

DISCUSSANT'S COMMENTS ON ANWESHA SENGUPTA'S PAPER

A very interesting paper, this. And, frankly, I have very little to offer by way of directly emendatory comment to this densely detailed narration of two popular Calcutta-based movements of the 1950s— the **anti-tram fare enhancement movement of 1953** and the **teachers' movement of 1954**. So, it's a relief, for once, not to have to play the role of the *Scharfrichter*, the 'keen judge', and to be able to throw about a few random thoughts for the consideration of the author and the assembled auditors at large.

The author, Anwesha Sengupta, has chosen to treat these two movements in chronological succession. And this is not unwarranted, for the possibility of the latter movement seems to have already germinated in the former. This is implicit in the narrations of Anwesha, though she does not make too obvious a point about it. Probably, this guerrilla tactic, so to speak, is the inevitable outcome of the fact that Anwesha chooses to inaugurate her narratives, Greek epic-like, *in medias res*— as two 'events' outside ontology. More about this later. As of now, let us discuss the evident strengths, in my opinion, of this paper.

To begin with, Anwesha shows an acute awareness of the narrow remit of the 'popular' nature of the two movements. They take place mostly within the confines of Calcutta, though references to the leadership's attempts at combining the tram movement with the labour unrest at Burnpur show a contemporary awareness of the limited nature of the movement's popularity as well. Given this, one would expect the author to reify the 'popular' hereon. However, refreshingly, Anwesha does quite the opposite. In understanding the 'popular' dimension of the tram movement, she sets up a broad church instead of the expected conceptual reification, wherein the idea of the 'popular' is disaggregated in terms of politically multimodal groups, namely, and I quote her, "**students and teachers from high schools and colleges, refugees, workers from various fields, and ordinary women of the neighbourhoods.**" The movement therefore is presented as a highly textured co-constitution of spontaneity and organization, of the unruly street and the regimented party, of convergence and conjuncture.

On the question of refugee participation in the tram movement, Anwesha's research probably makes its most important historiographical intervention. Established canon has tended to argue that the refugee participation in the tram movement was not very significant. Anwesha roundly challenges this through rigorous archives to argue in favour of active, if not overwhelming, refugee involvement in the movement. This again is part of her argumentative plan, for towards the end of her paper she would boldly assert that the centrality of the refugees "**to the oppositional politics of the time explains the essential urban character of the mass movements of [the] early 1950s.**"

The vigorous participation of the teachers in the tram movement anticipates the teachers' movement of early 1954, which started barely before the embers of the tram movement had died out. Better salaries and enhanced dearness allowance were the issues around which the movement actually congealed. However, Anwesha naughtily hints that overall uplift and betterment of the education system was incorporated into the movement's rhetoric as a face-saver to dodge the embarrassment of what was perceived by the teachers as trade-unionistic materialism. The teachers could not think of themselves as the working class, could they? After all, they were the builders of the nation! This, in fact, affected their mode of protests, which split along the ethical choice as to whether the teachers should limit themselves to *satyagraha*-style *dharna* in front of the Raj Bhavana or whether they should hit the streets armed with the aggressive methods of the working class. That is, should the teachers imitate the working class, or should they stick to their guns of empty snobbism, no matter that they were worse off than "a *chaprassy* of the Writers' Buildings". Those of us who have had our brushes with students' politics cannot fail to appreciate the perceptiveness of Anwesha's observation regarding this moral fracture that informs students' and teachers' activism at large, across time.

Sadly, these engaged case studies lead to a conclusion that does not live up to the readers' expectations. It dishes out unfortunate platitudes and catch-as-catch-can generalizations. In concluding, Anwesha basically tells us at some length that these movements were born out of failed promises of the postcolonial state and are indicators of the volatile nature of the time! Probably, and this is just a suggestion, she could more fruitfully think in terms of the implication of these movements in the broader left mobilizational politics that was gaining momentum in this decade; how they shaped and were shaped by the organized left politics of the time; what pathways the coiled violence of these movements took to find release in a decade's time to become paradigmatic of left politics by the late 1960s. Or, if these connections can be made at all. This in turn may enable her, and us, to understand if unharnessed spontaneity can a movement make. These are, of course, suggested lines of inquiry. She is free to come to her conclusions.

To end, reading her paper I could not but think of some recent developments. There has been an announcement recently from the Indian railways to introduce surge pricing in its three premium trains — Rajdhani, Duronto and Shatabdi. Passengers, political parties and analysts have unanimously opposed the rail carrier's decision saying it is an anti-people move and will burden the common man for whom railways are the cheapest mode of travel across the length and breadth of the country. The sentiments of the stakeholders almost echo Manikuntala Sen's statement in the West Bengal Assembly in July 1953 against the tram fare hike. Yet, there has hardly been any organized protest, let alone movement, against this hike. Again, the school, college and university teachers of West Bengal— or Bangla is it now— are struggling under the cosh of low dearness allowance, in fact the lowest in the country. In local trains and *mofussil* eateries you find people torrentially complaining against this. Yet, hardly has their discontent congealed into a movement and the popularity of the government has only surged. Historical parallelisms are fraught with interpretational perils. However, an attempt to understand variant responses to comparable situations across different contexts and times relieves us of the boredom of canned historical re-tellings. Will Anwesha help us in this? Will she give us something to live by, something to live for?

Thank you