

West Bengal: The Food Movements of 1959 & 1966

Sibaji Pratim Basu

In the turbulent courses of the history of people's/popular movements that largely shaped the politics of the first two decades of the Indian State of West Bengal, the Food Movements 1959 and 1966 have a very distinct and glorious status.

The end of the World War II saw the beginning of a wave of popular protests in Bengal. Initially organised (in most cases) by the left in general and the Communist Party of India (CPI) in particular, these protest movements took almost 'spontaneous' shape, as common masses, without party affiliations or discipline, also joined these movements in great numbers. Mainly city/town based, these movements witnessed many street fighting between the masses and the police, ransacking/destruction of official properties/vehicles: in a word, a severe deterioration in law and order situation.

This kind of partly organised but vastly participated movements of radical nature (which often crossed the boundaries of 'lawful' movements) marked the first phase of left politics in West Bengal till they came to power in 1967. In another context, Charles Tilly has called this sort of protest movement based politics as 'contentious politics'. (Tilly and Tarrow 2006) After this phase, the left politics itself got divided between the 'official' parties (who were in favour of 'using' parliamentary means to further the cause of revolution) and the 'revolutionary'/Maoists (who believed in immediate peasant revolution on Maoist line).

In these movements we find many features, which Tilly has associated with 'social movements', which according to him, first came into being in Europe in the 18th century and spread throughout the world through colonialism, trade and migration. (Tilly 2004: 53-54) At the same time, one may also find that in many respect it was 'rhizomatic' (the term is borrowed from Deluze and Guattari 2004:3-28) – created its own structures and functions, without caring much about the vertical leadership.

1959

Intensity and impact-wise, the Food Movement has its unique existence yet, it can be seen as a continuum, a legacy that started in the post-1943-famine left movements and passed through the Tebhaga movement during the last years of the Raj, and the movements over the corrupt and inadequate Public Distribution System between 1956 and 1958. It continued through the first half of 1960s and reached its zenith in 1966, when, besides the old urban support base, it gradually engulfed the rural spaces and made it a state-wide affair.

The PDS had steadily declined in the 'new' state of West Bengal, which came into being since the simultaneous Independence of India and Partition of Bengal. The new state in the Indian Union roughly comprised 1/3rd of the land of the united Bengal (before Independence) but had to bear the pressure of a huge number of (mostly Hindu) refugees from the eastern side of Bengal (which then became East Pakistan and since 1971, Bangladesh). The new Congress government in the state followed the old World-War II-time restrictions over the inter-state and inter-district movement of food grains without reforming the existing malfunctioning PDS. However, the problem did not lie with West Bengal alone. If we go by the official statistics, from the early-1950s to the mid-1960s, we will find a huge *gap* between production and procurement of food-grains, which in turn also affected the PDS in a great way.

The situation in West Bengal, mainly because of Partition and population-pressure, was perhaps worse. In 1948, the state government could reach only 50% of its target (11.6 lakh tons approximately) regarding procurement and distribution (through PDS) of food-grains. The scenario further deteriorated between 1950 and 1952. In these years only 1, 35,000; 1, 70,000 and 2, 70,000 tons had been distributed through ration-shops: though in these years, population escalated steeply owing to fresh flow of refugees. But the surprise came in the year 1952-53. In this year, Bengal saw a good harvest but the provincial government, without making attempts to stock food-grains (mainly rice) for future needs, decontrolled the supply and distribution of food, which in turn encouraged the hoarders and black-marketeers to create an artificial scarcity of rice. The consequence of these events began to be felt shortly. The price-index of rice rose from Rs. 382 per ton in December 1955 to 532 in December 1956. The situation worsened in early 1959. In Kolkata and in some Southern Bengal districts, rice was sold between Rs. 28 and Rs. 30 per maund (1 maund=37.324 kg). Hoarding and black-marketing became rampant in the state, creating a near-famine like situation in rural Bengal.

The left leaders took a twine policy in this regard. They brought the issue of food-scarcity inside the State Assembly and thereby, drew public and media attention. Secondly, as a strategy of organising anti-government mass movements, they formed various issue-based committees to draw popular support beyond party-line. The Price Increase and Famine Resistance Committee (PIFRC) was one such committee, which played a historic role during the food movement. But in the Assembly House the left/opposition members also raised the debate over the scarcity to such a pitch that the government side seemed, at many times, almost stumbling.

From the beginning of 1959, the government and the opposition were (as if) warming up for a forthcoming battle which would actually take place between the end of August and early-September. The preparation for the 'big fight' was on within and outside the Assembly. After the tumultuous 5-days of violence (between 31 August and 4 September), counter-violence and uncertainty, three

main kinds of assessment emerged in the discourse of civil society, media and political parties. The *first* kind was an *angry reaction against* the police action/government's handling of the situation. The *second* kind *blamed the left/organisers* of the movement for indulging in "lawless anarchy", which resulted in loss of life and property, and saw the "communist conspiracy" in it. The *third* kind preferred a *middle-road of assessment*, while criticising the government's food policy and also its handling of the situation, it also criticised the left leadership for having *no control* over the situation.

The left/opposition parties, which initiated the movement under the PIFRC, naturally belonged to the *first* section, which squarely held the B.C. Roy government responsible for the "police atrocities" and "mass killings". In the heated Assembly debates between 21 and 28 September and again on 4 December, allegations and counter-allegations followed. All non/un-parliamentary behaviour occurred between the treasury bench and the opposition blaming each other. The members used slangs and abusive language (which had been "expunged" from the proceedings), "called names", and even, on occasions, allegedly showed shoes to each other and threw them on one another.

1966

The PIFRC formally announced the withdrawal of the food movement on 26 September, 1959, on the day, in which the foundation of a permanent Martyrs' Column was laid at Subodh Mallick Square. But the spirit of the movement did not die. Its echoes could be heard in near and distant future. The February-March of 1966 witnessed again a more fierce food movement in the state. This time the source-place of the movement shifted from Kolkata to districts – involving a greater number of rural people than before and making the small towns and villages, the theatre of an exciting and gruesome drama. Unlike, the movement of '59, the '66 movement was more spontaneous and popular.

The price of rice reached Rs. 5/ per kg that year. Kerosene, the main domestic fuel for the village people and the city-poor became more and more scarce. To cap it all, Prafulla Sen, the new C.M. after the demise of B.C. Roy, made a unique suggestion in a speech. In view of growing scarcity of rice, he advised the people of state to change their food habit. He suggested that people should shift in their choice: from rice to wheat/flour. He also argued that they could also live on "green-bananas" because it had more nutrition value than potatoes. On the 16th, the police again fired on the agitators at Swarupnagar, killing a 15-year-old school-boy, Nurul Islam and severely injuring his schoolmate, Manindra Biswas during a demonstration against the scarcity of kerosene and the steep prices of essential commodities. The news spread like forest-fire. And unlike '59, this time the people from districts/villages did not assemble in Kolkata to meet their demands but they fought back the police and

administration in their different localities. Towns and villages of the southern parts of the state like Bashirhat, Swarupnagar, Habra, Krishnanagar, Ranaghat, Chakdah, Hindmotor, Uttarpara Assansol, Dhubulia, Plassey, Beldanga, Berhampur and many other places saw incessant processions, demonstrations, blockades of roads/railways, destruction of electric points of railways, closure of schools and clashes between the agitators and police, during the month-long movement, spanning between 16 February and 14 March.

The Immediate Effect and After

The effect of the Food Movement was so intense that it changed the political complexion of the state. It did not only ensure a steady decline in Congress-support in the state but also became one of the factors that led to the split of the CPI. Marcus Franda, the US scholar on the state politics in West Bengal, also held that the 1959 food movement had an impact on the internal debates with the CPI in West Bengal. (Franda 1971) According to him, the militant campaign against the Congress state government was used by the leftist, anti-Congress sections (known as the 'let-wing') within the CPI to subdue the those sections (popularly known as the 'right-wing') that sought tactical cooperation with Congress.

The saga of popular social movements had their traces here and there, even after the United Front government came to power in 1967. But gradually the left parties, especially CPI (M) appropriated this space. They could do it more easily, after the virtual "smashing" and "elimination" of the left-radicals, the main forces behind Naxalbari movement. When, the left-parliamentarians came to power again in 1977 under the new avatar called the Left Front (LF), the flow of spontaneity gradually became a matter of routine-ritual under the absolute control of the "party", i.e. CPI (M)....

Then, in 2007, almost five decades after the Food Movement of 1959 and four decades after 1966, a mass outrage over the malfunctioning of PDS burst out in many districts of the state. (Banerjee in Basu and Dasgupta ed. 2010:91-107) Popularly known as "ration riots", this apparently anomic movement in three southern and one northern district shook the foundation of LF in the panchayat (three-tier rural self-government) elections in 2008 and proved once again that the 'rhizome' of 1959 could surface at any moment and take any shape even in distant futures.