

Agitational Politics and People's Movement

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What I am going to present is not a seminar paper, but a few observations based on my study of popular movements in post-colonial West Bengal and also on my confusing experience of humbly participating in this politics since 1966.

Public movements in West Bengal after 1947 set a pattern with distinct features. Precisely, it was an agitational kind of politics which would erupt in such violent acts as attacking the police and damaging the official establishments. The objective was to terrorize the state, dare the establishment, display desperation and create chaos in order to disrupt civic life for a couple of days.

Forget Tebhaga which had ebbed by the early 1950s. These movements were mostly city-based, confined to Kolkata (then Calcutta) and some other suburban towns and sparked off by urban middle-class demands. Characteristically, they were conspicuous by the participation of a new generation of angry youth which comprised young jobless boys from the refugee colonies along with their counterparts from slums and the wretched areas of the city's hinterland. Rootless, jobless, sometimes engaged in 'anti-social' activities, these youths would otherwise be scornfully looked upon as the riff-raff by the middle-class population. But interestingly, these elements, basically social drop-outs, often without political leanings, would lose not time in jumping onto the bandwagon of

popular protest to vent their anger against the ruling power. Largely, it is they who would give a horribly violent turn to the movement by setting fire to trams and buses and attacking the police with stones and bombs. And finally, it is mostly they who would fall to police-bullets and become ‘unsung martyrs’ overnight. By and large, this was the trend of public movement in urban West Bengal in the first two decades of Independence.

How did this trend take shape? Yes, with a squad of refuge youths, ready in hand it was easier to blame the Congress alone for Bengal’s plight caused by partition. But I would trace it to the days of the freedom struggle when thanks to the Bengal revolutionaries, throwing bombs at the police had come to be regarded as a heroic act. The revolutionaries however didn’t believe in public movement and preferred to work as secret groups. But their glorious example left a deep impact on the general population and could fire rebellion in anybody. After 1947, a large number of the erstwhile revolutionary terrorists joined the Communist Party, Forward Bloc, RSP and RCPI. Their ideology changed but they could not completely get rid of their early terrorist background.

In 1949, when the CPI had already been banned (March 1948), there was an abortive attempt to derail Darjeeling Mail by throwing grenades at it from the Belegkata bridge. The move was adventurist and reminiscent of the immature acts of the Barindra Ghosh-group in the early days of the 20th Century. During the same time, as I learnt from Sudhi Pradhan, Ananta Sinha together with Ganesh Ghosh was plotting insurrection along the terrorist lines. One may cite several other instances. But I would lay greater emphasis on a generation of youth that grew up in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Fed up with the colonial diplomacy, ambivalence of the national leaders, failed talks over the mode of transfer of power, a section of youths lost faith in the leadership and took law into their own

hands to challenge the colonial ruler in their own capacity. This trend could be discernible in the street demonstrations and barricade-war with the police in Calcutta during the Quit India Movement of 1942 (Aug-Sept). It found a more vigorous expression in the movement against the INA trials in 1945-46. This development shook the Raj on the one hand and opened a new chapter in Bengal politics on the other.

Leftist leaders and intellectuals have wondered with anguish and against how could Calcutta which was on the verge of 'an almost revolution' in February 1946, degenerate into a communal inferno in August the same year. I do not share their concern. I would rather argue that the same desperate mood of the youth (both Hindu and Muslim) underscored the Great Calcutta Killing of August 1946; only the target changed. Goons became heroes and the distinction between gentleman and hooligan – *bhadrolok* and *Chhotolok* – got blurred. The trend witnessed in the Rasid Ali Day movement came full cycle in August 1946. While doing a study of the Calcutta riots of 1946, I interviewed one Phatikbabu in the Khidirpur area who frankly admitted that he had taken part in the Rasid Ali movement and also in the communal bloodbath, a few months later. It is this trend which is relevant to our discussion.

I learnt from the late Dr. Romatash Sarkar, curator of Birma Planetorium who was once a Communist Party member, that in around 1949 some young men in the Belegkata area were plotting to subvert the state machinery with the same arms they had used during the riots earlier. These boys could also be found in the street meetings organized by the CPI (undivided). Yes, the leftists, particularly the CPI, encouraged and appropriated this trend after 1947 which would find its manifestation in all the popular movements in the 1950s and 1960s. Otherwise how could one explain the culmination of the schoolteachers' movement in 1954!

All hell broke loose in the city when young boys, not necessarily students, began to throw bombs and hand-made missiles at the police and prompted them to open fire indiscriminately.

Public outburst breaks all norms of discipline, targets the symbols of state power found at hand and it is understandable. But when hooliganism takes precedence over political protest, people begin to indulge in some acts which put the organizing party itself in an awkward position. The non-left leaders of the opposition front could not but condemn such acts in 1953 and 1954. In Krishnanagar 1966, common people found it hard to prevent some young boys from setting fire to a hospital. I distinctly remember that in November 1967 when Calcutta rose in revolt against the unfair dismissal of the anti-Congress U.F. Govt, two medicine-shops were vandalized in the Bhavanipur area. The local CPI(M) leaders looked the other way because they had no control over the attackers. It is not that they were simply helpless, they did sometimes encourage such acts which would pass for popular revolutionary outbursts.

What exactly was the sequence of events? To attack the police, set the trams and buses ablaze and thus throw the normal life to the winds. Provoked and sometimes without provocation the police would open fire and then go on a killing spree claiming a considerable number of lives. In the food movement of 1959, the police bet up to death a large number of rural people simply with their lathis. And the next stage: a hartal (the term 'bandh' would become popular later on) would be organized in protest against police atrocities. The hartal day would see violence on a larger scale and the police action would be ruthless to say the least. Sporadic violence would continue for a few days and finally a mourning procession would draw the curtain over what the leaders would proudly call a

great public upsurge. It was a sort of chain of predictable events – known to the Calcutta people in those days.

The Leftists had no alternative politics, no definite agenda, no concrete suggestion about how to tide over the continuing food crisis. They would remain content if the government temporarily stalled an unpopular decision (tram fare hike 1953), conceded some of the demands (Teachers' movement, 1954) marginally improved the public distribution system (Food Movement, 1959) or agreed to release the political prisoners (1966). Remember that these achievements were earned at the cost of no less than 60 (some say 80) in 1959 and around 40 lives in 1966.

The Naxalite movement with its call for armed struggle definitely gave a new direction this political trend but it was essentially an underground politics, public demonstrations were few; and within months, the movement, with a noble cause, degenerated into senseless violence. Unpleasant as it may seem, the public appearance of the Naxalite movement in urban areas consisted in demolishing the statues of the 'great men of Bengal', (manishi) damaging or destroying libraries' and laboratories, heckling the teachers, warning the educational institutions not to hold their routine exams, 'the dangerous politics of mutual killing among the political rivals and to cap it all the unprecedented state terror unleashed through ruthless police violence. Towards the end of 1971 when the movement was drawing to a close, the common people felt a sense of relief even as they groaned under the pain of having lost so many brave young lives. This movement destroyed many families not only of the political victims but also of the policemen killed by the Naxalities. In late 1971 I used to give tuition to two children whose father, a police officer had been hacked to death in 1970.

During the despotic Congress rule (1972-77) and the first ten or twelve years of the Left Front rule there was an uneasy lull in the kind of politics we are talking about. But it did not die out. It reappeared in the 1990s at the hand of the SUCI, a few pro-Naxalite groups, and more importantly, the follower of Mamata Banerjee within the Congress; and finally after 1999 of the Trinamul Congress led by Smt. Banerjee. Without going into details, I shall cite one formidable instance. What happened on 21 July, 1993 in Calcutta – merciless police firing on the Mamata-followers when killed 13/14 young men was an exact replay of 31 August 1959. On that day also the irresponsible leftist leaders suddenly gave a call for storming the Writers’ Buildings and foregrounded the rural people to face police violence.

Now in my advanced age, when I look back on those days, I find this politics unplanned and unscrupulous. I pay homage to all those who laid down their lives in the course of all these movement. I feel for my Naxalite friends but cannot support their politics. The same holds true of my view on the recent Maoist outbreak in the Jangalmohol area. Talking to the people in Lalgarh I had the impression that the entire politics had been imposed from above and outside. Anyway, I must desist from making sweeping comments.

I would rather end by referring to the popular movement in support of the peasant upsurges in Singur-Nandigram-Lalgarh (2006-11). We must not downplay the role of Mamata Banerjee but this movement also deserves to be reckoned with. Led by intellectuals and civil society groups, human rights activists, it was a new type of movement with a deep sense of solidarity with the peasants – the real heroes fighting at the grassroots level. There were some other traits too. While the intellectuals, known for their leftist leanings, got divided for another section the urge to put an end to the Leftist rule might have become more important than

the peasants' cause. Still I would call it a people's movement which ended not in a day's procession but continued for more than four years. Let us remember that exactly nine year ago, on 14 November, 2007 more that 70,000 people took to streets to protest against the violence of a heartless government that claimed to be leftist. To my knowledge it is unprecedented in the history of Bengal politics after 1947.

- My study of the youth upsurges in post-1947 West Bengal was published as '*Ranakshetra Rajpoth*' (2002), now available under the title '*Bikshubdha Bangla*', Radical Impression, 2014. Another book '*Chhechallisher Danga*' (Calcutta Riots, 1946) first published in 1992 has been reprinted by the same publisher in 2009.