

Participation of the Leftist Students in the Mass Movements of West Bengal (1959-1966): An Overview

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Students are the essential part of the society. They are considered as the pillar of nation of any country. From the earliest times, we came across the various movements organized by the students of the different parts of Colonial India. In Colonial India, the movement of the students was against the British imperialism. But in Post-Colonial era, the movements of the students remain unabated and in many cases the movements have assumed an alarming aspect. The goals of the different movements of the students, fighting in different political banners are not only political, but also social, humanistic and cultural. The students of all countries have always swooped down upon with constructive mind for the development of their countries. They have embarked upon the reconstruction like un-retarded waves and have rocked seriously upon the existing political, social, economic and cultural structures. The students swooped down upon the movements irrespective of caste, colour and creed. The movements of the students of West Bengal are no exceptions to that. The character of the movement of the students of West Bengal began to change since the 1960s. Starting as nationalists they gradually assumed Left and Extreme ideology. In the present paper an attempt has been made to highlight the movement of the students in West Bengal during the tumultuous period of 1959-1966. Post-Independent India nay West Bengal has to face a series of problems as a newly born state political instability, economic problem, problems of immigration and migration created an untoward situation throughout West Bengal.

After independence, till the 60s, student movement did not come anywhere in India so comprehensively as was apprehended. But after the 60s the embryo of the students' disaffection matured into a decisive shape. The main reasons were the internal political and social ferment and very shocking economic crisis¹.

In 1948 the Radhakrishnan Commission was constituted for the upliftment and betterment of University education. The commission submitted its Report in 1949 and in it the weakness of the socio-economic fabric of the then India became distinctly clear. The Report at the Page 374 reads like this: "The boarding arrangements tie up closely with discipline. Poor and unwholesome food not only breeds malnutrition and disease but can become a centre of seething discontent. No single factor has a more vital effect upon the atmosphere and morale of a College or a University than the prevalent conditions under which students live. Convenient and comfortable quarters for study and sleep, sufficient and whole some food at low cost, are essential component to good spirit and the best progress in University work. Unfortunately most Universities and Colleges in India do not have adequate residential and dinning facilities for students. As a general rule only a small fraction of the students finds accommodation in hostels"².

Before the outset of the 60s, on 31st August in 1959, the historic Food Movement in Calcutta along with the whole state of West Bengal shocked the Bengalees. This Food Movements took a serious turn in 1959 and 1966. On August 31, 1959, food marchers came to Calcutta from the adjoining Districts of Howrah, Hooghly, 24 Parganas, Nadia, Burdwan and Medinipur and gathered in the Esplanade area to protest against soaring prices of food grains and other essential commodities. The demonstrators were all along peaceful but the police suddenly surrounded them and without giving any warning took recourse to severe lathi charges. Calcutta went wild over this incident, tram cars and buses were burnt and the police had to fire 447 rounds in Calcutta and Howrah. Strike calls were given by the left parties. According to their estimate, 80 persons were killed as a result of police firing.³ Sudhir Roy Chowdhury, a PSP, MLA said on the floor of the West Bengal Legislative Assembly, *"It is no wonder if there is any sporadic eruption of the volcano that the Government has spread throughout the country. They should know that a volcanic eruption can not be suppressed by firing rifles. Have the ministers any right to govern the country by rifles. The Government could not manage the show, because it was incompetent, because it was callous,*

characterless and corrupt."⁴ The death of 80 agitators in the police firing shook the entire nation. In this historic movement the revolutionary role of the students became obvious with their involvement to the movement.

Before the sad memories of 1959 tapered of, came the year of 1960. Students of Calcutta University, Jadavpur University, Visva Bharati University, North Bengal University and almost all the Colleges of West Bengal began launching blockbuster movements on the issues which were related to their institutes and the prevailing educational system. As a matter of fact they combated against the situation. Students of school, too, came forward from different districts of west Bengal with a view to getting redress for their various problems through organizing movements and leading them to success. The crystallization of the grievances among the students began as per their assessment of the political condition of their state diverse activities on the basis of different political calculations started to gain militancy. And West Bengal came into limelight as a first class nursing home of indomitable student upheaval⁵.

A quest for adding an international dimension to the thinking of the students of West Bengal in the background of Indo-Chinese confrontation started from this point. But unfortunately at this time the student movements got a stumbling block in course of its procession towards an expected goal. Deplorably as a consequence of this shock ultra nationalism in a frenzied attempt got the better of the progressive student force and side by side with it the Students Federation was declared anti-national and an illegal organization. The student community stood up with their full strength against this blind ultra nationalism. In support of it in different dailies of that time information and news on war were published to enlighten the students of that time about the excesses that were committed by the ultra nationalists. For example:

- a) "To sit in a discussion with China India is always ready"- Nehru⁶
- b) "China agrees to discuss frontier Problems"⁷
- c) "India refuses the unconditional proposal of China"-⁸
- d) "Order has been given to drive away the infiltrators"- Nehru⁹

Students analyzed a bit deeply the main news in the 'Ananda Bazar Patrika' of 1962 and as a result they became doubtful about the truth of this news. They believed that this war was not being fought for saving the country from external aggression, but it was something else which seemed to them confusing. Supposedly students were conscious the truth underlined the mystery enshrouding the war reports. The National Council of the Communist Party of India branded China as aggressor and appealed to liberate farmers and ordinary people to stand by Nehru for the cause of their motherland. The rank and file of the Students Federation decided to go against the leadership of the students Federation. In true sense of the term they rebelled against the leaders of the students Federation on this issue. The leaders in return called the rebels 'China Roaders'. Emergency was declared by the administration of the country for the whole national boundary. The leaders of the Congress Party like Nepal Roy, Atulya Ghosh and many others in different public gatherings commented, "Communists are antinational, cut asunder their hands and legs"¹⁰. Some reports in 1962 of November and December published in Ananda Bazar Patrika increased the respect among the students about China.

"The slogan of the Chinese soldiers in the snows of the Himalayas of
brotherhood of the Indians and the Chinese"¹¹

This information about China made the students more enthusiastic to know more about this country and beside this some reports again about the patriotism of the ruling class made them apprehensive of the veracity of its patriotic devotion. To quote Ananda Bazar Patrika —

"Refusal of the students of schools to buy Red Pencil"¹²

The anti-Chinese sentiment increased and with it the College authorities became more inimical and they declared the Student Federation as illegal. Students who fought out peaceful resolution of all academic problems were out rightly expelled from their colleges. On the allegation of burning a picture of Nehru the students Union of Calcutta University was banned.¹³

The Indo-Chinese war influenced very deeply the sensibility of the students and their positive attitude. A storm of debate arose on such subject like war expansionism, imperialist economics and politics. Many conscious students began to be vociferous in saying that a socialist state can not attack another country. They emphasized that aggression and imperialist designs on the territories of other countries are the inevitable result of imperialist economic exploitation. A sort of rift in the lute appeared in the movement of the two students' organization. One of these declared that the China was the aggressor country and another assured that the truth was exactly the opposite of it. At this time the apolitical students started slogan voicing that they wanted peace and not war, thus avoiding the debate over the role of China in the controversial Indo-Chinese showdown¹⁴. Posters began to show up in different Colleges and Universities of West Bengal containing such rhymes:

*“Jakhani prashna othei juddha na shanti
Amader beche nite hainako bhranti
Amara jabab dei, shanti, shanti, shanti”*¹⁵
(“Whenever question arise
If we wanted peace or strife
We reply we want peace well nigh”).

The Indo-Chinese war ended on the 20th November 1962 with the unilateral declaration of truce by China. As a result of this the force of the student movements suffered a setback.

After July, 1965 Students agitation started over the issue of hike of Tram and Bus fare. They picketed in the streets of Calcutta day after day and it acted as an inducement to the Tram Company employee strike for one single day against the said hike. This enthused the students to go forward tremendously. Students, as a token of their sincerity as protestors, boarded the Buses of different routes and requested passengers to refrain from paying escalated fares. A sort of stronghold unity developed among the passengers against the price hike. The passengers even began to resist the

Tram and Bus Company to extort the increased rates of fare. Being faced with this reluctance from the side of the passengers the conductors too refrained from taking the increased fare. On the 3rd day of the movements i.e. 29th July 1965 order under the section 144 was promulgated in Calcutta. The police pounced upon the students with batons and teargas. Due to this repressive nature of the police action the student movement gradually became violent. Many students were wounded and many other arrested. Those who arrested were Azijul Hoque, Shyamal Chakraborty, Subhas Chakraborty, Asit Sinha, Shipra Bhowmik and so on. As a protest against these arrests the Left Parties called a bandh in Calcutta on 31st August 1965. The public unanimously responded to this call. The Calcutta University was declared for 3 days closure¹⁶.

Indo-Pak war began with a bang at a time when the resistance movement against their escalation of fare gathered momentum. Taking the opportunity of India's being engaged in an international confrontation, the self seeking evil forces tried to foment communal riots in Calcutta and its adjoining areas. Being circumstanced thus political parties and students found it impossible to carry on with their programme of resisting any more fare hike. Now the principal duty of the student organization was to try hard to save communal harmony. Side by side with it anti war movement was also launched by the students. Both these seemingly were very tough tasks. In spite of this hassle the students Community of West Bengal came forward to help the Leftist student organizations to work together for keeping harmony among the various religious communities. On the other part of West Bengal, in the erstwhile East Pakistan, students started a pioneering movement against war and for establishing peace in their country on the basis of the principle of peaceful co-existence. In Calcutta too an impact of this movement was felt. The Leftist student organizations of Calcutta made their demand to end war even in the war time fluster through amicable settlement as much loud as possible for them. In the mean time public opinion of both the countries rose high and through a friendly intervention of the then Soviet Union, the Indo-Pak war ended at last. This military clash between the two countries triggered off a sort of a terrific

economic crisis in this country¹⁷ especially in West Bengal the tremendous food and fuel crisis. It was at this time students began pamphleting like this:

“Whenever people want job and food
In the frontier the bugle of begins to hoot”¹⁸

In the history of the Indian politics of the 60s, the Food Movement of West Bengal of 1966 was a historic event. This historic Food Movement had socio-economic perspective. By utilizing different loopholes in the West Bengal Land Reforms Act, feudal lords began to keep their holding intact by way of deluding the government. The Land which was redundant remained fallow for longtime affecting total harvest. This meant that they had not to pay a huge amount of tax against the quantity of lands that they owned. Along with this the rate of agricultural growth also began to go down. The Government used to levy a quantity of tax on the husking mills. But the owners of these mills did not pay this taxes¹⁹. According to Saibal Mitra, the student leader, the Food Movement took a tremendously violent turn because of the feudalistic agricultural politics of the congress led Government under the leadership of Prafulla Sen.²⁰ Apart from this, a huge quantity of rice continued to be illegally passed over to the erstwhile East Pakistan in collusion with the police. Apart from this subsequent to the Indo-Pak War the prices of the essential commodity shot up to go beyond the reach of ordinary buyers. For food and Kerosin Communist Party on the 30th January of 1966 called a massive gathering at the foot of the ‘Sahid Minar’. A good number of students participated in this gathering to express their solidarity with the cause of the movement.²¹

In 1966, on 16th February thousand of school student boys and girls alike expressed their grief over the dearth of rice and kerosene while standing before the office of the S. D. O. of the Basirhat sub-division of North 24Parganas. Here they demanded continuous immediate supply of rice and kerosene oil at a cheap rate regularly without interruption. At first it was a spontaneous outburst of the people against inflation, price rise and curtailment of Civil Liberties. The police lathicharged on the aggrieved demonstrators and in this police action six students were wounded and 40 of them were

arrested. After this incident the Food Movement spread throughout the district. It requires to be mentioned that the students demonstrated their protests against the police atrocities and the police in response fired upon them. In this firing Nurul Islam, a teenage student of the Tetulia Multipurpose School was gunned down. Nurul Islam became the first student martyr of the Food Movement of 1966.²² Close on the heels of this incident Food Movement spread from South to the Northern part of West Bengal.

In the North especially in the North Bengal University and its surroundings the students in great number took part in this Food Movement. In this movement participants were Kisan Chatterjee, Dilip Bagchi, Pabitra Pani Saha, Harisadhan Ghosh, Probodh Sarkar, Ranjit Chattopadhyay, Ashok Nanda, Amit Sen, Kumkum Bhattacharyya and such others. In the view of Kisan Chatterjee, "The Food Movement was a student movement irrespective of their party and ideology and with the passage of days this student movement was gaining momentum". The agitators participating in this movement took out processions, arranged street meeting, sent deputations and etc. They ventilated their grief in this manner. Many teachers and students supported them and marched out in an apolitical line with them.²³

As the news of the death of Nurul Islam reached at Naxalbari, a student demonstration took place at the Nanda Prasad High School premises under the leadership of Nathuram Biswas. Being astounded at seeing the spontaneous strike of the students the school authority expelled 6 students forthwith. This was definitely an undemocratic decision on the part of the school authority and to protest against it the students' community burst out in anger. A continuous strike was declared and began to be observed by the courageous students. Some of the residents of Naxalbari whole heartedly supported the student. To ensure uninterrupted study of the students who struck against, the authority arranged for them a makeshift school for their study. There were some educated persons of Naxalbari and scholar student of North Bengal University who used to teach the students. The name of Kisan Chatterjee, Dilip Bagchi, Pabitra Pani Saha are deserved

to be mentioned. All of them played an indispensable role in the historic agrarian movement of Naxalbari²⁴

Large waves of countrywide demonstrations splashed upon such a premier seat of learning like Presidency College. Some courageous students came forward to give an integrated shape of an organization to the ill assorted student Front. One of the closely knit units of this student Front was made by one of the eminent leader like Asim Chatterjee of the Presidency College. Among his known associates and aides he was popularly known as 'Kaka'. A movement brewed in the Eden Hostel against various difficulties and autocratic attitude of the ruling class. After this, in 1966 in the Students' Union election, the organized Student Front came out with the thumping victory and won leadership. This consternated the education department of the Government. The authority of the Presidency College expelled 7 students of the undergraduate level and ordered not to admit another two demonstrators into the Post Graduate class. It is worth mentioning that those, against whom the punitive action was taken of, all active workers of the movement of the Hindu Hostel and members of the student union representing the Student Federation of the College²⁵ In protest against this hostile attitude of the College authority a continuous sit-in strike started. This strike deadlocked the day to day functioning of the collage and administrative set up. Day and night at the gate of the Presidency College a confluence of students coming from different colleges to express their whole hearted empathy with the demonstrating Presidency Collegians gave a new dimension to the militant demonstration. They chanted slogans and the slogans did not merely limit themselves to the demands of the demonstrating student of the Presidency College. Watch-words began to sound the demand of over all democratization of all the educational institutions. These demonstrating students even manifested their wish of uniting with the labour class in posters and in Party cries. A student of that time commented on this movement thus: "The movement has become an issue involving the entire student community and no longer one of establishing only their democratic rights."²⁶

If it can not be claimed that 100% support of the students of the Presidency College was in favour of this movement. At that time there was another student organization named P.C.S.O. in this college. It was always against this movement right from its inception. Skirmishes between this two student organizations broke out frequently in course of demonstration. The P.C.S.O was never in favour of an indefinite closure of the college which was otherwise whole heartedly demanded and supported by the opponents. Any way the P.C.S.O did not want to be troubled by raising of the different demand by the Student Federation. The Statesman reported that, the students, loyal to the P.C.S.O started a signature campaign in which out of 1450 students of the Presidency College not less than 275 students put their signature.²⁷ The Statesman at this time published an article from which an extract is given here —

“Its members are described today, in derision as, opportunist and Pro-American. Rightly Perhaps. The organization is seen to mirror what is loosely termed the establishment. Its members, particularly the boys of Presidency’s 400 girls, are better off than the resteven the protest over the bombing of Hanoy and Haighphong was seen by many in the P.C.S.O as an ominous sign at the shape of things to come. They too join in the chorus of denunciation of unwarranted intrusions of politics into the sanctum of education”.²⁸

At the end of 1966 when the Food Movement of West Bengal became tremendously powerful, the state govt. sent a requisition to the Central Govt. for giving an immediate and effective check to it with repressive measures. The then Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi began parlance with the leftist leader detained in jail through emissary and then increased the per head allotment of food grains by 100 grams. In this way with the intervention of the Central Govt. the food movement came to an end. But the main problems, the crux of the issues, did not get any satisfactory solution. Almost all the demands remained unfulfilled. But curiously enough, hundreds of prisoner put behind the bars on political ground in connection with this movement, were released by the govt. and this the govt. did being compelled by the leaders of this protest movement.

Students told that although the economic struggle did not evolved into a political struggle on the higher level, the govt. being impelled by the economic struggle might accept some of the political demands as legitimate. The proof of it was the freedom of the political prisoners. Here one thing should be made clear that during the Food Movement of 1966 among the 50 martyrs 28 were the students.²⁹ Although Food Movement of West Bengal came to a temporary end, student movement was then widely seen all over India as a tremendously continuous process for reaching apparently to a definite goal.

Students participation and leadership in various protest movements during the period 1959-1966 not only strengthened that movement but also placed the students in a very important position in the Political arena of West Bengal. It also inspired the other political parties to gain momentum. The students' participation and movements gradually extended its area of activities from urban areas to villages and thus occupies a very significant position in the political platform of West Bengal.

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