moral economy. However, to Hobsbawm, peasant rebellions and mobilisations are constrained in their potential and scope by the absence of a developed class consciousness and lack of understanding of the structures of their exploitation. For him, peasant actions are brief and millennial, and prolonged activity necessarily requires external leadership—the agency that this study draws from his definition of politics is not necessarily seen by him as such.²⁰

For others, however, peasant politics, especially political action embodied in mobilisations and movements, are better explained in economistic terms. Migdal, for example, posits that peasant action is extremely unlikely unless it is for material reciprocity; he asks: “Why should peasants participate politically” at all? In his rational choice approach, he sees peasant lives as being too busy, their power too meagre, and their hopes too slim for them engage in political activities,

¹⁹ Eric J. Hobsbawm, “Peasant and Politics,” 3.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

unless it is for material inducements. Participation by his rational peasants is dependent on reciprocity from those who seek to mobilise them. They are, like all people, primarily economic rather than ideological beings, exerting agency in their choice, but ultimately dependant on elites to be mobilised for various forms of material gain.²¹

However, the twentieth century is replete with peasants exerting their agency, mobilising and revolting for demands as varied as reduction of rents to overthrow of the social order, against excessive exploitation or for millenarian goals. Peasant politics is not therefore homogenous and fixed, but contingent on specific historical circumstances. This politics can be expressed in various ways, from passive subjugation, small acts of resistances to mass mobilisations depending on historical contexts. Indeed, for James C. Scott and for Hashmi, to understand the politics of peasants, it is crucial to understand their lives and lived realities. Scott, argues that since peasant movements are not the norm, it is more important to understand “what we might call *everyday* forms of peasant resistance.” Such resistances, as he has documented, can range from verbal and tactical undermining of their superiors, passivity in carrying out orders to clandestine sabotage of machinery that threaten their livelihoods.²²

So, the question can be framed in another way: how do structural factors facilitate specific articulations of peasant politics? Sustained demographic changes and ecological crises have been posited as determining factors for mass mobilisation by Wolf.²³ As land becomes converted into commodity, peasants become subjected to the demands of a market to which they become subservient. For him, the “spread of the market has torn men up by their roots, and shaken them loose from the social relationships into which they were born”—peasant rebellions are not just knee-jerk reactions for immediate needs, but responses to broader

²¹ Joel S. Migal, *Peasant, Politics and Revolution: Pressures Toward Political and Social Change in the Third World*, 21.

²² James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*.

²³ Wolf, “On Peasant Rebellions.”

societal changes. Similarly, D. N. Dhanagare in his studies of peasant movements in India, identifies commercialisation of agriculture as a pre-condition for peasant resistance and political instability as a catalyst.²⁴

In Scott's analysis, exploitation cannot be a sufficient cause either: the suddenness of impacts threatening peasant subsistence, shocks that are difficult to adapt to, the risks of repression, social structures of cooperation, and mitigating factors all play a role in determining whether passive resistance turns into outright mobilisation. Resistances begin small, against identifiable causes and individuals responsible for their misery, and how they unfold is dependent on their "alliances with other classes, the repressive capacity of dominant elites, and the social organization of the peasantry itself."²⁵

This brings us back to the issue of agency. There have been attempts to categorise peasant movements on the basis of their leadership and class consciousness (or simply, their motivations for mobilisation). Shanin's categorisation of peasant political action has been in terms of leadership and duration: independent class action, where peasants act for their class; guided political action, where they are mobilised by external elites; spontaneous political action, such as riots with short-term agendas; and passive forms of resistance as documented by Scott.²⁶ But, as is usually the case, it is difficult to place any particular movement into such ideal types.

In terms of understanding peasant agency, this study draws much from the subaltern group of historians, particularly the works of Ranajit Guha. His deconstruction of official narratives of peasant insurgencies in colonial India to reveal an autonomous domain of peasant politics was a response to what he called an elitist bias of historiography. Guha's analysis situates the

²⁴ D. N. Dhanagare, *Peasant Movements in India*.

²⁵ James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*, 193-240.

²⁶ Shanin, "Peasantry as a Political Factor."

agency of the peasant as central, whether they be guided by class consciousness, kinship ties or religious beliefs.²⁷

Guha's prioritising of peasant autonomy and agency, as Hashmi has pointed out, swings too far the other way in granting complete autonomy of peasant action. Hashmi posits a more nuanced view of peasant action which is helpful for our broad understanding of politics and its articulations. To him, motivation for mobilisation is explained neither by purely economic theories, nor are they purely morally determined: peasants engage in movements and rebellions due to a host of factors, with aspirations of upward social mobility and economic benefits to ideological or millenarian goals. In this, the peasant's agency is neither denied, nor does it constitute a purely autonomous domain.²⁸ However, the subaltern scholars' attempts to focus on peasants as historical actors without appropriating their political motivations to larger nationalist or other ideological narratives remains crucial in how this study focusses on peasants' narratives as political beings engaging with their historical contexts.

While the studies discussed till now mostly focus on peasant rebellions and insurrections of the twentieth century in a colonial context, they inform this paper in terms of how agency, solidarity and everyday politics, shaped by socioeconomic contexts, can manifest at certain times in acts of resistance. They also remain relevant in analysing the roles of elites and alliances in how movements unfold over time.

2.3 Social mobilisation and popular movements

Besides studies of peasant movements particularly, this study also engages with theories of social mobilisation. While these theories are often categorised in terms of paradigms—from classical explanations in functionalist, rationalist or Marxist traditions to the theories about

²⁷ Ranajit Guha, "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India."; Guha, *Elementary Aspect of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*.

²⁸ Hashmi, *Peasant Utopia*.

resource mobilisation, political processes and new social movements—it is particularly the recent focus on emotions that I am primarily interested in.²⁹ But, my analysis also engages with conceptual tools from social mobilisation theories such as framings and networks. This is particularly useful in understanding how the movement, as it scaled up after November 7, came to be supported by mainstream political parties, in the context of the anti-Ershad movement.

The reason for my focus on the emotional components of social movements is to go beyond purely rational explanations—movements such as this have strong affective motivations as well. The relatively recent analytic focus on emotions in studies of social mobilisation challenges both the early dismissals of emotion in collective actions as irrational and hysteric on one hand and complete disregard of emotions on the other. For these scholars, emotions are central to how movements form, recruit members, trigger wider responses and are kept alive for a long period. They are important in the framings of a movement and in creations of identity and solidarity among participants.³⁰

Two such studies, almost microhistorical in their approach, show why the focus on emotions is useful for this study. Colin Barker, examining the Solidarity movement of 1980 in Poland has shown through examining testimonies of the movement's actors how the multiplicity of feelings, from fear to hope, through the rituals of mass gatherings, gave rise to a collective identity and a sense of empowerment for the workers at Lenin Shipyard.³¹ Similarly, Anne Kane's study of the Irish Land War of the late-1880s highlight how diverse social groups could be mobilised for a coherent agenda through the framing narratives and mobilising emotions at regular mass meetings. Emotions of humiliation and shame were transformed through such

²⁹ Marc Edelman, "Social Movements: Changing Paradigms and Forms of Politics."

³⁰ Jeff Goodwin, James M. Jasper and Francesca Polletta, "Why Emotions Matter."

³¹ Colin Barker, "Fear, Laughter, and Collective Power: The Making of Solidarity at the Lenin Shipyard in Gdansk, Poland, August 1980."

“rituals” to emotions of hope and solidarity—what she sees as the “restructuring of emotions”, comparable to “consciousness raising.”³²

Lastly, in trying to understand why Karunamoyee Sarder became a symbol of resistance and a martyr, I draw from Katherine Verdery’s *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies*. Though the cases Verdery analyses are set in very different contexts from that of Polder 22 in the 1990s, it is a reminder in how the dead continue to stand for localised meanings and contested claims, shaping narratives, politics and identity of peoples—in our case, it is not the remains of the dead, but the death itself which plays this role.³³ This understanding is also complemented by studies of social mobilisation focused on emotions which have analysed how innocent victims of atrocity generate outrage, which in conjunction with other factors such as organisational and relational ties and identity, can lead to increased solidarity with and mass participation in movements.³⁴

2.4 Methods, sources and limitations

A key difference between most of the studies mentioned in the previous section and this study is that many of the participants of the anti-shrimp movement are still alive. Therefore, besides textual evidence, oral testimonies of participants could be collected, which adds a further dimension of analysis in terms of how they remember and evaluate the movement three decades later. However, without any comparative analysis with similar narratives of the participants from 1990, this also adds the complexity—it is not always possible to separate retrospective values from the values that guided their actions in 1990. This remains a limitation of the study.

³² Anne Kane, “Finding Emotion in Social Movement Processes: Irish Land Movement Metaphors and Narratives.”

³³ Katherine Verdery, *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Postsocialist Change*.

³⁴ Sharon Erickson Nepstad and Christian Smith, “The Social Structure of Moral Outrage in Recruitment to the U.S. Central America Peace Movement.”

Nine participants were purposively selected as key informants for this study and interviewed between April 24 to June 20, 2020. Interviews of six inhabitants of Polder 22 who directly participated alongside Karunamoyee serve as the most important sources for reconstructing the events prior to, during, and after November 7, 1990. Alongside these, interviews of three other individuals—the coordinator of Nijera Kori, the-then Paikgacha staff of Nijera Kori and the socio-economic advisor to the DDP at the time—were conducted. All interviews, open-ended and semi-structured, were conducted over phone since field visits were not feasible due to Covid-19 and subsequently, Cyclone Amphan, which directly impacted the polder.

Alongside the interviews, two booklets documenting the history of the anti-shrimp movement that were published from Khulna in 2000 also serve as key sources. The first of these, the *People's Movement against Shrimp Farming in Bangladesh* was written by a local journalist for the Bengali newspaper *Sangbad*, Manik Saha, who was closely involved with the movement, and was later murdered, reportedly for his investigative reporting.³⁵ Throughout 1990, he had reported on the events, and his book on the movement draws much from that reporting. The second, a booklet titled *22no poldarer chingri gher birodhi andoloner itihash*, was written by Ashraf-ul-Alam Tutu and published by the Coastal Development Partnership (CDP) in 2000 as a response to “renewed conspiracies to introduce shrimp farming in Polder 22”.³⁶ These two popular histories are invaluable for the chronological narrative they provide of the movement from 1990 to 2000. Both booklets are written in a popular format, valorising the heroics of the participants and the movement. As such, it is difficult to verify exact numbers of participants of various processions and gatherings that they claim. However, based as these are on first-hand reporting (Saha) and on interviews of participants (Tutu), they can be taken as reliable accounts of the events through which the movement unfolded. In any case, while I

³⁵ Manik Saha, *People's Movement against Shrimp Farming in Bangladesh*.

³⁶ Ashraf-ul-Alam Tutu, *22no poldarer chingri gher birodhi andoloner itihash [History of People's Struggle against Shrimp Aquaculture in Polder No 22]*, 8.

do not take the numbers of participants literally, they do indicate that large numbers of people were perceived to be present at those times.

Other records used as sources of information include project documents of the DDP, contemporary newspaper articles, published and unpublished documentation (in video and text formats) obtained from NK, and posters and songs commemorating Karunamoyee Sarder.

In summary, the scope of this study is limited to a microhistoric study in as much detail as permitted by available sources of the anti-shrimp movement of Polder 22. In doing so, it engages with and borrows from other streams of research. However, this can only be a cursory and tentative engagement, reflecting possible courses of further research for which this can serve as a source.

The major challenge in undertaking this study was the emergence and rapid spread of Covid-19 in Bangladesh which discounted field visits to Polder 22 for collection of testimonies for public health reasons. The planned interviews were instead conducted over phone, which impacted the quality and depth of interactions. Sustained engagement and interaction with the participants at the site of the movement would undoubtedly produce more detailed testimonies, which could lead to a more complex study of the emotions and politics that manifested in their actions. For the same reasons, it was impossible to access contemporary newspapers from physical archives, and therefore my access to contemporary news reports has been limited to scanned clippings, mostly from *Ekota* and *Sangbad*, obtained from NK's online archives.

Throughout the study, I have used the common practice of spelling Bangla words with English alphabets rather than the International Phonetic Alphabet. All translations from Bangla—mostly of quotes from interviews, and texts of posters and songs—are my own.

Chapter 3

Background to the Protests

The anti-shrimp movement that grew out of the resistance at Polder 22 in 1990 is one of many cases of local community mobilisations, in Bangladesh as well as in other Asian countries, against shrimp farming. The adverse environmental and socioeconomic impacts of the shrimp industry on communities have given rise to movements against “powerful economic and political interests” in Andhra Pradesh, Orissa and Tamil Nadu of India, in Thailand and Malaysia, and in other parts of Bangladesh where extensive shrimp farming has been introduced.³⁷

To understand why poor and landless people in coastal villages in Asia have organised in various ways to resist the industry, one need only to reflect on the importance of land and access to common resources for these communities. In a way, these movements are similar, in that they grew out of first-hand experience of insecurity and dispossession (or threats of dispossession), over conflicts over access to means of livelihoods and for seeking justice. However, they differ as well in terms of the strategies and the organisational structures of their mobilisation. The microhistory of Polder 22’s resistance details the complexities of one movement, but that must be understood within the broader contexts which shaped it.

In this chapter, first, a brief history of how commercial shrimp culture became so lucrative globally in the late-twentieth century is presented, alongside the context of Bangladesh. This is followed by a summary of the environmental and socioeconomic impacts of the industry and the local resistances they prompted based on existing literature. In the last section, I present the context of Polder 22 from my primary interviews to set the background in which the people of Polder 22 organised against Wazed Ali Biswas in 1990.

³⁷ Faris Ahmed, *In Defence of Land and Livelihood*, 3.

3.1 The growth of the shrimp industry

Hussain Muhammad Ershad's regime, spanning 1983 to 1990, was a time which saw the continued economic liberalisation of Bangladesh's economy, a process which started post-1975 during Ziaur Rahman's rule.³⁸ This shift towards growth-oriented development and large-scale export promotion policies were accompanied by conditional international loans and policy prescriptions by the IMF, the World Bank and other international institutions. The adoption of neoliberal policies and increasing privatisation of state (*khas*) land constitutes the backdrop within which the commercial shrimp industry began in Bangladesh.

Bob Pokrant documents the rise of shrimp aquaculture in the country beginning from the late 1970s, which saw increasing private investment in brackish water shrimp. The Second Five Year Plan (1980–1985) supported initiatives for the growth of the industry through funding from FAO, SIDA, ADB, and the World Bank for various aquaculture and shrimp culture projects.³⁹ By the mid-1980s, international banks and development agencies were promoting and financing commercial shrimp production in Bangladesh.⁴⁰ Structural adjustments and a demand boom in developed countries had turned shrimp into a lucrative export industry for Asian and Latin American countries.⁴¹ Shrimp aquaculture also formed part of the promises of a “Blue Revolution”, which was heralded by international donor institutions as a means to ensure food security, create livelihood opportunities and improve socioeconomic conditions of people in developing countries.⁴²

³⁸ Ziaur Rahman, who was Bangladesh's Chief of Army Staff, was the president of the country from 1977 to 1981, when he was assassinated. He came to power as the chief martial law administrator in 1976, following the assassination of the country's independence leader, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, in 1975. Hussain Muhammad Ershad, who was the chief of army staff after Rahman, assumed power as president in 1983. Rahman and Ershad both founded political parties: the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Jatiya Party (JP).

³⁹ Bob Pokrant, “Brackish Water Shrimp Farming and the Growth of Aquatic Monocultures in Coastal Bangladesh.”

⁴⁰ Shapan Adnan, “Land Grabs and Primitive Accumulation in Deltaic Bangladesh: Interactions Between Neoliberal Globalization, State Interventions, Power Relations and Peasant Resistance.”

⁴¹ Environmental Justice Foundation (EJF), *Desert in the Delta: A Report on the Environmental, Human Rights and Social Impacts of Shrimp Production in Bangladesh*.

⁴² EJF, *Smash and Grab: Conflict, Corruption & Human Rights Abuses in the Shrimp Farming Industry*.

However, by the 1980s, it was becoming increasingly clear that the environmental and socioeconomic externalities that this high-risk industry entailed were disproportionately affecting the poor and marginalised. As one report by the Consumer's Association of Penang put it in 1997: "When the Blue Revolution comes to the village, it can destroy everything and everyone in its path."⁴³ The environmental impacts of brackish water shrimp have been documented extensively by both academic scholars and international advocacy groups. The industry's expansion has been linked to ecological destruction, soil erosion, groundwater pollution, loss of biodiversity and increased salinity of agricultural land.⁴⁴ In Bangladesh, to take one striking example, one of its more devastating impacts has been the widespread destruction and clearing of the Chakaria Sundarban mangrove forest between the 1980s and 1990s, when it was turned over to private investors for shrimp farming.⁴⁵

But the impacts of shrimp farming went beyond the environmental, directly or indirectly leading to profound socioeconomic transformations affecting the lives of the poorest in the areas it was introduced. As a non-labour intensive industry, it not only did not create significantly new employment opportunities, but through conversion of land and denial of access to the commons, dispossessed peasants of their means of livelihood.⁴⁶ Meghna Guhathakurta, in studying its impacts on class and gender relations, notes that while the industry brought windfall profits for some, it has been accompanied by the proletarianisation of those who depended on agriculture for subsistence.⁴⁷ Documenting its impacts on Polder 23, just across the river from Polder 22, Kasia Paprocki and Jason Cons write how the industry had

⁴³ Ahmed, *In Defence of Land and Livelihood*, 4.

⁴⁴ EJF, *Smash and Grab*; EJF, *Desert in the Delta*; and Apurba Krishna Deb, "Fake Blue Revolution".

⁴⁵ Pokrant, "Brackish Water Shrimp Farming."

⁴⁶ Malini Sur, "Chronicles of Repression: Encounters and Silences."

⁴⁷ Meghna Guhathakurta, "Globalization, Class and Gender Relations: The Shrimp Industry in Southwestern Bangladesh."

brought changes in terms of “access to land, quality of land and ability [of peasants] to remain on land”.⁴⁸

Added to these, in Bangladesh, the industry’s growth has been synonymous with human rights abuses, insecurity of marginal peasants and conflicts over land due to widespread corruption, poor governance and minimal oversight. So much so, that documentation of its impact in the country is full of stories of kidnapping, intimidation, arson, rape and murder. Since 1980, a 2004 report by the Environmental Justice Foundation notes, at least 150 people had been killed over clashes associated with the industry.⁴⁹

3.2 Land, livelihood and resistance

Widespread landlessness and concentration of land ownership have been historical facts in the region that is now Bangladesh since the twentieth century. Citing the findings of a report by the Floud Commission, Hashmi writes of the dramatic increase in landlessness in the region following 1930: by that time, about 47.29 percent of peasants were landless or semi-landless.⁵⁰

While reliable historical data about the extent and regional distribution of landlessness in Bangladesh is not available, two government surveys from 1977 and 1978 put the percentages of functionally landless rural households (that is ownership of less than 0.5 acres of land) at 48 percent and 50 percent. However, Hossain’s 1986 projections based on analysis of the two surveys concludes that the figures were in effect much higher, and that landlessness was increasing in the country at a rate higher than the population.⁵¹

The latest published government data from the Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) 2016 reflects the same skewed ownership: 7.7 percent of the rural population of the

⁴⁸ Kasia Paprocki and Jason Cons, “Life in a Shrimp Zone: Aqua- and Other Cultures of Bangladesh’s Coastal Landscape,” 3.

⁴⁹ EJF, *Desert in the Delta*, 2.

⁵⁰ Hashmi, *Peasant Utopia*, 37.

⁵¹ Mahabub Hossain, “A Note on the Trend of Landlessness in Bangladesh.”

country own no land, while another 66.9 percent own less than 0.5 acres of land—that is, around 74.6 percent of rural people are functionally landless.⁵² While other sources quote different figures—52 percent of the rural population according to USAID’s Land Links website—that the majority of the population in the country is functionally landless is more than confirmed.⁵³

Studies in land reform in Bangladesh have noted how land relations in the country have been historically characterised by inequality, patronage and an alignment of landowners and political elites. Despite promises of land reform and distribution since the country’s independence, control of elites over the distribution process has meant that much of official policy has been ineffective in achieving any meaningful reform.⁵⁴

In 1983 to 1984, there was again talk of land reform, with a committee being formed for the purpose. However, the coterminous expansion of the shrimp industry had meant that quick justification and motivation were soon found by the rich to gain possession of land, according to Shapan Adnan. This dispossession occurred in two ways: through denial of government land to the landless (by its conversion for shrimp farming) and through illegal means of occupation such as forged deeds and leases and outright intimidation.⁵⁵ Routledge, writing of the same period, notes that Bangladesh’s implementation of structural adjustment programmes accompanied by the trade liberalisation of agriculture resulted in increased landlessness in the country.⁵⁶

In effect, the shrimp industry’s expansion in Bangladesh led to the “systematic eviction of the poor, backed by state power”. While conversion of land for aquaculture formally requires the

⁵² Bangladesh Ministry of Planning, *Final Report on Household Income and Expenditure Survey, 2016*.

⁵³ USAID, Land Links, Bangladesh country profile, <https://www.land-links.org/country-profile/bangladesh/>.

⁵⁴ *Dainik Bangla*, . “*Tin lakh bhumihheen krishok bhumi pabe*” [“3 Lakh Landless Peasants to Get Land”]; Paul Routledge, “Territorialising Movement: The Politics of Land Occupation in Bangladesh.”

⁵⁵ Adnan, “Land Grabs and Primitive Accumulation.”

⁵⁶ Routledge, “Territorialising Movement.”

consent of 85 percentage of landowners, a licence, a registered lease document and an obligation to flush out saline water by July 31 every year, these have been rarely adhered to in practice.⁵⁷ Shrimp, instead of being the path to trickle-down development as promised by the Blue Revolution, instead became an industry which benefited few, while striking at the very basis of existence of many. Even its importance as an export industry was put to question in India when a cost-benefit analysis by scientists at the National Environmental Engineering Research Institute (NEERI) found that for every dollar (US) of profit earned, the industry contributed to the loss of four dollars “by the people, the coastal ecology, and therefore the country as a whole.”⁵⁸

Reflecting on agrarian development through a “Green Revolution”, Scott had written in 1976, that such a path could not be peaceful, since it would ultimately benefit only a minority, be dependent on mitigation of dislocations of peasants and through its disruptive consequences, give rise to unemployment.⁵⁹ In much the same contexts, the impacts of shrimp, especially land grabs prompted by the confluence of donor policies, state priorities and local power relations, have been met with resistances from communities through “coalition-building and collective action” all over Asia.⁶⁰

In India, where shrimp aquaculture started with a WB loan, local peasant mobilisations against the industry, followed by the NEERI study quoted above, had led to a Supreme Court order in 1996 banning commercial aquaculture within 500 meters of the high tide line. The ruling, however, was overturned through lobbying soon after. In Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Orissa different types of local organisations, from NGOs to community associations, have come together to resist shrimp’s expansion. These protests, mostly employing non-violent

⁵⁷ EJF, *Desert in the Delta*, 11.

⁵⁸ Ahmed, *In Defence of Land and Livelihood*,” 5.

⁵⁹ Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*, 207.

⁶⁰ Adnan, “Land Grabs and Primitive Accumulation.”

strategies, have been met by violence and intimidations, false cases and arrests, and even police shootings on crowds without provocation.

In Andhra Pradesh, Mahila Mandals (women's circles/groups) started to organise, with the support of a local NGO, in the 1990s. They organised protests, marches, and public tribunals to make their demands heard. The response was violence and arrests. In Tamil Nadu, Shri Jagannathan and Krishnammal through their non-violent, Gandhi-inspired approach, mobilised people against this destructive industry walking from village to village. Responses from the powerful were similar: burning of houses and intimidations by thugs. At one point, Krishnammal was threatened with being burnt alive by people employed by the industry. In Malaysia, fishers' associations have come together to resist land acquisition for shrimp through a combination of protests and legal means, leading to drawn out court battles. Central to all these have been conflicts between peasants and private or state interests over access to land and autonomy over land use.⁶¹

In Bangladesh, where "shrimp aquaculture has not differed greatly from other nations—except that the level of corruption, bad governance, human rights abuses, land conflicts and general mismanagement associated with the industry and its development have perhaps been greater than anywhere else", instances of local resistances abound as well.⁶² Pokrant writes of a plethora of local resistances in the 1980s and 1990s, giving examples of the Jaliakhali movement in Dacope of Khulna (1987) under the leadership of the Bangladesh Communist Party (CPB), the Bhaina Beel movement in Dumuria (1988), and the Tala movement (1996-1998) in Satkhira, alongside the story of Polder 22. In Cox's Bazar, he writes of resistances through organisations such as the Bargachashi Samity (Sharecroppers Society) and the Kudal Bahini (Spade Soldiers), which tried to resist outsider control of *khas* land and loss of common

⁶¹ Ahmed, *In Defence of Land and Livelihood*.

⁶² EJP, *Desert in the Delta*.

access resources. Indeed, the “newspapers of the time [1980s to 1990s] are full of stories about land-grabbing and conflicts over land use, particularly in the south west of the country where most shrimp farms are located close to rice farming lands.”⁶³

3.3 Socioeconomic context of Polder 22

The lives of the people of coastal Bangladesh, due to the nature of the region, have been historically affected by salinity, floods and tropical cyclones. As a means to “protect the people and agriculture of the coastal zone and crops from tidal inundation and saline water intrusion and release a large extent of land for permanent agriculture,” polders were constructed by the government in these areas through the Coastal Embankment Project (CEP) in the 1960s and 1970s.⁶⁴ Polders are essentially embanked areas with water drainage and retention structures such as sluice gates. Because drainage and retention play such an important role in the lives of the people living in these areas, water management has also been historically a major source of conflict—the bureaucratic approach to water management in post-partition East Bengal, as Ahmed Kamal writes, has seldom involved or consulted local communities, leading to clashes between peasants and the state over priorities and plans.⁶⁵

Polder 22 in Deluti Union, Paikgacha, Khulna, is a mere 3,600 acres of land partially surrounded by 17 kilometres of embankment, with only 12 villages and a population of around 10,000.⁶⁶ This polder, with 47 sluice gates, became the site of a water management project by the Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB), funded by the Netherlands government, in 1976. The Delta Development Project’s aim was to achieve “integrated development of land,

⁶³ Pokrant, “Brackish Water Shrimp Farming,” 123-126.

⁶⁴ Bangladesh Ministry of Water Resources, *Coastal Embankment Improvement Project, Phase-I (CEIP-I) Final Report, Vol I*.

⁶⁵ Ahmed Kamal, *State against the Nation: The Decline of the Muslim League in Pre-independence Bangladesh, 1947-54*, 139-165.

⁶⁶ Tutu, *History of People’s Struggle*, 12.

water and human resources” in two polders: Polder 22 and Polder 29.⁶⁷ Besides reconstruction and repair of the embankments, the DDP was geared towards people’s participation practices ... [and] establishing local-level water management groups.”⁶⁸ Thus, the responsibility of water management, for once was given to the people whose lives depended on the timing of letting water in and out of the polders.

Subinay Nandy, who joined the project in 1987 as the socioeconomic advisor, speaks of the DDP as conceived in the growing environmental awareness and policy debates of the time.⁶⁹ In highlighting the centrality of community involvement in the DDP, he says the Dutch funding was conditional on the formation of the water user groups. In two other important ways the DDP differed from other infrastructure projects: firstly, the eschewing of labour contracting societies in favour of organised landless groups for the construction, repair and subsequent maintenance of the embankments in the polder; and secondly, the land that was acquired by the WDB adjacent to the embankments, the project stipulated, should be provided to organised groups of landless people for use as common resources.

Nandy, an agricultural economist, also points to how the debates over agrarian reform at the time were all “painted as black and white” and landlessness was projected to increase further:

We were trying to show that you can do development without causing harm to nature and also bring some benefits in terms of access to productive resources to those who would otherwise be completely left out.

This is also where NK came into the picture as an NGO focussed on conscientisation and social mobilisation of landless peasants. NK was to be in charge of organising the landless groups for

⁶⁷ Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Bangladesh: Evaluation of the Netherlands Development Programme with Bangladesh, 1972–1996, Summary Report*, 32.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 31.

⁶⁹ Subinay Nandy, who last served as the Director, Asia and the Pacific Division at the Department of Political Affairs, United Nation, is a visiting scholar at New York University. He was interviewed over Skype on May 8, 2020.

the DDP; landless members would be paid for their labour and also gain access to the acquired land around the embankments for farming. The organisation was intent on working in areas with a high concentration of poverty and where other NGOs were not already working, according to Nijera Kori Coordinator Khushi Kabir.⁷⁰ NK formally started working in Polder 22 in 1981, although it had presence in the polder from 1980. NK's focus on grassroots mobilisation and collective action, rather than service delivery and provision of microcredit, as David Lewis has argued, should be contextualised in the political climate of Bangladesh since mid-1970s. Terming such organisations as “the radical NGO subsector”, he identifies these as political organisations which took on “grassroots development work, along with campaigning agendas that aimed to influence wider structures and policy.” Mostly founded by leftist or feminist activists, these organisations adopted a “Freirean approach to ‘conscientization’”, and their approach “had once seemed promising ... [in making a] significant contribution to the tasks of challenging the marginalization of subordinate groups and strengthening democratic processes.”⁷¹

Socioeconomically, the context of Polder 22 was grim, even without the existence of shrimp farming. It was primarily a one-crop area, growing only Aman rice, with some sesame cultivation during drought seasons. Abdur Razzak Mollah and Rahela Begum, landless members who participated in the movement in 1990, also speak of how livelihood opportunities for people without any land of their own were limited to working as wage labourers or sharecroppers.⁷² Razzak compares the lives of landless peasants in Polder 22 at the time as akin

⁷⁰ Interviews with Khushi Kabir were conducted over Skype in two sessions on April 24 and 25, with additional questions clarified through subsequent conversations.

⁷¹ David Lewis, “Organising and Representing the Poor in a Clientelistic Democracy: The Decline of Radical NGOs in Bangladesh.”

⁷² Abdur Razzak Mollah, from Syedkhali village, joined the landless organization in 1981 as a member. He is currently the General Secretary of the Syedkhali Committee and President of the Polder Committee of the landless organisation. Rahela Begum, from Noai village, also joined the landless organisation in 1981. They were both interviewed over phone on June 17, 2020.

to slaves (*kritodash*)—the poor had no dignity, and were constantly insulted and cursed by those for whom they had to work:

At that time, we used to be day labourers, we used to work seasonally for six or 12 months. We used to face curses and insults regularly. *Mahajani* used to be in vogue then.⁷³ We used to be insulted if we didn't listen to the people we worked for Today we [the landless organisation] are consulted in everything, we are represented in school managing committee elections, in the Union Parishad—we are established now.⁷⁴ But at the time we were treated as uncivilised people (*onarjo*). They would use us like slaves—no one could protest.

Kabir explains the existent labour relations as based on seasonal contracts. Those who did not have land would work as wage labourers or sharecroppers. Contracts would be for the entire season, with the payment to be made at the end of the period. However, this was also a process of exploitation of these landless peasants, she explains. For regular expenses, hired labourers would be paid throughout the contractual period in loans with exorbitant interest rates. When the time for final payment came, the loans with interests would be deducted. This arrangement, therefore, also became an issue for NK and the organised landless groups to mobilise against.

Related to this, was the practice of *ulta tebhaga* (reverse Tebhaga). The Tebhaga movement in Bengal was one of the most massive peasant mobilisations in the region which, with support of the Krishak Sabha and the Communist Party, demanded reduction of sharecropping rents from half to one-third of the produce in the early days of post-partition. Though its success in achieving its aims has been widely debated, it remains a significant episode in the region's history, when alongside similar movements such as the Hajong, Nankar and Nachol Bidroho,

⁷³ For an explanation of *mahajani*, see glossary.

⁷⁴ For details about landless organisation and landless group, see note 31.

large sections of the peasantry organised to demand changes to existing agrarian relations.⁷⁵ For the Tebhaga movement, the basis for the demand for one-third produce as rent was that the landowner, the input (such as seeds and fertiliser) provider and the farmer should get equal shares: as the provider of input, the farmer was entitled to keep two-thirds of the produce from the land he cultivated.

The practice of *ulta tebhaga* (curiously, referred to as Tebhaga by the landless members I interviewed), was a reformulation of this same logic, but in favour of the landowners. Arguing that peasants did not need to provide any additional input since the deltaic soil was already fertile, landowners would take two-thirds of the produce, explains Khushi Kabir.

In terms of land ownership, the situation was equally grim. According to Nandy, the concentration of ownership was similar to the national trend, but worse: most of the land was owned by a handful of families, mostly absentees, while the majority of the villagers were functionally landless. This was aggravated by “distress selling”, as Hindu families in the area, mostly from the fisherfolk community (*jeley*), were forced to sell their lands to outsiders and migrate to India at times of crisis. This also made them easy targets. Abul Khair Majnu, who was the NK field staff stationed at Paikgacha at the time, explains how *gher* owners would first target lands of households from minority communities, since the probability of resistance from them was considered negligible.⁷⁶

Most of the villages in the polder at that time were still Hindu-majority, with only three or four where the majority of the people were Muslims, recalls Kabir. While there was no mention or indication of outright communal hostilities between Hindus and Muslims in the interviews, they do reveal underlying tension and social segregation. Urmila Sarder, one of the women

⁷⁵ Kamal, *State against the Nation*, 107-137.

⁷⁶ Abul Khair Majnu started working in Nijera Kori in 1989, with Polder 22 as his first duty station. He was interviewed over phone on June 16, 2020.

who participated alongside Karunamoyee in the protests, recalls how growing up, this sense of communal othering had been instilled in them. In her words, Muslims and Hindus viewed each other with *ghrina* (disgust). She refers to this in contrast to how through the landless groups and especially after the anti-shrimp movement, this communal identity was largely replaced by solidarity between Hindu and Muslim members in favour of common identities as human beings and as those who were exploited.⁷⁷

Overall, then, the peasants of Polder 22 were exploited and their opportunities were scarce. But, as Nandy points out, even then, people could survive. In this context, involvement in water management and access to WDB acquired land through an organised structure of their own—Nijera Kori's landless members are organised into groups, have various committees, and collectively take decisions—were significant for the people of the polder. They would be paid for their labour, had access to some land, and were responsible for the opening and closing of the sluice gates. Abdur Razzak Mollah speaks of how people from all the villages who had been organised were given licenses for working on the embankments, showing which, they would be paid directly.

By the mid-1980s, shrimp aquaculture had started extensively in Khulna. Its impacts in the surrounding polders were visibly evident by the end of 1990. Owners of these *ghers* would be mostly outsiders who would come for *bagda* (tiger prawn) cultivation. Given the profits to be made from the industry, absentee land owners would usually lease their land to these owners, who would then flood the entire area with saline water, a requirement for *bagda* cultivation. Small landowners had no say over this. And in any case, musclemen, mostly outsiders, would be hired by *gher* owners to intimidate people and silence any dissent.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Urmila Sarder, from Harinkhola village, around 30 at the time of the movement, was not a member of the landless organisation before November 1990. She joined the organisation through participation in the movement. She was interviewed over phone on April 28, 2020.

⁷⁸ Subinay Nandy, interview.

While all small and medium plots—other than those leased for shrimp—would also get flooded, whether one received compensation or not depended on power, wealth and influence. In effect, most peasants owning tiny plots would not receive any compensation for the land they would lose.⁷⁹

Thus, the situation was one where environmental disaster was looming large and shrimp aquaculture was worsening already existing poverty in the area.⁸⁰ In Polder 22, for those organised members who now had access to WDB acquired land despite local elite resistance, this hard-earned resource would be lost if shrimp farming was introduced. Nandy explains the landless members' access to the land was not easily accepted by local elites, and was only ensured through mobilisations and after they had successfully explained their plans for use of the land to the-then land commissioner, Kamal Uddin Siddiqui. By 1990, 14 groups of landless men and 14 groups of landless women had access to 176 acres of acquired land around the embankment which they had been cultivating for three years.⁸¹

At the same time, everyone knew about the torture, murder, sexual harassment and rape that shrimp had brought to surrounding polders. Women knew that their lives would be affected, not just because of physical insecurity, but in terms of their access to water and fuel, and their mobility. The interviewed landless members speak of how husbands would not be able to go fishing and many would have to migrate for livelihood due to loss of fish species as a result of shrimp farming and denial of access to common resources. Overall, shrimp was an existential threat to their subsistence, which would leave them with little hope of coping. And, despite the discourse of shrimp being important for the foreign earnings, it was, to borrow Guha's phrase, "dominance without hegemony" by outsider elites.⁸²

⁷⁹ Khushi Kabir, interview.

⁸⁰ Subinay Nandy, interview.

⁸¹ Ekota. "Wazed ali khulna japar koshadgokkho" ["Wazed Ali treasurer of Khulna JP"], Dec. 7 1990.

⁸² Ranajit Guha, *Dominance without Hegemony*.

All of these contributed to the anti-shrimp discourse among villagers of Polder 22 and also to the DDP's insistence that shrimp aquaculture should not be introduced in the polder. While the right to lease their land for *ghers* was with the landowners, DDP's argument rested on the fact that sluice gates were public goods, and therefore, on insisting that they could not be used for flooding the polder and harming the public.⁸³

However, against an industry that promised lucrative earnings for big landowners, *gher* owners, and the state through foreign exchange, especially in the "pre-RMG days" as Nandy puts it, there was a limit to the efficacy of such lobbying. In any case, where use of sluice gates was not allowed, *gher* owners would simply resort to cutting holes in embankments and introduce pipes to flood the land.⁸⁴

How Wazed Ali Biswas, the biggest *gher* owner in Khulna, went about his plan to do just that; how the opposition to it gradually took on an organised form; and how the events unfolded after November 7, 1990, amidst police repression and the formation of new alliances, is continued in the following chapters.

⁸³ Subinay Nandy, interview.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

Chapter 4

The Makings of a Movement

The context within which we must understand the resistance by the people of Polder 22 on November 7, 1990 has been set out in some detail in the preceding chapter. I have tried to show how the confluence of global demand and policy prescriptions along with the state of governance and development priorities in Bangladesh shaped the structural context within which the growth of the shrimp industry took place at the expense of peasant livelihood and security. The minimal oversight, poor governance, and the dynamics of the relationships between the people and the state are themselves part of the broader history of the postcolonial nation. This chapter zooms in on the actors of the movement to explore, in Subrahmanyam's words, the uncertainties, hesitations and choices that constitute agency within the "larger processes that define the historical matrix."⁸⁵ In this we glimpse the politics of the movement's actors reflected in their choices, motivations and decisions within the broader contexts.

The first two sections of this chapter continue the story from Wazed Ali's attempts to introduce shrimp aquaculture in Polder 22 up to the events of November 7. Using the collected testimonies—both from my interviews and from existing documentation by NK—in conjunction with Manik Saha and Ashraf ul Tutu's books, which document events till 2000, I present a more detailed picture of the act of resistance that I have briefly outlined in the first chapter.⁸⁶ The issues of agency we glimpse in this early, local phase of the resistance is then explored in more detail in the last section.

⁸⁵ Subrahmanyam, *Three Ways to be Alien*, 3-5.

⁸⁶ Manik Saha, *People's Movement against Shrimp Farming in Bangladesh*; and Ashraf-ul-Alam Tutu, *22no poldarer chingri gher birodhi andoloner itihash* [History of People's Struggle against Shrimp Aquaculture in Polder No 22], 8. Referred to as Saha, *People's Movement* and Tutu, *History of People's Struggle throughout this study*.

4.1 The decision to resist

For politically powerful people like Wazed Ali Biswas, owner of 29 shrimp *ghers* all over Khulna and Satkhira, and the treasurer of Khulna district Jatiya Party, against whom few would dare protest, local peasant opposition meant little, especially when he had already succeeded in getting leases from the big and absentee landowners of the area. By 1988-89, remembers Nandy, there was already talk of introducing shrimp *ghers* in the polder. Why, then, did Wazed Ali have his eyes firmly set on Polder 22?

To Abul Khair Majnu, the NK field staff at Paikgacha at the time, the fact that shrimp had never been farmed in Polder 22 before was a major factor. He explains that extensive shrimp farming increases chances of disease outbreaks, which could wipe out entire farms—in Polder 22, this would not be as much of a risk since shrimp had never been commercially cultivated there. Without the extra cost of guarding against disease outbreaks, the profits would be greater. Others I interviewed ascribe similar motivations of greed and power: Wazed Ali could not bear that Polder 22 was the only area in the region where he did not have a *gher*, for example. Another explanation put forward, especially in Tutu's book, is that the opposition of landless members, who by that time had a significant presence in the polder, and DDP's insistence that the sluice gates could not be used for letting in brackish water had meant that big landowners were unable to go forward with their wishes for establishing *ghers*. For that reason, given Wazed Ali's power and influence, they had brought him in to counter local opposition. In lieu of leasing their lands, they would get *hari*—payment from *gher* owners. Nirapodo Das, who had joined the landless organisation in 1980 after completing his SSC, says: "They [rich landowners] wanted to subjugate the people who had come together and organised themselves [i.e. landless members]." ⁸⁷

⁸⁷ Nirapodo Das, from Darun Mallik village, was interviewed over phone on June 18, 2020.

By mid-1990, Wazed Ali had already obtained lease for some 600 acres of land according to Manik Saha, although Tutu puts this at 400 acres in his book. In any case, the leased land—obtained from big or absentee landowners, as well as from small peasants through intimidation—was nowhere close to the 85 percent of the sarea which would get flooded as formally required.⁸⁸

As Wazed's activities towards establishing a *gher* gained momentum, landless members too became active through their groups and committees. In the interviews, the landless peasants speak of “*mitings and michils*” (meetings and processions) that they started to organise in 1990 as a response to Wazed's plans. Subadh Ray, who was not a member of the landless organisation at the time, but as a leftist activist had supported them, also speaks of regular meetings in all the villages of Polder 22 to decide on how to respond.⁸⁹

In Tutu's documentation of the events leading up to the day of confrontation we can see in more detail the activities, alliances and networks through which the people of Polder 22 started mobilising. Although his book narrates the events as a premeditated movement that the landless members decided to engage in from the start—while my interviews highlighted a more nuanced picture, where the decision for a mass movement evolved slowly in response to how things unfolded over the year—its detailed accounts of the preceding months, collected through interviews, show the bustle of activity that Wazed's plans had generated. He writes how, as Wazed became more active in his efforts in the last months of 1990, landless members had approached the UP Chairman Samaresh Halder. The importance of Samaresh Halder's role is also stressed by Nandy, who speaks of him as sympathetic and supportive of the peasants.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Tutu, *History of People's Struggle*; Saha, *People's Movement*.

⁸⁹ Subadh Ray, who was involved with the anti-shrimp movement alongside landless members since 1990, joined the landless groups in 2019. He was interviewed over phone on June 18, 2020.

⁹⁰ For reasons not quite clear, the Chairman of Deluti Union is referred to as Somendra Nath Halder in Manik Saha's book and in contemporary news reports, and as Samaresh Halder in Tutu's book and in the interviews. I have consistently referred to him as Samaresh after confirming with him through Nijera Kori.

Urmila Sarder, who was not yet a member of the landless organisation but had joined the processions on the day, mentions that Halder had explained to them that Wazed's plans would harm the polder and its people, and how this was one of the reasons for her participation in the processions. But, the reputation of Wazed Ali seems to have been equally important, as she continues:

The person named Wazed, we knew him as a bad person—a person who did not have any love for the poor, who had no love for the people (*jonogon*). He only wanted to amass a mountain of black money.

With Samareh Halder's support obtained, Tutu writes, landless leaders and the chairman went to the big landowners living in the polder to convince them to not lease land to Wazed. While some owners verbally agreed, within a week they had gone to Khulna and signed over their lands.

In the meantime, group meetings with the UP Chairman and local NK staff continued, as did processions against "*lobon pani chingri chash*" (brackish water shrimp farming). Members of the landless groups also obtained lease of 1,000 acres of land and started cultivating Aus rice, which was not cultivated in the polder before then. This, Tutu explains, was to show Wazed Ali that: one, members had lease over more land than him, and therefore he had no right to establish a *gher* in Polder 22, and two, to show how they were putting the land to better use by cultivating it.⁹¹ Abdur Razzak Mollah, a member from landless group in Syedkhali village of the polder, in his interview refers to the leasing of lands through legal means as well.

⁹¹ Tutu, *History of People's Struggle*, 16-17.

By the last months of 1990, landless members had heard that a group of *lathials* employed by Wazed were training at a *gher* nearby in preparation for an attack.⁹² Throughout October, there were meetings about possible strategies of resistance in the villages, some of which were joined by activists of the Krishak Sangram Samiti⁹³ as well, with which Samaresh Halder had ties according to Tutu.⁹⁴ On October 29, he continues, ten thousand people went to the UP office to protest against shrimp farming where Wazed's goons were also present and were chased away by the protestors. However, like most figures in Tutu's book about the number of people, ten thousand is almost certainly a hyperbolic figure, meant to convey the largeness of the crowd as perceived by the participants he interviewed for his documentation.

Even if we do not take the figures literally, his book provides a very detailed picture of how the landless organisation's structures were being put to use by the people of Polder 22 to encourage locals to take a stand. Their increased confidence and existing relationships with the chairman, for example, were leveraged to mobilise wider support. While they all seem to have understood how little formal requirements meant to people like Wazed, their attempts to lease land to counter his claims indicate to me that given their past successes and sense of empowerment in gaining control over WDB acquired lands, they were deploying the same strategy of using legal means and mobilisation simultaneously.

It is not clear from the existing documentations or from my interviews how the people of Polder 22 learnt that November 7 would be the day when Wazed would make his move. Nandy explains how the timing of cutting the embankments would usually be dependent on the lunar phase and the tide to ensure the water that was let in would be most saline. This, he says, was

⁹² A *lathial* is literally someone who wields a *lathi*, a bamboo stick used for fighting. In pre-British and British periods, *lathials* were a distinct social group, and armies of *lathials* would be maintained by zamindars as fighters. See "Lathial," Banglapedia. Here, the reference is most likely to hired goons wielding *lathis* as weapons.

⁹³ Krishak Sangram Samiti was started in the 1980s as the peasants' organisation of the Biplobi Communist Party, an underground communist party which used to be active in southern Bangladesh at the time.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

could be one reason for which the people of Polder 22 had started guarding the embankments around the time of the attack. However, this remains a conjecture, unconfirmed by my interviews. According to Kabir, Wazed had made a first attempt on November 3, but was resisted by locals—following this, the people of the polder vigilant, knowing he would come back with goons. It is clear that people of Polder 22 were in fact expecting Wazed to come on November 7—as Urmila Sarder says, “Wazed’s men were already moving around in trawlers. ... They told us they would come on the seventh [of November], but instead showed up on the sixth.”⁹⁵ This is an understandable confusion: while Wazed’s men did come on November 7, in the early hours of the night, in the Bengali calendar, a day is measured from one sunrise to the next.

In expectation of Wazed’s arrival, a committee had been formed on November 5, and people were asked to be ready to march to the site where Wazed would land.⁹⁶ The plan was, according to Nirapodo Das, that when Wazed’s men landed, each group would inform the group in the adjacent village to make sure everyone could assemble in time to protest collectively.

4.2 The death of Karunamoyee Sarder

Khushi Kabir, who heard of the events the following day through the WDB, says that Wazed’s men had arrived at Harinkhola around 3 am. They came in five trawlers according to contemporary news reports and Saha’s book, although, Tutu mentions 10 trawlers. Since 6 November was the day of Kali Puja and there was a *mandap* (a structure erected for religious and social functions) near the landing site at Harinkhola, there were people nearby who saw the arrival of the trawlers.⁹⁷ Wazed’s men beat up the Brahmin who was there to conduct the puja, and started setting up base. News spread to the villages within the night that Wazed had

⁹⁵ Urmila Sarder, interview.

⁹⁶ Tutu, *History of People’s Struggle*.

⁹⁷ Kali Puja, a festival dedicated to the goddess Kali, is celebrated in the Bengali month of Kartik, roughly coinciding with October-December. It is one of the biggest festivals of the Hindu community in Bangladesh.

arrived and started cutting the embankments; groups from all the villages started gathering together to march to the site. By 9 or 10 am, two processions of landless men and women from the villages of Polder 22 started marching towards Harinkhola village from the north and the south.

What happened next can be pieced together from the individual narratives of those I interviewed. The number of people who marched to the site varies from interview to interview. However, based as these are on their perceptions and estimations of the crowd around them, it is clear that almost a thousand people had assembled. One group had either not reached the site yet or had already been forced to retreat by Wazed's men. The other, the one coming from the side of Bigardana village, was being led by women, including Karunamoyee Sarder, a landless leader of the women's group in Bigardana.

As the procession approached, Wazed's men started shooting and throwing homemade bombs at the approaching crowd. Participants remember that it was raining, and one of the bombs had failed to go off. Unfamiliar with what bombs looked like, one woman had even picked it up to examine what it was.

Tapati Rani Mandal, a landless member who was immediately behind Karunamoyee in the processions recalls that while approaching the embankments, they had heard that Wazed's men had come armed with guns. So, they decided to leave the elderly behind, and continue forward. As the firing and explosions started, she recalls, everyone started jumping out of the way, lying down flat on the ground, or trying to take shelter in the adjacent paddy fields.

Among Wazed's men there were locals known to the people of Polder 22 as well—*dalals* who had been bought off by him.⁹⁸ Urmila Sarder says that seeing a certain Anil Krishno Ray firing

⁹⁸ Although the word *dalal* literally means middleman or broker, it is used pejoratively to mean collaborators. See Nusrat Sabina Chowdhury, "Crowds and Collaborators" in *Paradoxes of the Popular*, for more on the insider-outsider dynamics of *dalals* in popular movements in Bangladesh.

at the crowd, Karunamoyee had gone right up to him and taken hold of his gun: “she started telling him that as someone from the community, he should not be shooting at the people (*jonogon*).”⁹⁹ Anil had some form of kinship ties with Karunamoyee through her late husband and was from Hatbaria village of Polder 22. At this moment, another person, Pobitro Mallik—identified as the son of Debendranath Mallik from Baroaria village from Batiaghata—took the gun from Anil and shot her.

Meanwhile, dispersed by the attack, the people of Polder 22 started regrouping at a distance after they had escaped. Tapati Rani Mandal recalls her experience:¹⁰⁰

I was right behind Karuna. The bullet passed right by my *didima* [an elderly relative who had gone with her to the procession] and hit Karuna. We all jumped into the paddy fields, into the water by the sides of the roads... I remember that day even now. My two small children sitting at home saw smoke rising from the side of Harinkhola, birds flying away. When I returned home, they would not stop crying; they kept asking me why I had gone there... I had tried to take shelter in a house after escaping through the paddy field; from there the owners of the house chased me away as well. I was a *bou manush* [young wife; literally a bride] then, I was in wet clothes. Like that, I ran from there.

She remembers the fear throughout, how her fellow protestors—and the roads—were soaked in blood, there were big holes on the ground. Some protestors had seen Wazed’s men leave with two bodies after the attack, and had assumed Tapati was one of them—the other being Karunamoyee. Seeing her alive, they realised that it was another landless member, Rupban

⁹⁹ Urmila Sardar interview.

¹⁰⁰ Tapati Rani Mandal from Senerber village has been a member of the landless organisation since 1982. She was interviewed over phone on June 20, 2020.

Begum, who had been taken away. Tapati explains that Rupban and her were wearing the same coloured saree on that day.

At least 40 people were injured altogether, some very severely. Urmila's eyes were damaged due to the bombs, and have not healed to this day. In video documentations by Nijera Kori, Anwara Khatun says how the second bomb had ruined her eyes and injured her husband as well.¹⁰¹ She speaks of how, while escaping through the paddy fields, she felt a sense of "*hotasha*" (hopelessness). After that, she fainted, and remembers nothing else. Aroti Sarder remembers how there was blood everywhere, and as she tried to find people she knew afterwards, she could see how other landless members and leaders had been injured severely.¹⁰² Rahela Begum, a landless member from Noai village, during the interview in describing the scene of the attack says that the water in the adjacent paddy fields and the bases of the paddy stems had all turned red from the blood. In all the testimonies, Nijera Kori's and my own, the extent of carnage unleashed upon the people of Polder 22 on November 7 becomes vividly clear, as does the fear and trauma they had experienced that day.

Karunamoyee's body was taken away to remove evidence of the murder, although blood and parts of her brain remained the next morning on a tree nearby. Rupban was taken away too, assumed to be dead since she had fainted from a blow. She recalls that when she woke up on the trawler, she saw Karunamoyee's body near her. Wazed's men took her to another *gher*. While pleading with her captors for her life, she was reprimanded for joining Hindus in the procession as a Muslim-born woman. She had seen someone dragging Karunamoyee's body away before fainting again.¹⁰³ Eventually, they decided to let her go and dropped her off in the

¹⁰¹ Unpublished testimonies from 2018, in video format, of participants of the movement including Anwara, Aroti, Rupban, as well as some of those I interviewed personally were collected from NK. Hereafter, I cite these as Testimony from NK archives, 2018.

¹⁰² Testimony from NK archives, 2018.

¹⁰³ Rupban's traumatic experience has been documented and analysed in considerable detail by Malini Sur in "Chronicles of Repression", cited before.

middle of the night or early in the morning near a river bank, where she was found on November 9. She had been presumed dead till then. Rahela recalls, how afterwards, Rupban had completely stopped talking for a while, shaken by the traumatic experience she had gone through. Listening to Rupban narrate her experiences in Nijera Kori's documentation, the lasting trauma of the event becomes visibly clear.

After the attack, Kabir says, landless members tried to use the wireless set from the UP office to contact the police. But, while it was a two-hour distance from Paikgacha to Harinkhola, the police were there as soon as Wazed's men had left. Some participants of the movement in the interviews claim that the police were already there with Wazed's men in one of the trawlers, while others say that they were stationed somewhere close by, ready to swoop in immediately after the attackers were clear of the scene.

As soon as they landed, the police cordoned off the area and told people not to come out of their houses. They claimed, as most of the interviewees recall with palpable contempt, that the traces of blood and brain that remained at the site of the attack were from a dead dog, all the while trying to remove these traces. In the meantime, with the help of small boats, the injured protestors had been taken to Paikgacha for treatment by landless leaders. Samareh, who too had participated in the processions, managed to make his way there as well separately.

After the carnage, a second round of repression started: in the polder, protestors were beaten and everyone was confined to their houses, while in Paikgacha, the injured in the hospital were arrested and put in handcuffs. Rupban was arrested as well and taken away to Paikgacha along with other landless members. The protestors were charged as criminals who had supposedly been wounded while trying to rob one of Wazed's *ghers*.

4.3 Subsistence, solidarity and alliances

From the narrative presented so far, we can already see how focussing in on the actors of the resistance outline complexities and nuances of their politics. Our discussion on the contextual background in Chapter 3 highlights, as Scott has theorised, the importance of subsistence to the moral economy of peasants.¹⁰⁴ Certainly the threat of an impending subsistence crisis was a crucial factor that motivated the peasants of Polder 22 to resist Wazed Ali's plans. As witnesses to what shrimp aquaculture had done in surrounding polders, they knew that even their bare minimum livelihood would be threatened and they would be victims to the same persecutions.

In their explanations about why they were initially against *ghers* in their polder, two factors stand out clearly in the interviews: one, the destruction of land, vegetation and livelihood opportunities; and two, increased insecurity, particularly for women. Urmila Sarder, like almost all of the participants of the movement interviewed, speaks of the industry as one brought in by *bohiragoto* people (outsiders), who came in and destroyed the *desh* (literally, country). Tapati Rani Mandal, then a young mother and a member of the landless groups says: "We understood this much, if we let brackish water enter, we would have no individuality, no freedom left." She adds that they would be left with no way to earn a livelihood and women would have to live amid constant insecurity, while the rich would still get by: "Since we have no land, we would get completely destroyed."

In all the interviews, the movement's participants describe the surrounding areas where shrimp aquaculture was already pervasive as bereft of trees, where it was impossible to rear livestock and the water was so saline that it could ruin one's eyes. Nirapado Das describes shrimp areas as vast stretches of water with nothing else in sight. He adds that when shrimp entered an area,

¹⁰⁴ Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*.

drinking water would not be easily available—one might even have had to buy water for drinking.¹⁰⁵ Rahela's words sums up their concerns perfectly: "No matter the extent of the destruction, the rich people would at least get *hari*; but those of us who have no land, we live by our labour, we work for them. But, if they leased their lands, we would not be able to survive."

Shrimp also meant violence and insecurity. The very process of taking lease and flooding was carried out through intimidation, without adherence to the formal requirements such as the consent of 85 percent landowners. Its operation entailed watchtowers or bunkers set up near the *ghers* and imposition of curfew after dark. Women were especially affected by this, since this meant they would not be able to go to outhouses or toilets after evening. People knew about cases of rapes and murders committed in surrounding areas by these "outsiders", who would drag in women to the *ghers* if they went out after dark. Shrimp was, for these people, not a delicacy food item, but *shontrash chingri* (criminal shrimp).¹⁰⁶

Stories of murders from surrounding areas, such as that of one Mowla Baksh, a peasant from Khulna who was murdered by goons hired by shrimp owners over accusations of stealing from the *gher*, were common knowledge.¹⁰⁷ Mowla Baksh is—confirmed by NK—the peasant referred to as Mowla Morhol in an impact study by Research and Development Collective (RDC) from 1999, and as Maula Box Morat by EJF. In these, we find in more detail the circumstances of his murder: in 1988 (1987 according to Wistrand), a young man from Ghosal village in Paikgacha, Mowla Baksh was charged with stealing from a *gher* in Kachubania as he was passing through the area. He maintained that he had not stolen anything, and there seems to be no proof of the accusation either. In any case, he was confined by two employees of the *gher*, and tortured mercilessly. Passers-by witnessed the torture—as his fingers and legs were

¹⁰⁵ Nirapodo Das, from Darun Mallik village, was interviewed over phone on June 18, 2020.

¹⁰⁶ Abdur Razzak Mollah interview.

¹⁰⁷ Nirapodo Das, Khushi Kabir interview.

broken—but were threatened to not interfere. Afterwards, he was hanged from the roof with a towel, which too was witnessed by someone. “It is told that his dead body had been carried by a trawler and thrown into the river”. The Kachubania *gher*’s owner was none other than Wazed Ali. Afterwards, with witnesses silenced by Wazed’s men, there were attempts to organise protests, but not much seems to have come of it. Without witnesses who would come forward—and allegations of bribing the police—the legal case was dismissed as well.¹⁰⁸

Besides the crimes associated with *gher* owners and their men, interviewees point out that it also increased crime among the communities, as children and youth, tempted by the easy money to be made by selling a shrimp, would become involved in criminal activities, some participants explained.

Such acts of petty theft by peasants and children, Kabir points out, were for many people not a crime but a reclamation from the land that had been taken away from them. In this, as Pokrant notes as well, it is easy to see Scott’s passive forms of resistances that accompany exploitation. However, as both Kabir in the interview and Pokrant clarifies, reading too much into this might be misleading as well, since accusation of theft was the most common tactic for filing false cases against peasants, and for justifying the violence, murder and sexual harassment.¹⁰⁹

Thus, seen through a moral economic lens, shrimp culture was not only to be despised because of the profound impacts it would have on their means of livelihood, but also because it would mean increased insecurity, particularly for women—all for the benefit of “outsiders” who cared little for the land, or for the big landowners who only cared about *hari*.

Looking at the lyrics of songs about Karunamoyee and the shrimp industry written over the years in commemoration of the protests by landless members and NK staff, the association of

¹⁰⁸ Abdul Ghafur, Mesbah Kamal, Matiur Rahman Dhaly and Sayema Khatun. *Final Report on Socio-Economic and Environmental Impact of Shrimp Culture in South-Western Bangladesh*, 54-57; EJF, *Desert in the Delta*, 18; and Åsa Wistrand, “Country Report on Saline Water Shrimp Aquaculture in Bangladesh,” 21.

¹⁰⁹ Pokrant, “Brackish Water Shrimp Farming,” 125-126.

shrimp with violence and destruction can be clearly seen. While they also speak of shrimp aquaculture from broader environmental and development perspectives—a retrospective understanding according to my understanding—they constantly refer back to the early existential threat that the industry posed for people. For example, in the song lyrics I collected from the NK office in Khulna, the advent of shrimp is usually described through images of destruction of green and lush agricultural lands, and through words like *jibbonnashi* (life-destroying) and *golar fashi* (a noose around one's neck). One song, speaking of Karunamoyee's sacrifice, describes the industry as outright murderous:

Ma Karunar rokto jani britha jabe na/ Manush mere chingri chash korte debo na

Ma Karuna's sacrifice will not be in vain/ we will not allow shrimp farming through murder of people¹¹⁰

However, a subsistence crisis alone does not explain collective mobilisation—it can only tell us what degree of repression or exploitation goes beyond the accepted norms in the collective moral economy. In the narratives presented in this chapter, glimpses of agency in the face of the crisis abound, which highlight other motivations beyond subsistence.

For Urmila Sarder, a young mother at the time, who was not a member of the landless organisation, the plot of land she stood to lose if the polder was flooded was crucial. In her interview, she speaks of how over the years—before 1990 and after—her husband and son had been threatened and harassed for the land she had inherited. Her religious identity, as a Hindu, constituted a major reason for this harassment—as other interviewees too have mentioned, Hindu households would be first targets. So, when she had heard that Wazed had arrived to

¹¹⁰ Lyrics of songs about Karunamoyee Sarder, written jointly by landless members of Polder 22 and NK's cultural team, were collected from the organisation's Khulna office, and translated by the author.

flood the polder, it was imperative for her to go and defend it. If shrimp cultivation was introduced, she says:

Us Hindus would not have any shelter—we might even have had to leave the country.

But, even our Muslim brothers and sisters, they too would have to face torture. We understood all of this, and that's why we all went together.

The bulk of the protestors, however, were members of the landless organisation. For some years by then, they had been sitting in weekly meetings with fellow members, discussing their experiences, speaking of their rights over land and resources, and mobilising to challenge existing power relations. They even had significant cases of success: gaining and retaining control over WDB acquired land that big landowners tried to deny them for example. In their interviews, almost all the landless members referred to how they used to be treated as less than human beings, insulted and humiliated by everyone, from those whose fields they used to work to doctors when they tried to go for treatment, as Rahela says. That situation had considerably changed by 1990. By that time, as Khushi Kabir says, groups had been mobilising against exploitation and injustices, including the practice of *ulta tebhaga*. And the attempts to introduce shrimp were therefore seen by members as an attempt by the rich to take back control. Nur Ali Gazi, a landless leader who has now passed away, quoted in Tutu's book, explained:

Through the groups, we had slowly started taking leases of *khas* lands in the Polder. These had come under our control. Previously, it was the rich and influential who enjoyed access to these. So, we used to have regular confrontations with them over control of these land and waterbodies. So, to take revenge on us, the rich people of the polder wanted to evict us [from the leased land] by establishing *ghers*. That is why they called in someone as powerful as Wazed Ali.¹¹¹

¹¹¹ Tutu, *History of People's Struggle*, 14

Nirapodo Das also puts forward a similar motivation: “They wanted to vanish [sic] us; they did not want us to stand together with our heads held high.” Those who had started working the acquired lands adjacent to the embankments also came to feel their entitlement to government-owned resources. This is evident from Rahela’s interview:

We used to work the lands by obtaining DCRs [Duplicate Carbon Receipts]¹¹²—for that, trouble started between us and the rich landowners. So, we had to constantly struggle for our rights. We live beside the embankments, so we deserve the *khas* land adjacent to it.

Members who joined the groups would also engage in collective savings, which would be used at times of crises—a clear attempt to overcome their dependency on moneylenders. Their organised structure is evident in Tutu’s book, where he writes that decisions would be first taken at village-level group meetings and then taken to the polder committee meetings.

The landless peasants’ participation in the activities of the groups also meant that new relationships were being forged beyond ties of kinship—they were sitting in meetings with groups from surrounding villages. For women, this would have meant engaging with ideas and ties beyond their usual domestic confines. Ultimately, as Urmila and Rahela both point out, these interactions and discussion were also creating solidarities beyond religious lines. As mentioned in the preceding chapter, while there might not have been any outright communal tensions, a sense of social othering did exist for many people in the polder. Through interactions within the groups, and through the movement itself, the “disgust” and antagonism between Hindus and Muslims were being replaced by a broader identity. Urmila explains:

¹¹² For government-owned land that is not for distribution, such as the land acquired for infrastructure projects, DCRs are issued, through which landless peasants can make use of the land for a certain specified period.

That day, we were all together [Hindus and Muslims], because if brackish water entered the polder, everyone would be affected. Before, we used to be disgusted by them, they used to be disgusted by us. But since the protest against Wazed, we no longer have that separation—we know we are all humans.... Previously, we did not go to their houses, they would not come to our houses. This type of thinking, this attitude is wrong—we understand this now.

In discussing the solidarity of Polish Workers at the Lenin Shipyard in 1980, Barker, writes “unofficial consciousness”—individual understanding of the causes of their exploitation in this case—develops through social experiences and “choral support” into ideology. The regular meetings of the landless groups, in line with Barker’s analysis, can be seen as ritualised actions where through regular communication, commitments were affirmed and solidarities enhanced. The importance of such action is crucial for collective empowerment—that is, the “development of new social and personal identities, and a self-recognition ... as history-makers”—and in binding participants to a shared purpose.¹¹³ Similarly, in Layli Uddin’s analysis of the workers riots of 1954, the importance of regular sites of interaction are crucial as “spaces where solidarities were formed ... on the basis of their [workers’] shared experience”.¹¹⁴

The goals, aspirations and demands shared by members in their weekly meetings, united them through a common narrative of their struggles and aspirations.¹¹⁵ This is what we articulated in the “*mitings and michils*” in the months preceding Wazed’s arrival. It is through these that their understandings of shrimp’s destructive capacity and their feelings of empowerment converged into a coherent narrative of exploitation.

¹¹³ Barker, “Fear, Laughter, and Collective Power,” 179.

¹¹⁴ Uddin, “‘Enemy Agents at Work’,” 21.

¹¹⁵ Kane, “Finding Emotion in Social Movement Processes.”

It is also through their activities as members of the landless organisation that these peasants had crafted new political ties with local leaders. Their interactions with and support from Samaresh Halder, the UP Chairman, exemplifies this, although, Halder's support has to be seen in terms of his personal political outlook as well. Even then, his identity as a local government representative provided support to these villagers—at a time when support from local government institutions was not there—in a way that his political outlooks alone would not have. The landless members' relationship with Halder, in turn, also helped mobilise wider support from the community and linkages with political activists from the Krishak Sangram Samiti.¹¹⁶ The participation of Subadh Ray, who as we have mentioned was not a member of the landless groups, is also representative of this—he says that as a leftist activist associated with the Krishak Sangram Samiti, he had found reasons to support and participate alongside the landless members.

The story of Polder 22 also highlights the importance of moral outrage in generating solidarity. Nepstad has written how network ties act not only as “conduits of information” but also as “transmitters of values”: in the case of Polder 22, the networks and alliances that were being formed must have therefore also amplified the moral outrage over Wazed's reputation in particular and the shrimp industry's in general. And moral outrage “can be a powerful motivation for protest when there is someone to blame for the injustice.”¹¹⁷

Thus, the framing of the issue at hand would have been a simple affair: the threat of a subsistence crisis and insecurity was evident, and there were clear targets responsible (rich landowners and Wazed Ali Biswas). The solidarity and collective identity of landless members, their experiences in mobilisation for their rights till then, and their relationships with other local actors, meant that a call to action—to actively protest against Wazed—found resonance.

¹¹⁶ Tutu, *History of People's Struggle*, 17.

¹¹⁷ Nepstad and Smith, “Moral Outrage,” 171.

It is also important to note, in concluding this chapter, that the decision to resist was not one taken by Nijera Kori. This is stressed both by the participants of the movement I interviewed and by Khushi Kabir. It was the organised peasants of Polder 22 who first decided to put up resistance against Wazed Ali, and till November 7, it was largely a local affair: “How would Nijera Kori know? We understood this from our own experiences, that is why we protested. Nijera Kori did not tell us to protest—they supported us.”¹¹⁸ It was only after Wazed’s men attacked the protestors on November 7 and murdered Karunamoyee Sarder, and when participants were being arrested on false charges, that Nijera Kori as an organisation became closely involved with the events, as did Subinay Nandi from the DDP, journalist Manik Saha from *Sangbad*, and eventually, activists from political parties, including the Communist Party, the Workers Party and Awami League. That story is continued in the next chapter.

¹¹⁸ Rahela Begum, interview.

Chapter 5

Repercussions and Resilience

Our story till now has covered, what might be for the purposes of this study called the first phase of the movement, when it was still largely a local affair. The men and women of Polder 22, even those who knew that Wazed's men would come armed, did not expect the extent of violence that would be unleashed on them on November 7. What followed—police repression and false charges—was however unsurprising. Shrimp was of national importance and Wazed was an influential businessman and a member of the ruling party.

But, within a day of the attack, the mass violence triggered reactions from different actors. The Chairman of Deluti Union, Samaresh Halder, DDP's Subinay Nandi (and soon after, the Netherlands Embassy in Bangladesh), Khushi Kabir and Nijera Kori, a range of political parties, journalists, and people from all over Khulna came to play a part in the movement. Manik Saha, the Khulna correspondent for the newspaper *Sangbad*, who visited the scene of the attack, continued to report extensively about the attack over the next two months; there were also reports in *The Bangladesh Observer*, *Ekota*, *Purbanchal*, *The Tribune* among others—thus, ensuring national publicity to what was happening in Khulna. The movement against Ershad's regime was also reaching a crescendo, and political parties from across the spectrum too joined in.

But, all of this is not to say that the movement, to use Shanin's classification had now gone from being a spontaneous grassroots mobilisation to being elite-led.¹¹⁹ In fact, in this phase, what we see is creation of new alliances and strengthening of solidarities. Most importantly, the activities of the peasants of Polder 22 gave a symbolic value to the protest on November 7 and to Karunamoyee Sarder as a martyr. What we see in fact are different dimensions of

¹¹⁹ Shanin, "Peasantry as a Political Factor."

leadership as the movement gained national prominence for a time, paving the way for national and transnational activism against the shrimp industry.

In the following sections I take up the events as they unfolded after November 7. Necessarily, this focusses only on the immediate aftermath of the events, till the end of 1990. I draw particular attention to what the movement's participants chose to highlight during the interviews. For this, I use my textual sources to place their narratives to specific dates and events; however, exploring the complexities of motivation of these broader alliances and strategies during this phase remains limited due to the focus of this study. By way of concluding the narrative of the movement, I briefly outline the events after 1990, including the outcome of the legal cases against Wazed Ali and the landless peasants, and the formation of broader transnational advocacy alliances, even as shrimp cultivation continued in various parts of the, giving rise to new local resistances.

5.1 New alliances

As Wazed's men left with Karunamoyee Sarder's body and an unconscious Rupban Begum, and the police stepped into the scene, the primary concern of the protestors was to get the injured to hospitals. Samaresh Halder, who had also been in the processions, started to make his own way to Paikgacha to meet the DC; there, on November 8, he held press conference where spoke out about what had happened in Polder 22, naming Wazed Ali Biswas as the prime perpetrator.¹²⁰

Meanwhile, at the polder, the police were “were trying to hide traces of the murder—they wanted to show nothing had happened.”¹²¹

¹²⁰ *Ekota*, “Wazed Ali treasurer of Khulna JP,” Dec. 7 1990.

¹²¹ Abul Khair Majnu, interview.

Hearing of the attack, Subinay Nandy made his way to Harinkhola on the morning of November 8. Through the DDP and WDB, Khushi Kabir, who was at Noakhali at the time, heard of the attack on NK members and arrived at Harinkhola on November 9. By then, according to a report in *The Bangladesh Observer* published on November 9, five seriously wounded villagers had been admitted to Khulna Sadar Hospital and private clinics. According to the same report, two women—Karunamoyee and Rupban—remained traceless, and were assumed to be dead.¹²²

Arriving at the scene early in the morning on November 8, Nandy remembers witnessing a scene of devastation as traces of the murder still remained on the tree near the place Karunamoyee had been shot. From there, they had returned to Khulna and went to the hospitals in the evening; Nandy recalls: “Their [injured protestors] backs were burnt, they were handcuffed. But they were very strong and organised—they were not voiceless.”¹²³

Subadh Ray was one of the people who had helped to take the injured protestors to Khulna. They had to go through canals, as Wazed’s men had been patrolling the main river route with two trawlers to prevent this.¹²⁴ In Khulna, Subadh was arrested as well:

We took them [the injured] Khulna and got them admitted to Fatima Hospital [a private clinic]. A little later, the police showed up and put handcuffs on the injured people. So, Samaresh and I went to meet the SP. The SP, however, allowed Samaresh to leave, but detained us. Then they took us to Paikgacha police station... we were in custody for six-seven days after which we received bail and joined the movement again. We came out and started looking for landowners who had given leases. There were some altercations, while some of them had left the polder and hidden.¹²⁵

¹²² *Bangladesh Observer*, “Clash in Khulna village: 40 injured,” Nov. 9, 1990.

¹²³ Subinay Nandy, interview.

¹²⁴ Abul Khair Majnu, interview.

¹²⁵ Subadh Ray, interview; *Babu*, in Bengali, is a suffix added to a person’s name as a sign of respect.

Rahela Begum, who was among those injured, remembers how after the attack:

Nandy *babu* came by motorcycle and made sure everyone was admitted to the hospital. He saw that most of the people were in handcuffs and cases had been filed against us—thinking of that day, I cannot think clearly, my head blanks out. Nandy *babu* assured them [the police/DC] that we were not going to escape and got the handcuffs removed.¹²⁶

From a news report published in *Ekota* on November 23, we know what had transpired since the attack. On November 7, one Abdul Khalek, a staff in Wazed Ali's Jewel Fish Products had already filed two cases against 46 (or 47 according to Saha¹²⁷) protestors: one, accusing them of killing a *gher* guard and another, for use of explosives. The same report notes that after the attack, on November 8 the District Magistrate and the police had visited the site and had found evidence of murder; however, the police still insisted that Rupban and Karunamoyee were missing. The report also paints a bleak picture of Polder 22: villagers were being confined to their houses, not even allowed to go outside to fish.¹²⁸

At the same time, a case had also been filed by Ajit Sarder, the eldest son of Karunamoyee at the Paikgacha Magistrate Court. But, while his case was accepted, it seems that initially his signature was taken on a blank sheet of paper, and there was no reference to Wazed Ali. On the same day, a correction was accepted, possibly due to the intervention of landless members or Samaresh Halder.¹²⁹

¹²⁶ Rahela Begum, interview.

¹²⁷ Saha, *People's Movement*, 22-23.

¹²⁸ *Ekota*, "Karunar mathar khulir ongsho, mogoj o chul pawa geche" ["Part of Karuna's skull, brains and hair found"]. Nov. 23, 1990.

¹²⁹ *Ekota*, "Part of Karuna's skull, brains and hair found". Nov. 23, 1990; Manik Saha, "Paikgachay santrash: Grambashi ekhon bari chara, pulisher bhumika niye proshno" ["Crime in Paikgacha: Villagers forced to flee homes, questions over police role"], *Sangbad*, Nov. 14, 1990.



Figure 2: Photos of the injured in hospitals: top left is Surman Mandal, one of Wazed's men; then, clockwise: Nur Ali Gazi, Haripada Mandal, Koushalya, Simangini, and Urmila and Anwara. Photo: Sangbad, Nov. 14.

On November 9, there were two major developments. Firstly, Rupban had been found unconscious by a river bank—and arrested soon afterwards. Secondly, the first secretary of the Netherland Embassy in Bangladesh, J C van der Laan arrived at Harinkhola.¹³⁰ A report by Saha in *Sangbad*, published on November 14 tells us that afterwards a letter had been sent from the Netherlands embassy to the Home Ministry and the Khulna District Administration condemning the attack. The report, which featured pictures (Figure 2) of the injured in various hospitals and clinics in Khulna, also quotes Surman Mandal, one of Wazed's men who had

¹³⁰ *Sangbad*, “Harinkhola graam thomthome, ekjon mohila nikhoj” [“Harinkhola village deserted, one woman missing”], Nov. 10, 1990.

been injured as saying that on Wazed's order, 150 men had gone to occupy Harinkhola in 5 trawlers.¹³¹

The attack was led by Anil Krishna Ray—the person Karunamoyee had recognised among the attackers. Wazed Ali Biswas was supposedly waiting at the house of Debendranath Mallik (father of Pobitro, who fired the shot that killed Karunamoyee) in Baroaria village, according to another report compiled by Amal Saha and Masud Bibagi after talking with locals of Polder 22 in December. The same report also read that according to villagers, the police were waiting in a village opposite Harinkhola all the while the villagers were being attacked.¹³²

Through these news reports, we also start seeing how political parties started to take notice of what was happening and started joining in various ways around this time: the Khulna city Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB) organised a protest against the attack at Hadis Park, Khulna, while Sarbadaliya Chatra Oikya Parishad (All-party Students Council) put out a press statement in condemnation and demanding punishment of the attackers.¹³³ Similar press releases, denouncing the attack and demanding justice, published in *Purbanchal* on November 11, highlights how all major political parties were reacting: the Workers Party on behalf of the 5-Party Alliance¹³⁴ referred to the incident as another example of oppression on people by an “autocrat and his associates”, Monnujan Sufian alongside other Awami League leaders compared the oppression by *gher* owners to those of *Nil* (indigo) cultivators¹³⁵, and the Jatiya

¹³¹ Saha, “Crime in Paikgacha: Villagers forced to flee homes, questions over police role”, *Sangbad*, Nov. 14, 1990.

¹³² *Ekota*, “Wazed Ali treasurer of Khulna JP,” Dec. 7 1990.

¹³³ *Sangbad*, “Harinkhola village deserted, one woman missing”, Nov. 10, 1990.

¹³⁴ During the anti-Ershad movement, the 5-Party alliance constituted major leftist parties of the country, including the CPB and the WP.

¹³⁵ This is in reference to the *Nil Bidroho* or Indigo Revolt of 1859, when peasants in Nadia, Bengal, mobilised against the oppression of Indigo cultivators.

Krishak Samiti and Bangladesh Khet Majur Union, jointly, referred to the empire of terror that *gher* owners had established in southern Khulna.¹³⁶

As mentioned earlier, Khushi Kabir arrived at Khulna on November 9 as well. Together with Nandy, she went to talk to the DC and SP. She recalls how the SP was completely dismissive about the entire incident and told her: “A poor, Hindu woman has died; why has this brought you all the way over here?” She was explicitly told not to go to Polder 22. The first few days of her arrival, she says, were spent trying to ensure that the injured were receiving treatment and their handcuffs be taken off in the hospitals.

Then, on November 13, a mass gathering was organised at the Bigardana school field, where landless groups in the polder would usually hold their big meetings. “A lot of people came from other polders on that day as well. Political activists, professionals were also present. From there, we decided to march towards the site where Karunamoyee was killed,” Kabir says.

By this time, through word of mouth, news about this gathering had been spread to other villages. Saha, in writing of this gathering, mentions that at least ten thousand people had attended. In the meeting, a 14-member Onnay Protirodh Committee (Committee for Resistance against Injustice) was formed to coordinate the ongoing protests and mobilisations, with CPB activist Rashiduzzaman as its convener.¹³⁷ Other members included Advocate S M Yusuf of Awami League, and Samaresh Halder. Rashiduzzaman, who was also the Chairman of Kapilmuni Union afterwards, was already aware of the exploitation of villagers by *gher* owners. A few years earlier, he had been part of the protests against Wazed Ali when Mowla Baksh—whose story we have referred to in chapter 3—was murdered.¹³⁸

¹³⁶ *Purbanchal*, “Paikgachar ghotonay bibhinno moholer ninda o protibad” [“Condemnation and protest from different quarters over Paikgacha incident”], Nov. 11, 1990.

¹³⁷ Tutu, *History of People’s Struggle*, 24.

¹³⁸ Ghafur *et. al.*, *Final Report on Socio-Economic and Environmental Impact of Shrimp Culture in South-Western Bangladesh*, 57.

Another participant in the meeting was Advocate SM Yusuf from Awami League from Khulna—participants I interviewed recalled that he had taken a very strong stance, and was crucial in ensuring that no lawyer in Khulna would represent Wazed Ali in court.

The police were still present at Harinkhola. As the march from Bigardana started, Kabir recalls, the procession kept growing in size as they proceeded towards Harinkhola. Then, as she recalls:

We suddenly came to a bunker, where the police were there. I didn't know that was the exact place where Karunamoyee was killed. I was told not to approach any further by the police, who had guns in their hands. They told us to go back. We refused and kept walking on.

She remembers, as the marching villagers passed the SP, they would each give him a poke on the belly or his sides—an act to undermine the repressive authority he represented. All of a sudden, Kabir says, they heard the sound of launches arriving from the river. The villagers started shouting that these were Wazed's men who were coming to bring food for the police—they jumped into the river and chased them away.

At the site of the murder, a stone or brick—an early monument in remembrance—was placed to mark the spot where Karumoyee was shot.¹³⁹ This would later be the place where a mural would be erected depicting Karunamoyee Sarder marching against Wazed Ali.

After this, the next reference I could find of a mass event was that of November 19, when a protest assembly was organised at the Shahid Minar premises in Paikgacha. There, the Onnay Protirodh Committee demanded a judicial inquiry within 10 days, followed by submission of a memorandum to the UNO. After that, the thousands of assembled people who had assembled, took out a procession through Paikgacha.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁹ Saha, *People's Movement*, 11.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 18.

Abdur Razzak Mollah points out that since Nijera Kori already had a significant presence in Paikgacha, it was possible to mobilise a lot of people for these gatherings. After the processions on November 19, Mollah says, there were even some incidences of picketing of Wazed's *ghers* and his house in Khulna.

Simultaneously, the movement against Ershad's regime was reaching its peak nationally. A state of emergency was declared and curfew was imposed. In Khulna, Kabir says, this was used to try to stop the movement. But, defying the curfew, gatherings and mobilisation continued:

We were getting stronger and getting more organisations involved—parties that never talked to each other began to come together at our office. AL and BNP supported us because of the anti-Ershad movement. But the biggest support came from CPB, Krishak Federation, JSD, WP, Krishak Sangram Samiti—which had organised the Beel Dakatia protests.¹⁴¹ Underground groups operating in Khulna were there as well.

General Ershad was forced to step down from power in the first week of December, and a new caretaker government headed by Justice Shahabuddin was signed in. Wazed lost the political backing that he had as a Jatiya Party official. This situation—a caretaker government in power—proved to be a blessing for the movement, according to Nandy.

Wazed was arrested soon after, but as Saha writes, due to his influence with the local police, he was granted bail on December 14, “even though the day was a weekly holiday [a Friday].” At this, political leaders from the 8-, 7- and 5-Party coalitions¹⁴² in Khulna boycotted Victory Day events on December 16 in protest, demanding withdrawal of the District Magistrate, which

¹⁴¹ Beel Dakatia in Polder 25, Khulna, is the second largest *beel*, a type of billabong, in Bangladesh. Due to drainage problems caused by the CEP embankments leading to other socioeconomic problems, locals began to organize themselves in response. One such attempt was that made by the Krishak Sangram Samiti in 1986-87. See Atiur Rahman, *Beel Dakatia: The Environmental Consequences of a Development Disaster*.

¹⁴² For 5-Party alliance see note 133. The 7-Party alliance was headed by the BNP and the 8-Party alliance by the Awami League.

the Deputy Commissioner of Paikgacha did on December 18.¹⁴³ Earlier, on November 21, Wazed seems to have been arrested once as well, and according to Tutu, was granted bail the very next day by the magistrate.¹⁴⁴ Of course, these two incidents could be the same, with one writer having gotten the date wrong.

In any case, mobilisations in Khulna continued throughout December. On December 24, the Onnay Protirodh Committee organised a mass gathering at Hadis Park in Khulna. According to reports, ten to fifteen thousand people assembled at Khulna Hadis Park on the day, including students, labourers, youth and cultural fronts, and political parties representing the major alliances to mention a few. The Convenor of the committee, Rashiduzzaman, presided over the gathering and renewed demands were made for the arrest of Wazed Ali. The gathering also called for the dismissal of the SP of Khulna and the ASP of Paikgacha, and transfers of the Divisional and Deputy Commissioner of Khulna. Soon after, on December 25, the order for the SP's transfer to Khagrachari by December 27 was issued.¹⁴⁵

In the events we have discussed till now, we see how an act of peasant resistance became a mass movement against shrimp aquaculture and Wazed Ali. The villagers of Polder 22, after November 5, gained the support from political parties and civil society organisations.

The political context of the time—the strong opposition against Ershad's regime—was a crucial factor in the formation of these new alliance. Looking at the press releases by the political parties following the attack, we see a new framing of what had happened. Wazed's attack and the protest by the villagers was no longer only about the shrimp industry's impacts, but also about the excesses of a government that was seen as illegitimate and autocratic. Certainly, some parties such as the CPB and Krishak Sangram Samiti had experience with

¹⁴³ *Ibid*, 18.

¹⁴⁴ Tutu, *History of People's Struggle*, 24

¹⁴⁵ *Sangbad*, "Khulnar polish superke bodlir adesh deya hoyeche" ["Superintendent of Police in Khulna given transfer order"], Dec. 26, 1990.

protests against *gher* owners and knew of the impacts of the shrimp industry. We have seen how the CPB had immediately brought out a procession in condemnation of the attack, and of the party's previous attempts to mobilise for justice when Mowla Baksh was killed a few years earlier (see Chapter 4). However, in the particular context of November 1990, because of Wazed's ties with the Jatiya Party, the carnage he had unleashed upon the villagers came to symbolise for political parties such as the Awami League—at least in its press release rhetoric—the autocracy of Ershad's government, drawing comparisons with the exploitation of peasants by Indigo planters.

Even after Ershad was forced to step down, this support continued for a while. During the assembly at Hadis Park on December 24, we see participation of:

Sheikh Muniruzzaman of CPB, Nazrul Islam of BNP, ... Abdur Razzak of Awami League, Maksudur Rahman of Baksal, Azizul Islam of JSD, Nurul Islam from BSD, Zillur Rahman from the Workers Party, Mohammad Elias from NAP, Advocate Firoz Ahmed and Sultan Ahmad of the Sramik Karmachari Oikya Parishad, Sultan Mallik of Krishak Sangram Samiti alongside the leaders of the Onnay Protirodh Committee and landless groups.¹⁴⁶

The publicity that the attack had received—through reporting by Manik Saha and journalists from other newspapers, and Samaresh Halder's press conference—was also crucial, as was the stance of the Netherlands Embassy. Newspaper articles leveraged that outrage, focussing on the improvements that the DDP had brought to the lives of villagers and the large amounts of money that had been spent by the Netherlands government, adding, that after the attack, there was a fear that the aid would stop. One report by Saha, published on November 20 carried the headline: "*Bideshi Shahajjer prokolpo bondho hobar pothe, jonomone bikkhob. Proshashon*

¹⁴⁶ Tutu, *History of People's Struggle*, 26.

nirob” (“Foreign-funded project in Paikgacha on the brink of closure, people unrestful. Administration silent”).¹⁴⁷

I have discussed in the last chapter about the role of moral outrage in generating solidarity and participation in a mass mobilisation. After November 7, as pictures of the victims appearing in newspapers with descriptions of the brutality unleashed on them, and the fact that a landless widow had been killed while heroically leading a procession against a well-known *gher* owner associated with many such crimes, the moral outrage not only had a clearly defined target (who was also importantly associated with the Jatiya Party, thus with Ershad), but also identifiable victims, most of whom were still suffering in hospitals, while being accused by the police for crimes they had not committed.

Scholars of peasant movements, notably Scott and Dhanagare, have theorised that political instability plays a role in triggering mass movements.¹⁴⁸ In this case, however, I do not see any direct relation between the first act of resistance and the national political context. To the people of Polder 22, Wazed’s association with Jatiya Party would have been more a reason to not protest given his perceived influence with the police and administration. But, in shaping how the movement continued after November 7 and the involvement and support of political parties, the political context had been crucial. As Dhanagare wrote about colonial India: “Where decay of legitimacy had set in or where a semblance or possibility of such decay is in sight, peasant rebellions developed more quickly.”¹⁴⁹

However, Dhanagare had also written, in his evaluation of the Tebhaga Movement, that involvement of political parties—what he terms the “politicization of peasants”—had

¹⁴⁷ Saha, Manik, “*Bideshi Shahajjer prokolpo bondho hobar pothe, jonomone bikkhob. Proshashon nirob.*” [“Foreign-funded project in Paikgacha on the brink of closure, people unrestful. Administration silent”], Nov. 20, 1990.

¹⁴⁸ Dhanagare, *Peasant Movements in India*; Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*.

¹⁴⁹ Dhanagare, *Peasant Movement in India*, 226.

weakened the movement because of the particularistic nature of the issue and internal differences within the Kishan Sabha.¹⁵⁰ However, in our case, even as the movement gained the support of political parties—even if for strategic reasons in the context of the anti-Ershad movement—it did not become one primarily led by them. Throughout this, the centrality of the landless organisation in taking decisions was maintained, and even after 1990, as alliances with mainstream political parties weakened, the villagers of Polder 22 continued to resist shrimp aquaculture and other forms of exploitation. The political context of 1990, therefore, for a time meant the movement gained mass support and publicity, even though it continued well after the movement against Ershad ended.

The role of political parties, however, remains largely marginal for the people of Polder 22 today. To Abdur Razzak Mollah, for example, it was necessary for the success of the movement that political parties got involved. But, he explains, their support was temporary, and the success of the movement was due to the leadership of the landless organisation. To him, the support from Nijera Kori, journalists, members of the civil society was important for the movement. Similarly, roles of local leaders such as Samareh Halder is stressed more by participants rather than political leaders.

The continued leadership role of the landless members during the months of November and December can be seen, for example, in the decisions regarding the mass assemblies we have already described, including the gathering on November 13. Clearly, the Onnay Protirodh Committee that was formed also played a big role in these decisions as well. But from my interviews, it seems clear that the villagers of Polder 22 saw the movement as their own, decisions about which was to be taken by themselves.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 174-175.

In Tutu's account, we glimpse how these decisions were taken through discussions at the Polder Committee meetings:

To make the gathering on December 24 successful, the Polder Committee held a number of meetings. Through a meeting on December 23... it was decided that 10 trawlers full of people would go from the polder to attend—the costs for this would be covered partly by the groups, partly by Nijera Kori, and some trawler owners would provide the service for free.¹⁵¹

Similarly, about the gathering on November 13, he writes how a meeting of the Polder Committee was organised on November 10, attended by 21 people, where after observing one minute of silence, the overall situation was discussed to determine the how to take the movement forward:

It was decided that the next day everyone would gather at Noai for bringing out a procession, and a protest gathering will be organised on November 13 at Bigardana field, where Khushi Kabir would be present.¹⁵²

References to such meetings of the Polder Committee and Nijera Kori staff throughout November and December show how these were used to continue mobilising villagers and take strategical decisions—they also lead to altercations with those who had leased their lands, and many rich landowners are reported to have fled from the polder. Through such meetings, other important decisions, such as how to best provide support to injured villagers were also taken. On November 19, for example, the committee decided on providing rice to Karunamoyee's family and the families of the injured.¹⁵³ Individually, those who had not been gravely injured during the attack or had not been arrested, continued to be part of the movement through

¹⁵¹ Tutu, *History of People's Struggle*, 25.

¹⁵² *Ibid*, 24.

¹⁵³ *Ibid*, 25.

various means. Rahela, for example, says that when the police had restricted movement in the polder, she used to go secretly make her way to the houses of the injured to distribute rice and see how they were doing.

In all these, the issues of collective identity and participation in regular mass gatherings are visible. If the “*mitings*” and “*michils*” prior to November 7 had created the possibility of a collective resistance, the mass gatherings afterwards, where participants were joined by people from other villages and political leaders, must have transformed the fear and despondency following the attacks into resolve and hope—“transformation of ideas and feelings, in ways that enable and constrain new possibilities of action and thought.”¹⁵⁴ Of course, to generalise about this process of transformation of emotions—similar to what Kane analyses in the Irish Land Movement—more specific analysis is required focussing on the evolving emotional experiences of the participants and the content of the discussions.¹⁵⁵ For this study, however, we can at least claim that the role of emotional reactions and participation in rituals of gatherings—as scholars interested in emotional components of social mobilisations claim—had been crucial factors in the formation of collective identities and solidarities.

But, even as their demands gained wider support and the movement gained in strength, the repression was far from over for the people of Polder 22. Despite the fall of the Jatiya Party, Wazed’s attempts continued for a few years afterwards. Villagers were still charged in the cases that had been filed against them. The immediate attempt to establish a *gher* might have been prevented, but insecurity and fear remained for some time. As Urmila Sarder says:

After this, we had to be constantly worried about going to jail. They were very angry that we had stopped their attempts—we had no security after that. They could harm us, me or someone from my family. They would threaten us for providing witness, filing

¹⁵⁴ Barker, “Fear, Laughter, and Collective Power,” 194.

¹⁵⁵ Kane, “Finding Emotion in Social Movement Processes.”

cases against them. Some of them still live here ... they had gone to jail, but they received bail soon. They suffered for less time than us.

While the political alliances did not last, the struggle continued for the people of Polder 22. There were attacks on landless members and NK staff, false cases against members continued for a long time, well into the first decade of the 2000s.¹⁵⁶ During the interviews for this study, Nirapodo Das and Abdur Razzak Mollah pointed out how numerous false cases had been filed against them for their participation in movements, for which sometimes they had been sent to jail and sometimes subjected to torture.

It is beyond the scope of this study to go into comprehensive details of how the movement continued after 1990. But, before moving on to the next section where I discuss the lasting power of the movement and Karunamoyee Sarder, a very short summary of the outcome of the legal cases against Wazed Ali and the landless members, and a subsequent attempt to introduce shrimp aquaculture in Polder 22 is presented by way of concluding this section.

The quest for justice by landless members was a drawn-out one. While the charge sheet in the Karunamoyee murder case was accepted on December 14, 1990, with Wazed Ali named as the main culprit, the process was stalled when the case was transferred to the CID for investigation. After considerable back and forth, appeals and counter-appeals by lawyers employed by both sides, a warrant was issued against Wazed Ali in 1996.¹⁵⁷ By this time, he had joined the BNP, and was even elected as a member of parliament in the February 15 election of 1996.¹⁵⁸ The trial was finally started in 2004, and in 2007, 12 people were sentenced to life imprisonment. Pobitra, the person who had fired shot, was sentenced in absentia—the people of Polder 22

¹⁵⁶ EJP, *Desert in the Delta*, 19; Sur, “Chronicles of Repression,” 52.

¹⁵⁷ Saha, *People’s Movement*, 20-23.

¹⁵⁸ *Daily Star*, “BNP leader Wazed Ali dead,” Dec 25, 2003. The February 1996 elections were boycotted by most opposition parties, were won by the BNP. The administration lasted only 12 days, and fresh elections were held in June.

claim he has gone off to India.¹⁵⁹ Wazed Ali and Anil were acquitted since they had died in the meantime. Karunamoyee's eldest son, Ajit Sarder, who had filed the case against Wazed, too had died a year earlier, on November 7, 2006.¹⁶⁰

The case against the people of Polder 22, though not formally dismissed, remains inactive at the Sessions Court level due to the death of the plaintiff, while another case against Samaresh Halder, accusing him of hiding Karunamoyee—filed by two younger sons of Karunamoyee, who were bought off by Wazed for a time—was dismissed in 1994.¹⁶¹

There was talk of introducing shrimp farming in Polder 22 again in 2000, when during a parliamentary session, the then Fisheries and Livestock Minister, A S M Abdur Rab approved its inclusion as a shrimp farming area. Landless members and Nijera Kori challenged this in court. On June 6, 2000, the court ruled in their favour, but even before the ruling, the decision was revoked by the minister himself.¹⁶²

5.2 Karunamoyee as a symbol of resistance

It is interesting to note in our discussion of the movement that the figure of Karunamoyee Sarder as an individual is conspicuously absent in the narratives of the participants I interviewed. Except in the accounts relating how she had been murdered, very little emerges about her from these narratives. We hear how some participants knew her as someone from a neighbouring village who was a leader of the women's landless group of Bigardana, or had met her in landless group meetings. Newspaper reports of the time describe her as a landless widow.

¹⁵⁹ *Daily Star*, "Karunamoyee Sarder Murder Case: 12 get life in Khulna," Mar. 23, 2007.

¹⁶⁰ *New Age*, "12 to suffer life time for killing woman landless leader," Mar. 23, 2007.

¹⁶¹ Personal conversations with Nijera Kori staff, including Khushi Kabir.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*



Figure 3: Portrait of Karunamoyee Sarder at the NK office in Polder 22, with the caption: "Struggle is life, life is struggle". Photo courtesy: Nijera Kori

But, even as we find very little about about Karunamoyee (figure 3) as a person in these interviews—her personal motivations for joining the landless organisation and leading the protests, why she had marched right up to a gun to convince the attackers not to shoot—a wealth of detail emerges when we start to look at how she is remembered.

Tapati Rani Mandal, who was right behind Karunamoyee in the procession, for example, says she did not know Karunamoyee very closely. But, in speaking of November 7, she recalls how as everyone was preparing to march to Harinkhola, somebody had told Karunamoyee: “*snan tan kori jabe na?*” (Don’t you want to first take a bath before heading out?). To this, Tapati says, Karunamoyee had replied jokingly: “*Snan korbo ni shoshan ghate giye*” (We can bath when we go to the pyre). She points to the irony of the fact that Karunamoyee never returned from the processions.

Rupban, who was beside Karunamoyee, recalls a similarly heroic figure. When the bombs had started going off, many of the marching villagers started to panic. However, Karunamoyee

remained undaunted, and marched ahead, telling Rupban: “Having come so far, we cannot retreat.”¹⁶³

In *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies*, Verdery defines politics as “a form of concerted activity among social actors, often involving stakes in particular goals... Because human activity nearly always has affective and meaningful dimensions and takes place through complex symbolic processes, I also view politics as a realm of continual struggles over meanings, or signification.”¹⁶⁴ Verdery shows, in the context of post-socialist Europe, how dead bodies, burial rites, and spaces of burial continue to inform the politics of people. The dead are particularly affective, more so than other symbols: “they were once human beings with lives that are to be valued. They are heavy symbols because people cared about them when they were alive, and identify with them”.¹⁶⁵

Thus, more than the factual authenticity of Karunamoyee’s last words to Tapati or Rupban, what is crucial to understand is the meanings and emotions that are conveyed through these stories told about her by people who were there with her, how the circumstance of her continue to convey values of struggle and heroism, deepening the solidarities and identities that brought the protestors together in the first place. She is therefore also a reminder of the criminal activities associated with shrimp farming and what the movement achieved for the people of the polder. If the criminality of the shrimp industry, as I have argued in the previous chapter figured largely in the moral economy of the protestors, Karunamoyee’s murder served to strengthen that even more. Unlike other individuals murdered over clashes relating to shrimp cultivation, Karunamoyee was not someone they had only heard of, but actually knew as someone from the same polder and who was a member of the same organisation as them.

¹⁶³ Sur, “Chronicles of Repression,” 42.

¹⁶⁴ Verdery, *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies*, 23-24.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 32.

Just as important as the stories told about Karunamoyee in how she is remembered, is the memorial at Harinkhola at the site of her murder. This corporeal representation shows her at her most heroic, as a person who struggled against the exploitation of the poor.

The social construction of meaning and memory, as Mitchell writes is “sustained through the interplay between collective recollection and repetition.” Commemorative events, therefore, can blur “individual interpretations of events, and [create] a single, highly idealized, composite image.” Through the example of the Statue of Liberty during a commemoration event a year after September 11, 2011, Mitchell highlights how the “semiotics of space” also figures in this process of fixation of meaning.¹⁶⁶ While she focusses on the dangers of monuments in creating rigid “claims to authenticity and moral righteousness” and erasing plural pasts and multiple memories, in the case of Karunamoyee Sarder, we see a different role that monuments can perform. The mural at Harinkhola gives a physical presence to the demands of the people of Polder 22 against.

Kabir says, after 1990, as Nijera Kori became more involved with shrimp aquaculture, and the movement was becoming stronger, despite repression, people from other areas started coming to the landless organisation and Nijera Kori with news of similar murders and their sufferings. The people of Polder 22, because of what they had achieved, “felt morally bound to keep Polder 22 and surrounding areas free of shrimp.”¹⁶⁷ It was also this, Kabir says, that led to the decision for erecting the memorial at the site.

Through discussions between Nijera Kori and the landless organisation, it was decided that the memorial should be a mural and not an abstract monument, which they felt, could be forgotten

¹⁶⁶ Katharyne Mitchell, “Monuments, Memorials, and the Politics of Memory,” 442-447.

¹⁶⁷ Khushi Kabir, interview.

after a few years. The idea was that even after many years, people should know what had happened from the picture and the text accompanying it.

“This, afterwards, became almost a site filled with sacred values for the protestors—on November 7, they place wreaths there, and people bow their heads in respect,” says Kabir. The protestors of the movement I interviewed, when asked if the younger people of the polder knew about Karunamoyee Sarder, replied how the mural has become a way to retell the story of November 7 to children, who seeing it, become curious about who she was and what she had done.

“Collective recollection and repetition” too, as Mitchell rightly observes, are crucial in the process of how narratives are constructed and imbued with certain meaning. Even before the construction of the mural began, from 1991, the groups and NK had decided to commemorate the day. In the first year, Kabir says, all the major political parties joined in, as did scholars and noted civil society members such as Hameeda Hossain, Kamal Hossain, Anisur Rahman, Mesbah Kamal and Philip Gain. Landless members, Rahela recalls, had staged a drama retelling the story of their protest against Wazed Ali Biswas on November 7, 1990.

The yearly commemorations of Karunamoyee’s death on November 7, even today draws thousands of landless group members from all over Khulna, as well as peasants who are non-members as well, according to my interviews. In the first few years after 1990, Abdur Razzak Mollah says, political leaders from Khulna also used to attend the commemorations. On these days, participants of the movement narrate their experiences, and perform plays and songs about their struggles and aspirations.

Before all these, the assembled people march to Harinkhola to the mural to place wreaths in honour of Karunamoyee. This march is also a re-enactment of an “epiphanic moment” of the movement—through which, as Sur writes, a “local injustice was transplanted to the realm of

public knowledge and action”—when, defying police restrictions, the villagers had marched to the site of the murder on November 13, 1990.¹⁶⁸

Equally important is what the movement achieved for the villagers. Beyond the spatial marker of the mural and repetitions through the annual commemoration, Karunamoyee and November 7 are remembered today, according to Abdur Razzak Mollah, because they brought a degree of peace and prosperity for the people.

This is also reflected in Tapati Rani Mandal’s interview. When asked why, almost 30 years later, people continue to gather and remember Karunamoyee, she says:

Why wouldn’t they? ... She did not go that day for her own interests—she did not have any land in the polder. She gave her life for all of us. She has taught us that we have to live through struggle. Without that, we would be living as slaves.

For landless members, many of whom have become involved in local government bodies and institutions over the years, their sense of dignity and empowerment is also linked with the success of the movement. Karunamoyee’s resistance remains symbolically tied to this sense of improvement to their lives. Subadh Ray, in highlighting that they had not only resisted the incursion of shrimp, but also succeeded in convincing those who were for establishment of *ghers* in the 1990s says:

When we started to cultivate two crops here, the people who were for saline water realised that they had almost made a mistake. So, they also supported us. Now, even if you wanted to, no one would allow you to bring saline water into the polder.

Others point to how through the movement, they achieved a polder of their own, where the lives of people are much better than in surrounding areas where shrimp continues to be farmed.

¹⁶⁸ Sur, “Chronicles of Repression,” 49.

“Our polder is a lot better than other polders. Those have been decimated to the ground. They don't have food. They don't have work,” says Urmila Sarder. As proof of this, all the participants give concrete examples to how their lives have improved since 1990. They speak of how vegetables and fruits of all kinds are produced by the people in the polder today, and how, especially through the cultivation of watermelon (worth crores of taka according to participants), villagers have attained a degree of financial prosperity. This is in stark contrast, as Rahela says, to other polders: “Polder 22 produces gold—people [from surrounding areas] see us and say they don't want to continue shrimp cultivation.”

Even if we take these statements as somewhat exaggerated, that the lives of peasants of Polder 22 is objectively better due to the absence of shrimp is reflected in academic studies quite clearly. Paprocki and Cons, in their comparative analysis of Polder 22 and Polder 23 has written how, even if “greater equality in agrarian class relations” have not been achieved, the people of Polder 22 have achieved a considerable degree of “food sovereignty within which communities are more central to making decisions about the shape of agricultural production and market integration.” Whereas, they write, in Polder 23—a “space of ecological crisis, bordering on ecological collapse”—shrimp aquaculture has contributed to widespread depeasantisation, higher levels of landlessness, decline of livestock and vegetation, and made it riskier to climatic events such as cyclones.¹⁶⁹

This focus on prosperity and improved living conditions, however, do not point towards economistic explanations of peasant movements. To try to explain it in terms of Migdal's theory of economically rational peasants or even in terms of its intellectual successors, resource mobilisation theories, would be to put retrospective perceptions of success as the cause.¹⁷⁰ As

¹⁶⁹ Paprocki and Cons, “Life in a Shrimp Zone: Aqua- and Other Cultures of Bangladesh's Coastal Landscape,” 3-9.

¹⁷⁰ Migdal, *Peasant, Politics and Revolution*; Edelman, “Social Movements.”

we have already argued, the decision to resist was one shaped by a multiplicity of reasons, including the threat of a subsistence crises and increased insecurity, particularly of women and religious minorities.

Beyond the moral values, political motivations and aspirations, which we see reflection in the resistance of the people of Polder 22, we can also see how their political concerns and identities were in turn shaped through the movement itself. During the interviews, participants spoke of how, even if they did not realise it at the time, they now understand the environmental impacts of shrimp aquaculture, and how their class identity is today more important than religious identities.

These, along with their engagement with other issues of political significance, can be seen in the songs commemorating Karunamoyee and the movement, written jointly by landless members and NK's cultural team, and in posters produced each year ahead of November 7 since at least 1993.

It is not possible in this study to analyse in detail the degree to which the song lyrics and the posters are reflective of the politics of the landless group members and to what degree they reflect the words of NK as an organisation. Many of the issues which come forth in these texts are indeed those which NK and other NGOs frequently engage with. However, it would be dismissive to say that these broader political understandings only reflect NK's understanding, especially given that southern Bangladesh has been the hub of leftist political activity since at least 1971.

If we assume that the lyrics, even if tangentially, are reflective of their political understandings through their engagement with NK and political parties, and the years of political mobilisation activities, we can see how shrimp aquaculture has become contextualised within broader

environmental, political and economic dimensions. One song, for example, speaks of the development agendas of international institutions:

Bisshobank dere loan chingri malikere/ Koti dolar kamai kore choto chashi mere

The World Bank gives loans to shrimp farm owners/ Crores of dollars are being earned through the destruction of small peasants

In these songs, we also see how Karunamoyee and the movement is collectively remembered:

Novemborer sat tarikhe ghotona bhor belate/ Nijer jibbon korilo dan chingri chas thekaite ...

Dak diyache ma Karuna jago desher jonota/ Shobai miley grame gonje gore tulo ekota

Jot badho bhai lorai koro/ Lorai kore bachte chai

On the morning of November 7/ She gave her own life to prevent shrimp cultivation ...

Ma Karuna calls, wake up people/ Build solidarity in every village

Form groups in resistance/ We want to live through resistance

Here, far from being only commemorated for what she had done, we see how renewed calls are being made through her story for the need of continued solidarity and resistance.

It is also equally interesting to note how Karunamoyee today represents not only the exploitation associated with shrimp aquaculture, but other issues central to the lives of marginalised communities in the posters.

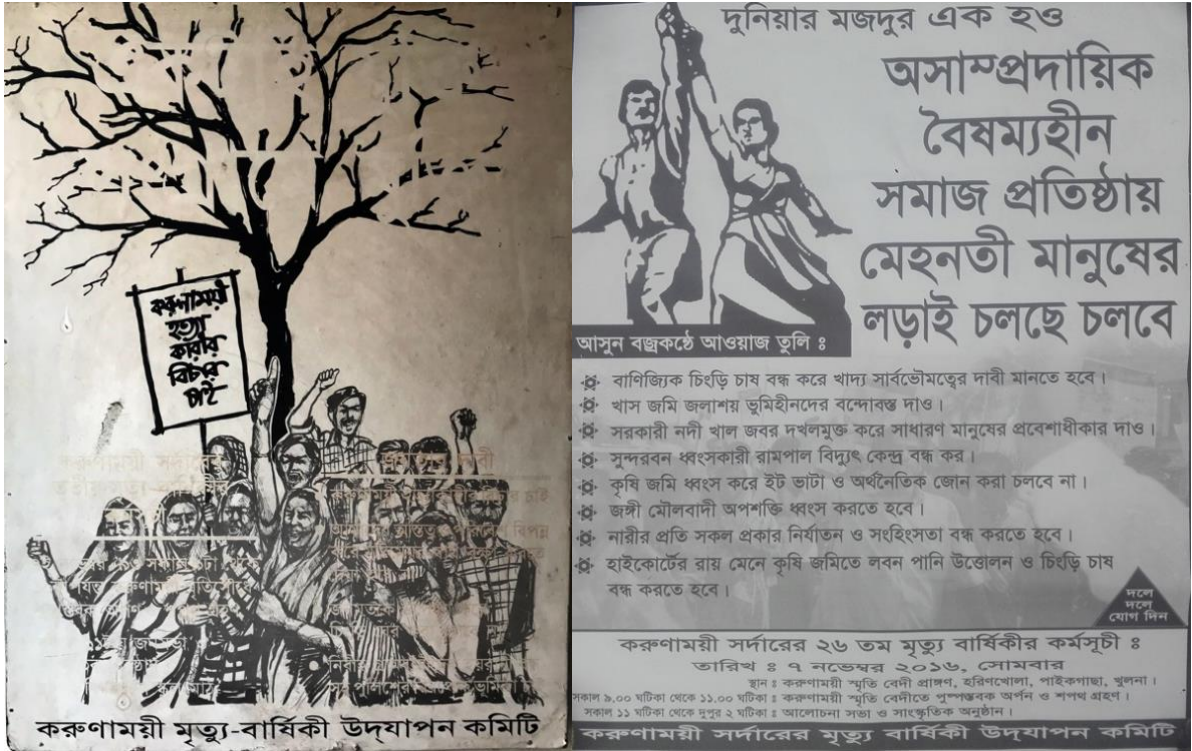


Figure 4: Posters in commemoration of Karunamoyee Day, left, 1993, right, 2016. Courtesy: Nijera Kori

In the 1993 poster (figure 4), for example, demands are made for ensuring justice for Karunamoyee Sarder's murder and an end to harassment of villagers by the police. By 1996, the poster also demands the scrapping of the Vested Property Act, reform of the education system, distribution of *khas* land, and wage equality between men and women.

Similarly, the poster from 1999 highlights issues of *ulta tebhaga* and communalism; in 2004, calls for equality between women and men are highlighted; and in 2014, demands for trial of war criminals, restitution of the Constitution of 1972 and enactment of a common family law for people of all religions are made. In 2016, the poster calls for saving the Sundarbans and stopping construction of the Rampal Coal Power Plant as well as resisting fundamentalism and religious militancy.

The placement of these demands, ranging from those directly affecting landless members (such as *ulta tebhaga* or distribution of *khas* land) to broader political and environmental and issues (Vested Property Act, trial of war criminals, construction of a coal powerplant near the

Sudarbans), in the same material commemorating Karunamoyee Sarder calls to mind the process through which populist demands are created according to Laclau. Laclau's theory of populism—defined as a political articulation, rather than its usual usage emphasising *the people* against elites or the establishment—explores the construction of the “underdog as a historical agent”.¹⁷¹ According to him, the logic behind populist demands lies in how, through a chain of equivalence (in that they all remain unfulfilled), one central demand comes to represent a multiplicity of demands.¹⁷² However, here I only identify this as a possible theoretical explanation to how Karunamoyee has today come to represent a wide range of demand. It would be interesting to explore this question in more detail, especially given that the demand of the anti-shrimp movement was fulfilled in this case. However, in this, the dynamics of the landless members' interactions with Nijera Kori is also crucial. Without understanding the process through which these posters—and songs—are produced, it would be premature to generalise about the centrality of these demands in their political outlooks.

Lastly, the continued significance of Karunamoyee Sarder can be glimpsed in the discourse around shrimp aquaculture following her death, and the story of Polder 22 continues to be central to most reports and studies of the impacts of shrimp aquaculture and peasant movements in response. While exploring details of similar movements in surrounding polder and the formation of transnational alliances and advocacy efforts which emerged after 1990 is beyond the scope of this study, I will briefly highlight how the movement of Polder 22 was symbolically important in these.

For Nijera Kori, as Kabir says, shrimp became a central issue after November 7. This prompted increased research on one hand by facilitating studies by national and international researchers, national level advocacy regarding policy related to the industry, and global alliances with

¹⁷¹ Ernesto Laclau, “Populism: What’s in a Name?.”

¹⁷² Laclau, *On Populist Reason*.

organisations in other shrimp producing countries including India, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia to highlight how the global demand for shrimp was causing socioeconomic and environmental damage to local communities.

For people of surrounding polders too, the movement of Polder 22 and by extension Karunamoyee Sarder have become, participants say, inspirational. Rahela and Nirapodo Das point out how, after 1990, they joined similar movements in surrounding areas including Dacope and Batiaghata, and that parts of Polder 20 and Polder 29 have been subsequently made free of shrimp *ghers* through such movements. They have continued to engage with peasants and local representatives of surrounding areas to advocate against shrimp farming and explain its destructive impacts.

Testimonies of landless members from surrounding areas who came to Harinkhola to attend *Karunamoyee Dibosh* in 2018, also show how the movement continued through similar resistances. To cite a few examples from the recordings collected from NK: Samita Rani Dhali, from Polder 23, speaks of how, in their area, they were involved in protests and advocacy activities with the local government to stop *ghers*. Mostayen Gazi, also from Polder 23, says the movement in their polder against shrimp *ghers* started after people saw the conditions of Polder 22. Panchanan Biswas, from Polder 29 in Dumuria, who as a member of the landless organisation had joined the mass gatherings in 1990 following Karunamoyee's death, speaks of how the people Polder 29 no longer wanted shrimp *ghers* either, and through similar movements, had succeeded in making the polder free of shrimp *ghers* four or five years back.¹⁷³

¹⁷³ Video recordings of Samita Rani Dhali, Panchanan Biswas and Mostayen Gazi were obtained from Nijera Kori.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

Responses to the expansion of shrimp aquaculture in Bangladesh by peasant associations and supporting NGOs, as Adnan has noted, have been constrained by the regulatory frameworks and rules set by the state and donor agencies within which they operate. Thus, he writes, such responses have been necessarily limited to “legal–constitutional avenues, pre-empting any explicitly political and militant challenge to the power structure involved in grabbing their lands.”¹⁷⁴ This is of course correct: the movement of Polder 22 is categorically different from the peasant movements of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. However, as this study shows, it was not solely dependent on liberal reformist activities, neither did it start with such an explicit agenda. Even beyond the initial act of resistance by the villagers of Polder 22, mass mobilisation has been a key feature of the movement.

The microhistory of the anti-shrimp movement of Polder 22 shows how, within the structural factors that shaped it—a threat of a subsistence crisis and insecurity, particularly for women, state priorities which favoured shrimp farming and *gher* owners, existence of a strong social organisation of the peasants of Polder 22—we witness glimpses of agency and peasant political motivations. The interactions of “information, culture, organization and relational ties, and identity” gave rise to strong “emotional reactions” to shrimp farming and its impacts.¹⁷⁵ At the same time, it documents the narratives of participants of a movement that is overshadowed in the broader nationalist historiography, but is significant in understanding how marginalised communities have been affected by broader political economic processes.

¹⁷⁴ Adnan, “Land Grabs and Primitive Accumulation in Deltaic Bangladesh,” 119.

¹⁷⁵ Nepstad and Smith, “The Social Structure of Moral Outrage,” 159.

Shrimp cultivation was for the people of Polder 22 morally wrong, even criminal; an attitude which was shaped by what they had witnessed in neighbouring polders. Stories of murder and rape had a regular circulation, thus amplifying the moral outrage against *gher* owners and their goons. For the organised members of the landless organisation, attempts to introduce shrimp cultivation in Polder 22 also constituted retaliation from rich landowners against their perceived sense of empowerment and solidarity. Thus, the threat of subsistence crisis and insecurity was for them a political matter, dependent on their class relationships *vis-à-vis* big landowners. For others, their identity as Hindus was equally important, and shrimp threatened loss of land and forced migration. Through the landless organisation's decision-making structure and capitalising on their relationships with a sympathetic union chairman, they confronted Wazed's attempt *en masse*. The nature of their relationships with landowners, local government representatives, and between themselves are necessarily about identity and power. The landless groups and the movement furthered strengthened their collective identities beyond communal or kinship ties. These relationships, as Hobsbawm defines it, is where we witness their politics.¹⁷⁶ And, as this study shows, far from being pre-political, the actions of the peasants of Polder 22 highlight a range of collective and personal aspirations, class and kinship identities, and organised decision-making processes—through the landless groups and committees—which facilitated their actions.

Even as the protests prompted violence from Wazed Ali and then repression from state, the movement gained support and publicity from political parties. This, as I argue, was largely contingent on the broader political context of the country in the last months of 1990, which saw a brief alignment of the anti-shrimp and the anti-Ershad narratives. The publicity that was given to the movement by journalists, the legal and advocacy support by Nijera Kori, and the

¹⁷⁶ Hobsbawm, "Peasants and Politics."

pressure exerted on the government by the Netherlands embassy all worked together towards the creation of a mass movement.

Thus, my focus on the narratives of the movement's participants not only highlight the complexities of identity, solidarity and motivation that shaped their initial actions, but the leadership roles and organisational structures of the movement. Instead of a centralised position of leadership, what we witness with the unfolding of the movement are multiple fronts of action, from mobilisation and legal support to advocacy, led by various actors. Crucially, even when the movement drew support from political parties, decision-making and leadership remained with local actors. Participants continue to see the movement as one led by the landless organisation, and the support from Nijera Kori and political parties as complementary to their goals.

Lastly, I have also attempted to explore in some detail what the movement and Karunamoyee Sarder mean for the people of Polder 22 almost thirty years after the events. Drawing from anthropological and social movement scholars, I have shown how the Karunamoyee became a symbol of resistance, and her death given particularly potent meaning through stories told and songs sung about her every year. Her status as a martyr was given a spatial presence through the construction of a mural and temporal continuity through annual events commemorating November 7, 1990. Through these processes, today the movement and Karunamoyee Sarder resonates with the political aspirations of landless people of Khulna. For locals of Polder 22, she also stands for what they perceive to have gained from the movement—a degree of peace and prosperity, and a sense of empowerment.

What is however missing in this analysis is the role of Nijera Kori in shaping these discourses—even as we see Karunamoyee being representative of broader environmental and political aspirations, the relationships between the landless members and the NGO have not been

sufficiently analysed in this study to understand how this came about. Thus, this study points towards questions of the role of social mobilisation organisations and the empowerment of deprived communities by non-state actors.

Other potential avenues of further research emerge from this study as well, a few which I highlight in conclusion. Firstly, it is interesting to see how the formation of political alliances was contingent on the national context of the time—further study on this aspect, that is the roles and motivations of political parties who joined the movement briefly, could be pursued to explore in more detail the processes through which certain social demands garner widespread support and allies.

In terms of what the movement of Polder 22 achieved, it would be equally interesting to view it from a global perspective: as the story of Karunamoyee Sarder became a staple in advocacy-focussed reports, how did it interact in shaping transnational advocacy narratives against shrimp aquaculture?

In the context of Polder 22, I find it worth further studying the symbolic value of Karunamoyee further. Why—even as she remains a powerful symbol for the landless groups of Khulna—has her story not received the same importance in the national narrative? One hypothesis for this is that the localised demands she represented only briefly aligned with a broader national narrative during the anti-Ershad movement. Afterwards, her story remained central only to the lives and aspiration of communities where commercial shrimp aquaculture was practiced, as opposed to another martyr figure from the same time, Nur Hossain, whose death could be reinterpreted for broader political demands, particularly against state repression, and who remains a frequently invoked symbol of democracy in urban middle class discourse.

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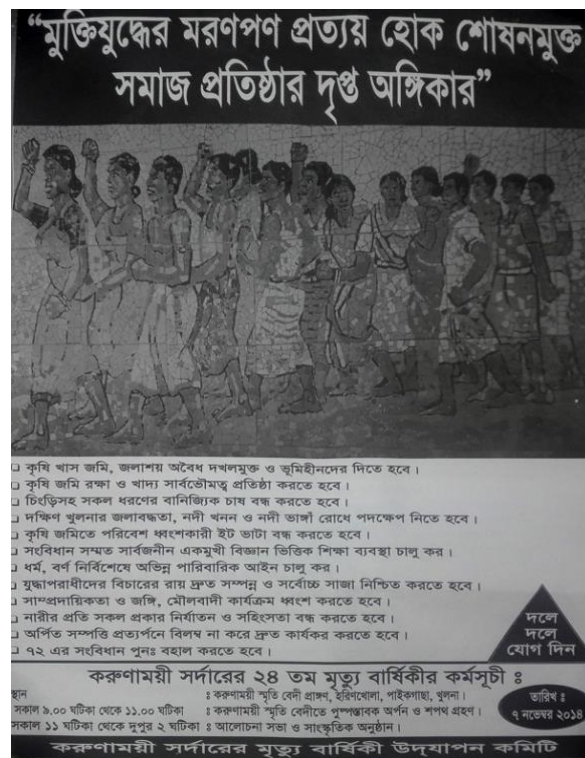
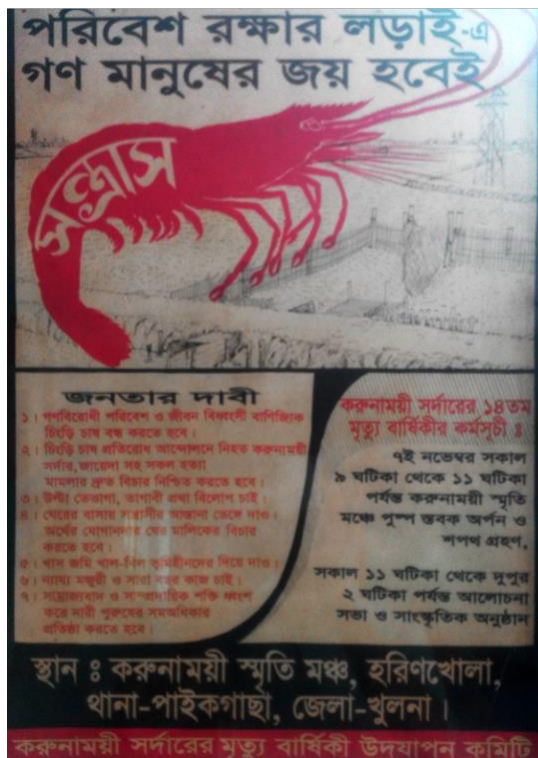
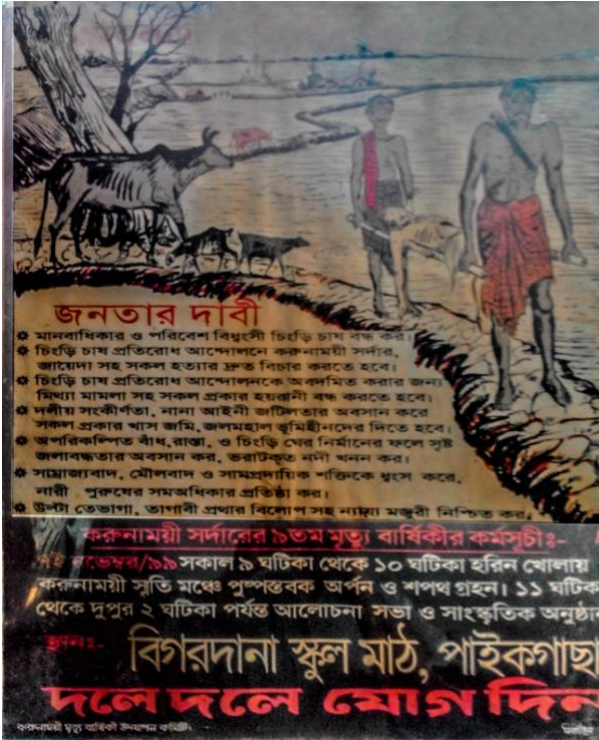
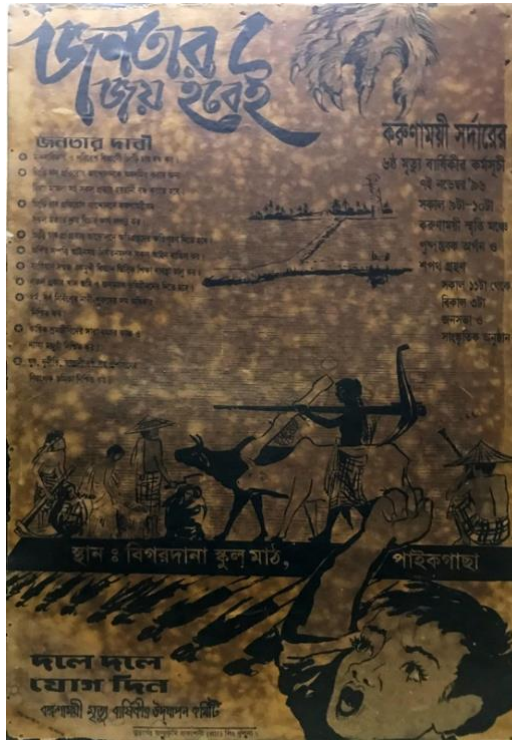
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Appendix

Posters in commemoration of Karunamoyee Day



Top row: posters from 1996 (l) and 1999 (r); Bottom row: posters from 2004 (l) and 2014 (r)