

Comments on the paper presented by Anwesha Sen Gupta

Anwesha Sen Gupta's paper, 'A Study of Anti-Tram Fair Hike Resistance and Teachers' Movement' is an exhaustive study on popular movements of Calcutta in the 1950s.

As far as the protest of Calcutta people against Fare hike by the Calcutta Tramways Company(CTC) is concerned, some more things could have come within the purview of her discussion.

1. One of the features of crowd action in Calcutta, during colonial and post colonial regime, was the attack on tram cars by a frenzied mob. Such incidents even took place during the days of Swadeshi Movement in early 20th century. In October 1907 Police repression on a Swadeshi rally triggered off a serious outbreak of mob violence in Calcutta and the trams were the ready victims. At least 29 trams were damaged in the first two days of violence. Dennis Gill, a British tramcar specialist, in his *Tramcar Treasury* (London, 1963) made similar observation about the Calcutta trams. (P. 100).

Eric Hobsbawm, an outstanding historian of our time also observed that of all forms of urban transport in Calcutta, the tramways, in particular, were unusually convenient for rioters. Hobsbawm saw two reasons behind this. He described a fare hike in any public transport in any public transport system as a "natural precipitant of trouble" which tended to affect poorer sections of the city. On the other hand, the rioters could help themselves by blocking the streets and disrupting traffic with the burnt or overturned large and trackbound vehicles.

2. Fare hike by the management of the Calcutta Tramways Company had history even in colonial period. In the wake of pay hike of the employees in 1921, the Company increased fare in 1922. The Employees Association, representing white collar employees of several concerns of Calcutta, articulated their protest in *Karmi*, the mouthpiece of Bengali middle class. But the pretest remained a mere intellectual exercise.

Immediately after independence, the company was once more seized with the idea of enhancing tram fare. But the move could be resisted due to intervention of a commission, headed by Justice Das of Calcutta High Court. However, in 1949 the CTC arbitrarily increased the first class fare.

3. The attempt to fare hike for second class passengers in 1953 was faced with severe resistance and sporadic violence. The Government of West Bengal tried to suppress the protest with unprecedented ferocity. The incidents of July 1953 saw flagrant violation of civil rights and police atrocities on the protesters crossed all limits. On 16 July, 1953, even army was deployed for suppressing the popular movement. The government also applied Preventive Detention Act to subdue the protesters. Section 144 was clamped down in several parts of Calcutta Prohibiting assembly of 5 or more persons.
4. In the early stage of the movement the tram workers wholeheartedly supported the popular protest against fare hike. But somehow a dispute between the protesters and the workers came on the surface. As a result, the city's tramwaymen, who had so long been regarded as the traditional leaders of any General Strike in Calcutta, did not participate in the General Strike of 15 July.
5. The entire episode revealed a dismal failure of the Government of West Bengal in handling the crisis. The *Eastern Economist* of 24 July, 1953, observed that the entire incident was "an ignominious surrender" by the West Bengal government.

6. The role of the refugees in the movement is an exaggerated version.

In the end, Anwasha Sen Gupta's paper is well researched and based on facts, although there is some scope for improvement.

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