

**The Chronicle of a Forgotten Movement:  
1959 Food Movement Revisited**

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The beauty of social/protest movements based on genuine (felt by a large number of people) grievances is that they create a relatively autonomous space for people's action – sometimes peaceful sometimes violent – which cannot be fully controlled or 'contained' by any leader or organisation (no matter, how powerful they are). They possess the capacity to spread horizontally like a rhizome – a subterranean stem that assumes diverse forms of bulbs and tubers in all directions. A rhizome has specific uniqueness yet connectivity. Borrowing from Deluze/Guattari, we may describe the popular protest movements as 'rhizomatic' (Deluze and Guattari 2004:3-28) because the spirits of genuine protest movements, despite their singularities, move across different times and spaces and continues to ignite the minds and actions of new protestors. In this season of revolts and protest movements, let us study a protest movement of yesteryears, and recall a few old lines from a poem of the Bengali prodigy-poet Sukanta Bhattacharya. Writing in the times of post-World War II revolts and upsurges in many parts of India, he expressed the mood of his time: ...*Bidroha aj bidroha charidike/ Ami jai tar dinapanjika likhe...* [Revolt's in the air, revolt everywhere/ I chronicle its upsurge in my words here.<sup>1</sup>]

## The Movement of 1959

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 (hereafter 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 lines).

The police and the administration often resorted to coercion and counter-attack to contain 'anarchy and violence', which often became a part of these movements, and again resulted in a number of deaths by firing and also by flagellation. The legacy continued for more than two decades in the post-independent West Bengal. The CPI and the left mobilised masses on popular issues like price rise, unemployment, malfunctioning of the public distribution system (hereafter PDS), refugee

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problems and so on. The success of these movements was instant: a large number of common masses – the urban poor and the middle classes – joined them and the rate of violence and casualties was much higher than pre-independence times. In these movements we find an assortment of features, that Tilly has associated with ‘social movements’, which according to him, first came into being in Europe in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and spread throughout the world through colonialism, trade and migration (Tilly 2004: 53-54).

Tilly argues that *social movements* combine:

1. A sustained, organized public effort making collective claims on target audiences: let us call it a *campaign*.
2. Employment of combinations from among the following forms of political action: creation of special purpose associations and coalitions, public meetings, solemn processions, vigils, rallies, demonstrations, petition-drives, statements towards and in public media, and pamphleteering; call the variable ensemble of performances the *social-movement repertoire*.
3. And participants’ concerted public representations of worthiness, unity, numbers and commitment (WUNC) on the part of themselves and/or their constituencies: call them *WUNC displays*.

A campaign always links at least three parties: a group of claimants, some object(s) of claims, and a public of some kind. Social movement repertoires are the context-specific, standard operating procedures of social movements, such as: public meetings, solemn processions, vigils, rallies, special-purpose associations and coalitions, demonstrations, petition drives, and pamphleteering. Regarding the ‘WUNC displays’, Tilly writes, “The term WUNC sounds odd, but it represents something quite familiar.” Social movements’ display of *worthiness* may include sober demeanor and the presence of clergy and mothers with children; *unity* is signaled by matching banners, singing and chanting; *numbers* are broadcast via signatures on petitions and filling streets; and *commitment* is advertised by braving bad weather, ostentatious sacrifice, and/or visible participation by the old and handicapped. WUNC matters because it conveys crucial political messages to a social movement’s targets and the relevant public.

In this spell of mass/social movements in West Bengal, the Food Movement of 1959 had its own mark of distinction. Our discussion will show how the movement carried similar characteristics of ‘social movement’ as emphasised by Tilly. At the same time, one may also find that in many respects it was ‘rhizomatic’ – it created its own structures and functions, without caring much about the vertical leadership. Intensity and impact-wise, it has had its unique existence yet, it can be seen as a continuum, a legacy that started during 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 effect of the Food Movement was so intense that it changed the political complexion of the state. It not only ensured 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 ‘left-wing’) within the CPI to subdue those sections (popularly known as the ‘right-wing’) that sought tactical cooperation with Congress.

And after the State Legislative Assembly elections in 1967 and 1969 a Left-dominated non-Congress United Front Government came to power for two short spells and inaugurated the

possibilities of several new avenues of politics, the impact of which went much beyond the boundaries of West Bengal. Let us, after five decades, revisit and chronicle the movement that shook the world of West Bengal politics forever.

Hundreds and thousands of men and women swept the streets of Kolkata (then Calcutta in English) since the early-afternoon of 31<sup>st</sup> October 1959. They came from the rural districts of West Bengal as well as the semi-urban places around Kolkata and Howrah to attend a rally at the Maidan (a large ground located at the heart of the city), near the Octerloney Monument – now known as the Shahid Minar. The rally spilled over into the Surendranath Park (formerly Curzon Park) and Rani Rashmoni Road. It was officially organised by a newly-formed Price Increase and Famine Resistance Committee (hereafter PIFRC) mainly to protest over a steep rise in the prices of rice and paddy, utter failure of the Dr. B.C. Roy-led Congress government to procure adequate food grains for distribution through the ration-shops and also its failure/lack of will to check the rampant black-marketing of the food grains.

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 1/3<sup>rd</sup> 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 figures below would speak for themselves.

### **Production, Procurement and Public Distribution (In million tonnes) <sup>2</sup>**

	<u>1951</u>	<u>1955</u>	<u>1965</u>	<u>1966</u>
Net Production	48.1	61.9	78.2	63.3
Net Availability	52.4	71.3	84.6	73.5
Procurement	3.8	1.3	4.0	4.0
Public Distribution	<u>8.0</u>	<u>1.6</u>	<u>10.1</u>	<u>14.1</u>

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.

## Beginning of Activism

In this background the PIFRC came into being in early 1959 by the leftists, with special initiative from the CPI. 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 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. Undoubtedly, the CPI was the main left/opposition party in the Assembly with 46 members out of 252 seats with 17.81 percent of the votes.<sup>3</sup> But other left/opposition parties including many independent members also played a vital role during debates. Here are some excerpts from the Proceedings of the West Bengal Legislative Assembly<sup>4</sup> on 2<sup>nd</sup> January 1959. One can still feel the heat of the arguments that followed after the two adjournment motions by Jyoti Basu (CPI) and Siddhartha Shankar Ray (Independent) were tabled before the House.

**Sj. Jyoti Basu:** The proceedings of the Assembly do now adjourn to raise a discussion on a matter of urgent public importance and of recent occurrence, namely, large-scale disappearance of rice from Calcutta and Howrah leading to non-availability at prices fixed by Government. This has led to grave anxiety and panic.

**Sj. Siddhartha Shankar Ray:** The adjournment motion that I wished to move is that the business of this Assembly do adjourn for the purpose of discussing a definite matter of urgent public importance and recent occurrence, namely, unavailability of rice at the Calcutta markets on and from the 1<sup>st</sup> January 1959 either at the rates fixed by the Government or at any other rate due to failure of the Government in properly implementing its recently announced rice price fixation policy as a result whereof there is great distress and uncertainty among the people. I went personally to big markets in my constituency.

**Mr. Speaker:** No statement.

**Sj. Saroj Roy** [spoke in Bengali]: Speaker Sir, Prafullababu [Prafulla Chandra Sen or 'P.C. Sen', the then Food Minister] should first give his answer regarding [the unavailability of] Kerosene before other things, since Kerosene is not available in rural districts.

**The Hon'ble Prafulla Chandra Sen** [spoke in Bengali]: Respected Speaker Sir, the Price Control Order has been implemented from yesterday. It is true that uncertainty prevails to some extent in the minds of the businessmen as well as the consumers in Kolkata because the quantity of the old stock of rice in the possession of the whole-sellers and retailers was not fairly adequate, and the supply of rice from the new paddy is not much... Yesterday the employees of our Food Department and Enforcement Department have visited different markets throughout the day to see the condition of [availability of] rice. It is true that fine rice was not available yesterday but coarse rice was available... Today, in Kolkata, the whole-sellers have 47,000 maund of the old stock and in Howrah at Ramkrishnapur, I cannot tell of other places, they also have 47,000 maunds, which make the total of 94,000 maunds of old stock. And the stock of the retailers –excluding our Fair Price Shops – is of 20,000 maunds... If the supply of rice remains a little lesser in the market then we will increase the rice-quota from 1seer [933.10 kg] to 1.5 seer from our Fair Price Shops. But atta [wheat flour] is fairly available... It is true that many questions cropped up in the minds of all after the implementation of Price Control Order but again, I assure you here that we, on the part of the Government, are very much aware of the situation and are taking all the measures to ensure the availability of rice in the market.

**Sj. Jyoti Basu** [spoke in Bengali]: But Sir, he [the Food Minister] did not say anything on whether the supply of rice in rural areas would increase – also regarding kerosene he did not utter anything.

[Loud furore from the Opposition Bench] [...]

**Mr. Speaker:** .... You can ask as many questions as you want to know about this matter, but I don't like any exhibition of heat. Mr. Sen, I would like you to emphasise on two points: (1) kerosene and (2) matters relating to villages.

**The Hon'ble Prafulla Chandra Sen**[spoke in Bengali]: I don't have such a news that rice is unavailable in villages... Regarding kerosene, I, from the start, have told in this House that in the next January, when the suppliers would start supplying [kerosene to consumer] then we will be able to supply kerosene [to dealers/ration-shops] as per the Ordinance, which we will bring as a Bill.

**Mr. Speaker:** Mr. Sen, I would like you to ask one thing. It has come to my notice and knowledge of the people of Calcutta – I cannot tell just now of the rural areas are experiencing some amount of difficulty regarding kerosene, particularly people who have no electricity, you can well understand their position. Do you think you will be able to do anything in this matter?

**The Hon'ble Prafulla Chandra Sen**[spoke in Bengali]: It is true that there is a scarcity of kerosene in villages as well as in towns. At present we can in no way control the kerosene oil, which the quota-suppliers have [already] supplied to retailers through their agents. But we will control it in [the next] January when the quota-suppliers would again supply kerosene to retailers through their agents. Nothing is possible before that.

**Sj. Narayan Chobey** [spoke in Bengali]: You said that huge quantity of atta [wheat flour] is available in Kolkata but we know that nothing – atta, flour, suji [a kind of Indian wheat, granulated but not pulverized] – is available.

**Mr. Speaker:** Mr. Chobey, the adjournment motion [is] related to rice. Incidentally, if you wish to draw the attention of the Hon'ble Minister about non-availability of suji, atta, flour etc., in rural areas, I dare say Mr. Sen will take notice of it.

**Sj. Subodh Banerjee** [spoke in Bengali]: The real point is [and] that is [also] my submission that he [the Minister] is describing the situation of Kolkata. And according to the news that he has as of today, he does not know that there is any difficulty in the mufasils.

**Mr. Speaker** [spoke in Bengali]: Which means he did not have this news. [...]

*The Statesman*, a leading English daily, also reported the above Assembly-debate on the next day (3 January 1959) under the heading: 'Angry Exchanges in the Assembly'. It reported: "When the Food Minister, Mr. Sen, explaining the position referred to the Minister Mr. K.N. Dasgupta's (Works & Buildings Minister) report about the availability [of rice] in Jalpaiguri, several opposition members stood up at once to contradict the statement. This led to a short exchange of sharp and unparliamentary words. At one stage the Speaker had to announce that he would adjourn the House sine die if order was not restored immediately."... From the same issue of *The Statesman* we come to know that 'S.K Acharya (Communist MLA) accused the food minister: "this is the touch of death. Whatever he has touched rice, cloth, or kerosene, has disappeared from the market." [While] Rabindralal Sinha (Congress) accused the opposition of spreading panic which the profiteers would utilize."<sup>5</sup>

## **Towards August-September 1959**

Thus, 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. The government, it would seem even to a sympathiser, was as if groping in the dark to find out the right and effective

solution. They vacillated, in a great way, in their course of policy formulation and implementation but without any effective result. The Bengali daily *Jugantar*, which sought to keep a balance between the opposition and the government, held the above sentiment in its editorial of 18 August.<sup>6</sup> The opposition, and the ‘critical’ media, on the other hand, squarely held the government in general and the Food Minister in particular, responsible for the deteriorating situation. The left/CPI and the PIFRC, the primary organiser of the movement of August-September, sought to highlight the ‘nexus’ between the landlords and jotedars (owners of big land-holdings) and hoarders with the ruling party. The Congress and the State as well as the Central governments, on the other hand, saw the growing movement as the ‘conspiracy’ of the communists to spread anarchy in the state. It is interesting to note that on 30 August, just a day before the PIFRC rally in Kolkata, a group of Congress MPs alleged at a press-conference in Kolkata that ‘political goal’ had occupied a higher place in the opposition-led food movement than the ‘economic goal’ (of finding a solution). They also saw in the ongoing movement, a ‘motive of taking revenge’ against the ‘Centre’s intervention’ in the Communist-ruled state of Kerala (by which the Kerala government was dismissed on 31 July 1959).<sup>7</sup> However, food stuff, in the background of such high-pitched political allegations and counter-allegations, became scarcer day by day. On 6 February, *Hindustan Standard*<sup>8</sup> wrote in its Editorial: “Starvation is not as swift as the agent of death as ‘Botalinus’[ a soil bacterium] is supported to be and the State Food Minister has necessarily to wait for some time to receive reports of death due to non-availability of rice. What is he to do in the mean time? Even the kind of inquiry promised on his behalf by Dr. Roy cannot occupy all his time. He should, therefore, so utilise his surplus time as might enable the public act accordingly to the appeal he addressed to them on Tuesday which, in the context of the current situation, is as meaningless as his search for reports of starvation death as proof of acute security of food grains. ...”

On the very next day (i.e. 7 February) the Editorial of the same newspaper expressed its concern over the manner the ‘gulf’ between the government and the people was widening in the state, not only in case of food but in other areas also. It wrote: “Food grains continue to be scarce all over West Bengal and the resultant panic in the public mind seems to be growing. Hospital Employees’ Union have reiterated their call for a general strike from Tuesday next as a result of which more hospitals started discharging their patients. In a more secluded sector of public life purveyors of education representing nine big colleges in Calcutta continue to stick to their decision to realise enhanced tuition fees notwithstanding the very active resistance of the students concerned. These are disturbing and disquieting symptoms but point to the existence of a deeper threat to the very foundation of our democratically organised national life. *Never within living memory was the gulf between the policies of the Govt. and the realities of life wider than what it recently has been...*” (Emphasis added.) In this background, a mammoth deputation, led by Jyoti Basu and other PIFRC leaders moved to Assembly House on 10 February and met Dr. B.C. Ray, the Chief Minister, who assured that small traders and ration shops would be supplied with stock at a fair price. But this promise by the CM was not kept. (Das and Bandyopadhyay 2004) The PIFRC campaign to mobilise public opinion began on 1 March and ended with a public rally at Subodh Mullick Square on the 4<sup>th</sup>. A peasants’ rally was held on 11 March.

Union Food Minister, A.P. Jain visited Kolkata on 26 April on a fact-finding mission. He met the CM at his residence and later told the reporters that ‘food situation in West Bengal was: “easy, smooth and comfortable”’.<sup>9</sup> Public outcry throughout the state began to mount since May-June. Despite several raids against ‘unlicensed godowns and shops for undeclared and hoarded stocks’ by the government fine/edible rice continued to be scarce in Kolkata. On 16 May, *The Statesman* reported again: “Complaints of acute rice scarcity and high price were coming in from the

districts. A large quantity of rice and paddy was believed to have gone underground in the districts following raids in Calcutta. Food Minister P.C. Sen admitted such a possibility and complained people were not cooperating with authorities...”

Several people were arrested and huge quantities of rice were seized from different parts of Kolkata. Government also tried to check profiteering in sugar.<sup>10</sup> But the cunning practice of hoarding of rice could not be checked by such government vigilance. According to *The Statesman* report (25 May 1959): Local Citizens’ Committee led by MLA Siddhartha S. Ray unearthed 600 mounds of fine rice from the Landsdowne market. Earlier when the dealers’ association had told the committee members that they had no stocks of fine rice and were sorry for not to be able to help the common man, the local committee members had some suspicion. Probing bags stacked in conspicuously over 600 mds of rice were then unearthed. The Enforcement Branch was informed and the entire stock sold off in their presence among local citizens. We are also informed that para-boiled rice all but disappeared from the market. Only atap rice [rice, matured not by boiling but under the sun] whose price wasn’t fixed by Govt was available. (27 May) And that almost every rice dealer in Calcutta against whom complaints were lodged was found to be in possession of a huge quantity of rice in his godown even if his shop is empty.<sup>11</sup>

Howrah, the neighbouring city and district of Kolkata was also passing through a hard time. Acute shortage of food was reported from Howrah. The Howrah Congress leaders, according to newspaper reports, had “sent an 30s telegram to the CM urging him to take steps towards redressal food crisis in Howrah, 80% food deficit. Reliant principally on importing its rice from other districts, first week of June proved catastrophic for Howrah’s people, adjoin rural [areas] included.”

Government withdrew its price control order for paddy and rice on the 22<sup>nd</sup>. This decision was hailed by the Rice Wholesalers Association. But for many common people the situation was like ‘from the frying pan to the fire’. A Letter to the Editor of *The Statesman* (22 June) expressed the sentiment of the time: “The whole state has been converted into a ‘Hoarders’ and ‘profiteers’ paradise. The common people wanted rice to be seized from the hoarded stocks of the big stockists and dealers and sold through govt. or semi-govt. agents at reasonable prices. Now thanks to the govt.’s policy, hoarders and profiteers can hoard a many thousands of maunds of rice as they like and sell it at exorbitant prices”.

The English daily, *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, which was growing critical in course of the movement wrote in its editorial (24 June): “To withdraw an order under the statutory law on the plea of inability to enforce is nothing short of admitting the impotency of the administration... The Chief Minister now looks in retrospect and realises the unwisdom of the price control policy. But what is the prospect before us? He hopes that the withdrawal of control would improve the market availability of rice and paddy and also bring down their prices... This optimism is not supported by logic... The bulk of stocks are now in the hands of big dealers and producers who had hoarded them, despite anti-hoarding law, with a view to making larger profits. Naturally, they cannot be expected to disgorge their hoards competitively after decontrol to bring about a slump in prices... If, in the face of all this, the Govt. contends that decontrol decision has been taken in public interest, the conclusion is inevitable that in the eye of the popular Govt., their interests are safer in the hands of profiteers and black marketeers than in those of their chosen representatives. ” In the same column, *Amrita Bazar Patrika* also cautioned the government ‘this retreat’ by the government ‘will further embolden the anti-social elements to fleece the public more openly and defiantly’. And true to the anticipation of the opposition and ‘editorials’ of some of the news dailies, the government’s hope of release of hoarded rice and paddy ‘upon the withdrawal of price control proved premature and unfounded.’<sup>12</sup> This became clearer by the first week of August.



A state-wide general strike was called on 25<sup>th</sup> June by PIFRC and over 100 trade unions to protest over the 'anti-food' policy of the state government. In the afternoon of the *hartal* (general strike) left leaders, at a meeting at Subodh Mullick Square (at Central Kolkata, near the residence of the CM), threatened the government that a mass civil disobedience would be organised if the demands of the PIFRC were not met. The speakers included leaders like Tridib Chaudhury (MP), Hemanta Basu (MLA), Subodh Banerjee (MLA), Siddhartha Shankar Ray (MLA), Bankim Mukherjee (MLA) and others.

The PIFRC in a press-statement (6 July), signed by Hemanta Basu, Jyoti Basu, Amar Basu, Makhan Pal, Niranjan Sengupta, Nihar Mukherjee and others, declared its mission to mobilise 50,000 volunteers for making the administration ineffective and organising a two/three-day long continuous general strike throughout the state in August.<sup>13</sup> On 9<sup>th</sup> July, *Swadhinata*, the CPI organ, gave the clarion call in its editorial: 'There is no other way. Hence the struggle! ... People of West Bengal know quite well that the Congress Government and its food policy are responsible for their destitute condition. They also know that only by hitting hard, time and again, they could be forced to do at least something... Hence the struggle and its preparation.' [Translation by Das and Bandyopadhyay 2004: XII]

The first phase of civil disobedience began in Medinipur district on 14 July and soon spread to other districts. This continued throughout the month of August. The PIFRC leaders claimed that between the middle of June and first week of August, 'at least 700 people were arrested'. Among these people nearly 500 were from Medinipur. They had been arrested 'for demonstrations in courts and block development offices'. The protestors were very active in Tamluk, Jhargram, Contai and Medinipur town. The food-marchers also demonstrated in several villages in the district of Hoogly and also in Basirhat and Diamond Harbour in 24 Parganas district. A similar movement was afoot in the districts such as West Dinajpur, Cooch Bihar and Howrah.<sup>14</sup>

On 6<sup>th</sup> August the CM along with Dr. P.C. Ghosh of the PSP issued a joint statement warning of stringent action against any anti-government agitation. Despite such warnings the movement seemed to multiply itself every day. The government imprisoned 6408 protestors, including left leaders and MLAs by the end of August.<sup>15</sup> On 19 August, the PIFRC protestors squatted in front of the food Minister's residence, which was cordoned by the police and the area was put under the preventive section 144 of Cr. PC. The demonstrators left the place warning the authorities about the forthcoming rally convened by the PIFRC in Kolkata on 31 August.<sup>16</sup>

### **31 August – 5 September**

As mentioned earlier, people began to pour in around the *maidan* area of Kolkata from neighbouring and distant districts. It was the season of monsoon rains in Bengal. And on the 31<sup>st</sup>, it was raining heavily in the city. Despite that, demonstrators, including farm workers, women and children gathered in huge number (number varied, as usual, between the official one, which estimated the number around 25 thousand and the agitators, who claimed the number to be more than 1 lakh [Das and Bandyopadhyay: xiii]) 'in response to a PIFR committee call for march on Writers' Buildings [the state secretariat] to force the govt. to reconsider its food policy and remove P.C. Sen [the then Food Minister]'. Many protestors from districts and suburbs could not reach Kolkata as they were detained in places like Sheraphuli railway station, Naihati, Diamond Harbour, Habra, Bishtupur, Behala, Kakdwip and Bongaon. Several thousand police persons, including the 'mounted [on horse] police' were deployed to prevent the demonstrators from entering the Writers' Buildings. A dozen of buses were kept ready nearby to remove the anticipated detainees.<sup>17</sup>

Trouble started when the people, forming a procession, proceeded towards the Writers' Buildings. They were stopped near the Government Place East, nearly half a kilometre from the Writers' Buildings. The entire area beyond that point was under section 144 Cr.Pc. which prevented any gathering of more than 4 persons as unlawful and punishable. This preventive provision is still operative in this part of Kolkata. When they were barred from moving further, the demonstrators led by left leaders like Mohit Maitra, Amar Basu, Chitta Basu and Makhan Pal squatted on the road, raising anti-government slogans. (Das and Bandyopadhyay: xiii) At about 7.20 pm, a small batch of fifty persons broke the police-cordon and courted arrest.

Problem began when others also went to follow their example. At this point, the police began to *lathi-charge* (the act of charging with long sticks) to disperse the masses. According to reports in *Amrita Bazar Patrika* (1 September): 'Tear-gas squad soon went into action and fired 10 rounds. Demonstrators dispersed in different directions, leaving streets strewn with shoes, festoons, banners, food, tiffin-box, umbrellas and scores of injured people.' The government's version of the story was predictably different. In a press-note, appeared on 1 September, it described the above incident from a different angle, defending its own action. It accused that after the first batch of persons courted arrest 'suddenly, it appears, the whole crowd surged forward, while still others from amongst them started throwing brickbats, soda water bottles and crackers at the police'.<sup>18</sup> Thus, the government put blames on the protestors for provoking the police first, inviting a stern action.

Whatever be the cause of the police action, the result was the dispersed protestors (most of whom had virtually no idea about the geography of the city) began to move in frenzy at many directions. At this point many sympathisers of the movement also gathered around the Esplanade East and Government Place East and cheered the demonstrators. These people were soon chased by the police and dispersed. Trouble then spread to nearby streets of central Kolkata like Dharmatala Street, Central Avenue, Mission Row. Stone throwing began near Curzon Park and then spread quickly in other parts of the city. According to the above government press-note, people in small groups at many places 'continued to throw brickbats, soda water bottles and crackers at passing buses and even private vehicles'. 'There was an attempt', the press-note held, 'at looting of a small shop and breaking glass panes of the other. An attempt was also made to tamper with the tram tracks. Some street lights were damaged.'<sup>19</sup>

According to the Bengali daily, *Ananda Bazar Patrika* [1 September], the police continued their operation till the late night in different parts of the central Kolkata. They chased the demonstrators, charged them with lathi, fired tear-gas shells on them and arrested many of them. Pandemonium prevailed as street-lights in this locality went off. Street lights were also put off in Cornwallis Street (now Bidhan Sarani) in north Kolkata and the police heavily patrolled in this area. We also learn that in view of this tensed situation and also owing to attacks on vehicles, bus and tram services were closed, which caused great difficulties for the commuters from their office. The government and most of the media observed that as the evening descended on the city, the hoodlums and anti-social elements became active, which further deteriorated the situation.

It should be emphasised here that the number of the agitated/panicked people rose very soon since many more people had also assembled in the Esplanade-Maidan area to cheer up the participants in the rally. Thus once the police resorted to lathi-charging, not only the rallyists, but their sympathising-spectators also got affected. They together with the rallyists ran helter-skelter to take refuge. Gradually, the ordinary people on road, innocent passers-by also got mingled with the police-public chase and the chaos that followed. Later, a section of city-lumpens might have utilised this anarchic situation. It has happened all over the world since the inception of 'social movement', first in Europe, then in other parts of the world. It is interesting that Arun Bose, a resident of

Kolkata, could realise *this* importance of his contemporary times and relate the movement of 1959 with the tradition of social movements in Europe. In a “letter to the editor” (*Amrita Bazar Patrika* 11 September as cited in Das and Bandyopadhyay: 189) he argued that “only good living conditions bring about good tempers”, and, therefore, without a real improvement of living conditions of the working people in Calcutta, there would be no permanent result. He further argued that even if it was assumed that hooligans were behind the violence, then the question would be why and how did these come into being? He held that this was a phenomenon similar to the European experiences of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early-20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and warned that it might spread elsewhere in India.

Regarding the number of the wounded and the killed, the official and the opposition/private estimates also varied. According to the government press-note, published on 1 September “... Twenty police personnel were injured, five to hospital – two with serious injuries. Twelve members of the public who received injuries in the stampede or due to brickbats or lathicharges were admitted to hospital and several others for minor injuries...”<sup>20</sup> However, on 21 September, while moving separate adjournment motions in the state Assembly, left leaders like Jyoti Basu, Hemanta Kumar Basu, Golam Yazdani, Chitto Basu, Subodh Banerjee and Jatin Chakravorty informed about the “large number of missing persons since 31<sup>st</sup> August, 1959” and “killing and injuring of a large number of people on the day [i.e. 31 August]”.<sup>21</sup> Although, no definite number of killed persons in the 31<sup>st</sup>'s incidence had been claimed/given by the opposition in the Assembly, we come to know from the reports of the Bengali daily, *Jugantar* that “at least 400 persons were injured” on that day.<sup>22</sup> *Hindustan Standard*, in its editorial on 21 September, raised the above issue. Though, the issue was related to the incidents of early-September, it very well focused on the controversy. Indicating at the government’s suggestion that “exaggerated reports” published “in a section of press” were “motivated”, the editorial held: ‘... But the fact remains that doubters are not comprised the politicians alone... They may be mistaken and exaggerated reports in a section of Press may have confused them. Belated official statements, however, instead of convincing them may actually produce the opposite effect...’ To overcome the doubts, the editorial repeated its earlier proposal of “ordering a judicial probe into the whole affair”.

The next day, i.e. on 1 September, Kolkata witnessed massive students’ protests, violence and massacre that swept the streets of the city. After the incidents of the 31<sup>st</sup>, many school and college students observed strike protesting the police action on that day. Many students assembled at the College Street campus of Calcutta University (located at central Kolkata). ‘This was followed by a procession towards Mr. B.C. Roy’s house’, reported *Amrita Bazar Patrika*.<sup>23</sup> But the procession was stopped by the police by *lathi*-charging. ‘Clearly, peaceful demonstrators were given chase by the police, making students fall in confusion.’ After some time, the students retaliated. They ‘came back throwing stones and soda-water bottles’.

‘They even picked up smoking gas shells and threw them back at the Police. Students further pulled out hand-carts from sheds and use them as barricades to keep off Police Vehicles.’ A brief respite came in the trouble with heavy rainfall in the evening. But as the rain subsided, the disturbance resumed. ‘Pitched battles took place near the Subodh Mullick Square area [around Roy’s house]. Scene of disturbance soon shifted to the University Campus, College Street, where students responded to *lathis* and tear gas with bricks and other missiles.’ Near the University, the police had to retreat for some time in the face of students’ violent resistance. It was reported that turbans and batons of the police were snatched from them and then set on fire.<sup>24</sup>

In the Esplanade area, panic-stricken shop-owners immediately shut down their shops. At the Hogg Market (popular as New Market), according to reports, the authorities had to “prevent shopkeepers to allay panic”. [ibid] Three ambulance vans were also “set alight after dusk”.

Harassment and manhandling of journalists, including two British women journalists were also reported. Violence and utter chaos gradually engulfed the length and breadth of the city as evening descended. From Kalighat in the south to Vivekananda Road in the north through the central Kolkata areas like Esplanade, Subodh Mullick Square, College Street and C.R. Avenue (popular as Central Avenue) the whole city had changed into a battleground.

By the afternoon, trams and buses stopped plying along College Street. By the evening, public transport was withdrawn from all routes. This withdrawal had followed the attack on a bus near Cornwallis Street-Vivekananda Road Crossing. In most 'troubled' areas, darkness prevailed after dusk as power was switched off. Street urchins and rowdies set things on fire and carried away whatever they could in full view of the people. The situation was evaluated in *Amrita Bazar Patrika* in such words: "The position had *not only gone out of police control but also of the organisers of the food movement.*" (Emphasis added.)

Shortly before midnight, there was an attempt to set the Kalighat tram depot on fire. Several food shops were looted in the C.R. Avenue areas. According to press reports, five police stations were attacked and one looted. The police had to withdraw from the affected areas. Later, they 'tried to stage a come back at many places. And in a desperate bid to quell disturbances, they opened fire in many places, killing and injuring lots of people. The police fired on at least 12 occasions, killing, according to unofficial reports, at least 12 persons and injuring about 1000 men women and children. (Das and Bandyopadhyay: xiv) However, as usual, the exact number of dead and injured persons remained a matter of bitter debate between the government/ruling party (Congress) and the opposition (mainly left).

After an uneasy silence on 2 September, violence again broke out on the 3<sup>rd</sup>. This time, besides Kolkata, Howrah became the new battlefield. In the words of Amrita Bazar Patrika, "Storm centre shifted on Thursday (3 Sept.) from Calcutta to Howrah."<sup>25</sup> The city of Howrah, on the opposite and western banks of river Hoogly (the local name of Ganga) was, and still is, the hub of many medium and small manufacturing industries, beside some big industries. Goods produced in this densely located medium and small industries were recognised as 'quality' articles both in other parts of India and also outside. This was perhaps the reason that Howrah was known as the "Sheffield of Bengal". It was/is also the home of the vast working class people, most of who were badly hit by the food crisis in 1959.

From the morning, according to newspaper reports, "rowdies" took charge of many streets and roads in Howrah. They gathered between Khurut Road and Bamangachi on the G.T. Road and started throwing stones on passing police cars. After 7.30 am, the police began to hit back with *lathis* and tear-gas, which continued till 10.30 am. Gradually, the local people, passers-by became involved in the incident. The mob set a traffic control post on fire near the south-western parts of Howrah Maidan area. Being outnumbered the police took shelter in the Control Room. The police gradually gained their ground but was not successful in pushing the angry protestors. Barricades were erected with "logs, push carts, scavenging carts, brick, packing-boxes and even telephone poles" on the G.T. Road and other areas. It was also reported that although private cars were "interfered with [by agitators], but not cyclists".<sup>26</sup> Later, ambulances were emptied to shift wounded agitators.

In this daylong violent agitation the police opened fire on the people on many occasions, killing at least 11 people and seriously causing wounds to at least 120 persons. 25 police persons were also injured. The mob chased some 20 policemen, who were passing along Narsing Dutt Road. Almost all of them fled, except one, who fell in the hands of the rioters, and later found dead, with his throat cut. By 4 pm, military troops were called in to control the situation because by afternoon the situation went out of control of the local police.

On the same day (3 September), trouble also spread in the industrial areas in the district of 24 Parganas, especially at Khardah and Behala. In Kolkata, youngsters and even children raised many road blockades. Cars and taxis were not seen on Kolkata roads till the evening. They along with local people roamed the streets challenging occasional vehicles. Train and bus services were stopped, schools, colleges and bazaars also remained closed. Areas like Shovabazar and Beadon Street in north Kolkata, Bhowanipore, Dhakuria and Khidderpore in the south were badly affected. Picketing, road blocks and attacks on the police in these areas continued. The police *lathi*-charged the protestors to dismantle road-blocks and also opened fire on them at least seven occasions, causing 3 deaths.<sup>27</sup>

On the next day (4 September), Howrah occupied the centre stage again. The trouble began when the violent protestors had beaten two persons to death in the Bharat Jute Mills area. These persons, according to reports, rescued a patrolling sub-inspector of police from the hands of the violent agitators/“rowdies”. Later, a rumour did spread in the locality that two workers of Bharat Jute Mills (situated near Dasnagar), who supported the strike, were thrown alive into the factory furnace, causing their instant death. This made the crowd furious, which attacked the *bustee* (slum), where the two rescuers of the police lived, found and killed them, looted their *bustee* and burnt about 50 huts. The army put a ½ sq mile cordon to control the situation and nearly 500 people were rounded up by them. Later, army and police pickets were set up in the sensitive areas.

Life seemed to come back to “normalcy” in Kolkata on 4 September, after three consecutive days of unprecedented violence and almost-leaderless chaos since the independence. Despite some stray incidents of bombing, the city picked up its pace as “state and private transport operated normally”. By noon, tram and train services were fully normal. Howrah too, “had quietened down” on the next day, i.e. 5 September. The victims of arson (on the 4<sup>th</sup>) near Bharat Jute Mills were sheltered in the premises of the jute mill itself.<sup>28</sup> The total number of the killed and injured persons, between 31 August and 4 September, varied as usual, according to official and the unofficial accounts. For instance, Jyoti Basu, Leader of the Opposition, along with other opposition MLAs claimed that “about 80 people” were killed during this time, thousands were injured and many went on “missing”. While, according to official reports, the number of the killed and injured were 41 and about 300 respectively.<sup>29</sup> The PIFRC, on 6 September, in a meeting discussed the effects of the movement and the government’s response to it. It was proposed that the next phase (“Third Phase”) of the movement would begin soon with street corner meetings in different parts of the state, “to maintain public pressure on the Government for an impartial enquiry into police violence and providing compensation to families of killed and wounded”. (Das and Bandyopadhyay: xv)

## Afterwards

The food movement of 1959, especially its violent “second phase” – spanned between 31 August and 4 September – had a major impact on the course of politics in West Bengal from early-1960s to the elections of 1967 through the food movement of 1966. After the tumultuous 5-days of violence, 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/unparliamentary 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.<sup>30</sup>

In this atmosphere a host of opposition like Jyoti Basu, Hare Krishna Konar, Subodh Banerjee, Jatin Chakrabarty, Chitto Basu, Golam Yazdani Siddhartha Shankar Ray, Labnya Prabha Ghosh, Amarendra Nath Basu, Haridas Mitra and many others took part in Assembly debates and fired volley after volley of criticism against the government. The police “barbarism” against the food-agitators was compared with the Jalianwalabag massacre under the British rule. The opposition also brought a No-Confidence motion against the government, which was naturally defeated due to lack of adequate members. Even in Lok Sabha, the opposition members, on 4 September, raised their voice against the “brutal firing” in Kolkata, Howrah and other places. Members such as A.K. Gopalan, Tridib Chaudhuri, Renu Chakrabarty, Prabhat Kar, Md. Elias, Hiren Mukherjee criticised the state government in an animated debate. Even the Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru became involved in a haughty interaction with the opposition.

Beside the opposition, many members of the civil society, especially the eminent persons belonging to academia, also registered protests in strongest possible terms. Triguna Sen, Vice Chancellor, Jadavpur University; Prasanta Kumar Bose, Principal, Bangabasi College, Kolkata; a number of teachers of Ballygunj Science College of Calcutta University, Jadavpur University, Vidyasagar College, Surendranath College, City College; intellectuals like Atul Gupta, Tripurari Chakrabarty, Surendra Nath Sen and many others include in the list. (Das and Bandyopadhyay: xiv) Among the media, party organs like, *Swadhinata*, *Ganadabi*, *New Age* etc along with *Dainik Basumati* made frontal attack against the government. Many citizens also wrote letters to editors of various newspapers, expressing anger and criticism against the government for its handling of the situation. The *second* position was mainly held by the government and the ruling Congress party. Also a number of citizens criticised the opposition/left through letters to the editors for indulging in hooliganism in the name of food movement. The government through press statements and the ruling party members in the Assembly and in Parliament staunchly criticised the opposition. Among the ruling party members, who participated in Assembly debates, include: Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy, Prafulla Sen, Bijoy Singh Nahar, Bankim Kar, Ananda Gopal Mukhopadhyay and others. It should also be mentioned that although a senior member like Dr. Prafulla Ghosh (the first “Prime Minister” of West Bengal after independence) did not belong to the ruling party and sought to mildly criticise the government, and also to hold a “balanced” position, in actual terms, he also opposed the food movement. In Parliament, the Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru took the main charge of criticising and condemning the movement.<sup>31</sup> Some of the print media including *Ananda Bazar Patrika* vehemently criticised the leaders of the movement for the “anarchic incidents” between 31 August and 4 September.

The *third* point of view found expression through common citizens, members of civil society and media. This section appreciated the need for food movement yet it felt that soon ‘hooligans’ took the advantage of the “anarchy” and spoilt it. For instance, at the initiative of some prominent citizens, the West Bengal Peace Coordination Committee was formed just after the violent “second phase” of the movement. It included People like Kalidas Nag, Nihar Ranjan Ray, Amiya Sen and

other notable persons. In its first public statement, the Committee admitted that the food movement was well-intended and organised in the interests of the people. Yet, it failed to check hooliganism. The Committee called on sober people and students irrespective of political affiliation to stand up in defence of life and property of the innocent people.<sup>32</sup>

The same view was expressed in many newspapers. English dailies such as *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, *The Statesman* and *Hindustan Standard* reflected this spirit in their editorials. Bengali dailies like *Jugantar*, *Basumati* etc also shared it. *Basumati*, in its editorial (5 September) wrote: ‘... The antisocial persons, who are engaged in destructive activities, have suppressed the peaceful food movement by their deed... The government had tried to suppress the food movement, but [in reality] it is for them [for the antisocial hooligans] that the movement could be suppressed...’ Thus, the third viewpoint, which carried a great deal of sympathy for the movement held the “anti-socials” responsible for the “suppression” of the movement and criticised the leadership for their lack of control over the courses of movement and observed that the leaders had virtually no control over the anarchic situation.

But, as we have argued, this has been the characteristic of almost all the “social movements”. Social movements, as Tilly argues, often engage in “contentious politics”, which is the use of disruptive techniques to make a political point, or to change government policy. (Tilly, 2008:5) According to him, examples of such techniques are actions that disturb the normal activities of society such as demonstrations, general strike action, riot, terrorism, civil disobedience, and even revolution or insurrection. Many of these techniques featured in the movement of 1959. These movements may or may not be initiated/organised by political parties, but soon spontaneous elements, often “anarchic”, mingle with the apparently organised/disciplined movements. Thus, social movements are partly organised, partly spontaneous, and at times might turn violent and chaotic. If a movement begins and ends in a totally “disciplined” manner under the supreme control of a party or a group of parties, then it cannot be called a “social movement” in the Tillyian sense of the term. From various documents that we examined for our present research on the movement of 1959, we came to notice that at least one contemporary citizen (remember Arun Bose’s letter to the editor of *Amrita Bazar Patrika*) could realise this amidst the violence and chaos of 31 August – 4 September, 1959.

## **Echoes of ’59**

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. In July, 1965 the students of Kolkata began their mobilisation against the rise in the tramway-fares. They began to ride the trams appealing to commuters for not paying the “excess” fare. The employees of Calcutta Tramways Company Limited (at that time it was a London-based private company) also went on strike for one day in support of the students’ demands. Gradually the common men/commuters began to take part in the movement.

On 29 July (on the third day of the movement), the government imposed the section 144 of Cr.Pc. throughout the city banning processions/rallies. But defying government order, a number of processions took place. Police retaliated with lathi-charges and teargases. To protest over the police-action, a mammoth rally was organised at the College Street campus of Calcutta University on the 30<sup>th</sup>. College Street had turned into a “sea of protesting students”. (Roy Chaudhury 2010, Vol. 3: 144) [Bharatjyoti Roy Chaudhury, *Rajnaitik Andolon Deshe o Birbhume* (in Bengali), 2010, Kolkata,

Muktamon Vol 3, p.144] The student-police clashes took place at various localities of the city. Four tram-cars were burnt by agitators. The left parties gave a call of General Strike on 31 July. The movement had also touched the people of the suburbs. Four persons were wounded by police firing at New Barrackpore and Gobra. Many students, including prominent students' leaders were arrested.

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. It bloomed and spread almost without any party command and initiative. The anti-tram-fare-hike movement of 1965 had already charged the spirit of the city protestors. The events of '66 ignited it throughout the state.

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. These comments of Sen made the people angry and agitated as never before. The first ignition took place at Bashirhat and Swarupnagar in 24 pgs district. The police opened fire at Bashirhat injuring 6 agitators in a police-people clash in the middle of February.

On the 16<sup>th</sup>, 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.<sup>33</sup> 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, damage 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.

In many districts, people having no connection with political parties enthusiastically joined the agitation. Thus, to a great extent, this movement too went on with partial or no control of CPI (M) (which came into being after the division of CPI in 1964) and other left parties. The angry masses set fire on a food-department building at Bongaon and also attacked the houses of Congress leaders at different places. This feature became fierce after the death of Ananda Hait, a polytechnic student of Krishnanagar. The house of the state minister, Fazlur Rahman, was set ablaze at Krishnanagar. Many Congress leaders fled and took shelter at Kolkata hotels. (Roy Chaudhury: 147) In Kolkata the movement took the shape of a situation comparable with guerrilla warfare in the serpentine by-lanes. In place of the clashes between the police and the protesters in the highways and the large open public space bands of youth organized themselves as small units in localities. Usually the clashes took place in the evenings. Streetlights were switched off; bombs and acid bulbs were hurled at police parties patrolling the narrow by-lanes. In most cases the identity of the attackers could not be established.<sup>34</sup> The police counter offensive against such attacks took the form of sudden and unwarranted the raids on households of the disturbed areas. These raids often translated into acts of unauthorized brutal repression. The answer to such action came in the form of hurling stones



and broken glass on the police parties.<sup>35</sup> The streets of Kolkata would witness this sort of “guerrilla warfare” and unwarranted police raids again after 3-4 years in the wake of Naxalbari movement.

The second Food Movement left over 40 dead in five days and several thousands were badly injured.<sup>36</sup> The political impact was tremendous. Senior Congress Minister, Ajoy Mukherjee resigned and formed Bangla Congress, which later joined the leftists to form the United Front in the elections of 1967. The CPI (M) and the newly formed Bangla Congress two called two separate Food Conventions on 6 March in Kolkata. But neither of the parties could persuade the masses to call off the movement. Thus both the parties agreed to the peoples’ demand and gave the call for a general strike for 24 hours on 10 March. But the spirit of popular spontaneity made the strike continue for another 24 hours. However, the movement came to an end with a long silent procession, starting from Subodh Mallick Square at central Kolkata to Deshapriya Park at south Kolkata on 14 March, 1966.

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.

Let us, for the moment, stop here and listen to a few words from a speech of Hemanta Kumar Basu, a respected Forward Bloc leader of his time. On 26<sup>th</sup> September 1959, after laying of the foundation of a Martyr’s Column at Subodh Mullick Square, Basu said: ‘The Martyr’s Column will serve as a beacon-light to all future generations. Passers-by will halt before it in respectful silence and will remember the martyrs with pride and draw inspiration from their noble sacrifices... The food struggle, in course of which these martyrs laid down their lives, will not stop, cannot stop, till the demands are met.’ (Das and Bandyopadhyay: xvi)

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Translation by Manasij Majumder, noted art-critic. All other translations from Bengali, if not mentioned otherwise, are by the present author.

<sup>2</sup>Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy, *India’s Agricultural Sector*, 1995, p. 38: as cited in P.S. George, ‘Public Distribution System, Food Subsidy and Production Incentives’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 31. No. 39, Sept 28, 1996

<sup>3</sup>Election Commission of India. See:

[http://eci.nic.in/eci\\_main/StatisticalReports/SE\\_1957/StatRep\\_WB\\_1957.pdf](http://eci.nic.in/eci_main/StatisticalReports/SE_1957/StatRep_WB_1957.pdf) (Accessed on 29/3/12.)

<sup>4</sup> *Proceedings of West Bengal Legislative Assembly* (hereafter *Proceedings*), 2 January 1959

<sup>5</sup> *The Statesman*, Calcutta (hereafter *TS*), 3/1/1959

<sup>6</sup> *Jugantar*, 18/8/59

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 31/8/1959

<sup>8</sup> *Hindustan Standard*, 6/1/1959

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- <sup>9</sup> TS, 27, April 1959  
<sup>10</sup> TS, between 10 and 22 May 1959  
<sup>11</sup> *Ibid* 1 June 1959  
<sup>12</sup> TS, 5 August 1959  
<sup>13</sup> *Basumahi*, 7 July 1959  
<sup>14</sup> TS 7 August 1959  
<sup>15</sup> *Ananda Bazar Patrika* (hereafter *ABP*), 30 August 1959  
<sup>16</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 20 August 1959  
<sup>17</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 1 September 1959  
<sup>18</sup> TS 1 September 1959  
<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*  
<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*  
<sup>21</sup> Proceedings, 21 September 1959  
<sup>22</sup> *Jugantar*, 3 September 1959  
<sup>23</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika* 2 September 1959  
<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*  
<sup>25</sup> *Ibid* 4 September 1959  
<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*  
<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*  
<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*. 6 September 1959  
<sup>29</sup> *Proceedings* 21 September 1959  
<sup>30</sup> *Proceedings*, 21-28 September 1959  
<sup>31</sup> Lok Sabha Debates 2 & 4 September 1959  
<sup>32</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika* 7 September 1959  
<sup>33</sup> <http://lite.epaper.timesofindia.com/mobile.aspx?article=yes&pageid=2&sectid=edid=&edlabel=TOIKM&mydateHid=25-07-2010&pubname=Times+of+India++Kolkata&edname=&articleid=Ar00200&publabel=TOI>  
 Accessed on 23/3/2012  
<sup>34</sup> See e-article “Events Violent, Moments Significant” by Sugato Nandy <http://mail.sarai.net/pipermail/reader-list/2007-March/008952.html> (Accessed on 23/3/12)  
<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*  
<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*

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