

A Study of Anti-Tram fare Hike Resistance and Teachers' Movement

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My research focuses on two significant political movements that took place in West Bengal in 1950s – a) tram fare enhancement resistance movement of 1953 and b) teachers' movement of 1954.

'50s was a turbulent decade in the history of West Bengal. If the previous decade was marked by war, famine and riots, this was a decade of crisis too. This decade witnessed intense political mobilization on issues of refugee rights, second class tram fare enhancement, revision of salary and dearness allowance of school teachers, proposed merger of Bengal and Bihar and food shortage. Despite a national government in power, in '50s "Calcutta constantly appear[ed] to be on the brink of the violence".¹ Or was it because of a national government that the politics of mass agitation gained increasing currency, as people became more and more restless when *their own independent* government failed to deliver? Among other crucial enquiries, I put forward this question as an entry point towards understanding the "popular" politics of West Bengal in 1950s. But before elaborating my research questions, let me discuss briefly the two aforementioned political movements.

1.

In 1953, when the British owned tram company decided to hike the second class tram fare by 1paise, the city witnessed one of the most violent protest movements of the decade that continued for almost a month marked by repeated confrontation between the protesters and the police. The leadership of the movement came from a hurriedly formed Tram and Bus Fare Enhancement Resistance Committee presided by Hemanta Kumar Basu of Forward Block. Important members of this committee included Jyoti Basu (CPI), Subodh Bannerjee (SUC), Suresh Banerjee (Praja Socialist Party) and Satya Priya Banerjee of Marxist Forward Block.

¹ Myron Weiner, "Violence and Politics in Calcutta", *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol.20, No.3, pp 275-281, p.276.

Calcutta Tram Workers' Union also opposed the move. They argued that the fare hike was unethical particularly because the Tram Company had already been making huge profit.

The struggle began on July 1 when the Committee urged the commuters to keep paying the old fare. The modes of protest kept changing. If initially the protesters boarded the trams in large numbers with the exact old fare in their pockets, a few days later the Resistance Committee called for boycotting the trams altogether. Hence, from July 7, the city witnessed almost empty trams running from one depot to another. Consequently, the company suffered from serious monetary loss. Barricading the tram lines, organizing demonstrations and putting up posters to mobilize people became the main strands of the movement. Another development intensified the struggle against the government further. A strike was going on in Burnpur where the police opened fire on July 5 and killed at least 7 workers and injured many. Several trade unions, except for Congress led INTUC, came together in protest against the police terror and a Joint Struggle Committee was formed. They, along with the Resistance Committee, called for a state wide strike on July 15. Among various agendas, the fare hike was a crucial point against which the strike was called. This strike was one of the most successful strikes of this period. Despite repeated police action, "about 10 lakh people struck work, affecting practically every industry, including jute mills, collieries, engineering works, bus transport and offices. Shops and markets remained closed even in the Congress strongholds like Burrabazar area dominated by Marwari business magnets."² The tramway men initially stayed away from this strike. But from July 17 CTWU and Calcutta Tram Mazdoor Panchayat went for an indefinite strike in support of the demands raised by the Resistance Committee. Violent clashes between the protesters and the police from across the city were reported, reporters of leading dailies were attacked, people were killed, many were injured and properties were destroyed in the course of this one month, particularly till July 22. The movement ended in a victory for the protesters as the older fare was reintroduced.

The government was certainly taken aback by the magnitude of the protest, so were some of the later commentators of this movement. B.C. Roy, who was in Europe when the movement gained currency, on his return expressed regret "that so much trouble had arisen over a matter "which

² Sidhhartha Guha Roy, "Fare Hike and Urban Protest: Calcutta Crowd in 1953", *EPW*, Vol 25, no.52, pp2863-2867, p.2865.

could have been settled without any difficulty across the conference table.”³ He insisted that the “root cause” of the movement laid elsewhere: “economic situation of the country was largely responsible for the agitation against the government and that situation was further aggravated by the ever increasing unemployment problem.”⁴ Thus, in his analysis, the enhancement of tram fare by 1 pice provided the already agitated and frustrated people of the city a reason to erupt. Perhaps, Bidhan Roy was indicating towards the refugees. The city had by then received several millions of refugees and they were being continuously cited as the reason behind the economic crisis and the problem of unemployment in West Bengal. Bidhan Roy’s plan of refugee dispersal, i.e., sending away the refugees to scarcely populated areas within and outside West Bengal, was at least partly to dilute ‘the political impact of these unwelcome “trouble-makers” [i.e., the refugees] by scattering them in far-away districts.’⁵ In this context, “overpopulation leading to unemployment leading to frustration leading to violence” seemed easy logic. Indeed, as some of the existing works indicate, refugees played a crucial role in this movement. For instance, in the words of Prafulla Chakrabarty, “..the movement demonstrated that the workers, the students and the lower middle class had been brought together and behind them all lurked the ubiquitous figure of the refugee.”⁶ Such a statement is corroborated by memoirs like that of refugee activist Tejendralal Dutta. He describes vividly how the refugee youths, both men and women, of South Calcutta colonies participated in this “completely political movement”.⁷ He further writes that “because of this movement, the squatter colonies of this area got their political character.”⁸ In other words, through this movement the colonies were mobilized against Congress and were brought together within the rubric of Left politics. Majumdar’s description of the movement is significant as it illustrates the role of various sections of the society in this movement. He writes about Haren Roy, a tube well mechanic who was given the responsibility of uprooting the tram lines near Gariahat as he had many helpful tools. Then there were local women who supported the movements in various ways – if two Punjabi ladies poured water from their first floor flat on a police team rounding up some of the agitators, a Bengali working woman gave protection to the author when he was fleeing from the police. Thus, in the refugee dominated areas - women,

³ *TOI*, Aug 1, 1953.

⁴ *Ibid*, Aug 3, 1953.

⁵ Joya Chatterji, “Dispersal’ and the Failure of Rehabilitation: Refugee Camp-dwellers and Squatters in West Bengal’, *Modern Asian Studies*, 41 (5), 2007, pp 995-1032, p.1006.

⁶ Prafulla Chakrabarty, *The Marginal Men*, Lumiere, Kalyani, p.337. See also pp 343-346.

⁷ Tejendralal Dutta, *Udbastu Andolonor Smriti Chitra*. Kolkata: Pratyay, 2011.

⁸ *Ibid*.

working class and youths all seemed to participate or to sympathize with the movement. But the question that needs further probing is whether the participants and sympathizers were protesting as refugees or as students, workers and common people disillusioned by the “national” government, its police and its administration?

The violence that marked the movement needs to be understood further as well. It has been repeatedly said that the agitation against tram fare hike was extremely, and according to many unnecessarily, violent. The government insisted about the involvement of the hooligans and “anti-socials” in this agitation. Sandip Bandyopadhyay has argued that part of the reason behind such a violent movement resided with the fact that many among the leaders were “revolutionary terrorists” of colonial India. Moreover, even though the Communist Party had done away with its “ultra left” line, Bandyopadhyay thinks that some of the party supporters and other Left leaders pursued a radical course of action during the tram fare movement.⁹ What were the various forms of police violence and that of the participants’ violence, whether there were any internal debate about the way the movement should move forward, did violence deter certain sections of the population from the movement – are some of the questions that this research will address.

2.

The tram movement was only the beginning of a long decade of anti-establishment mass movements. In less than a year’s time, West Bengal witnessed one of the biggest movements by the teachers under the leadership of All Bengal Teachers’ Association (ABTA). Since independence, there had been a continuous demand from the secondary school teachers for an increased dearness allowance. As early as on September 1, 1948, a strike was observed by them on this issue. But since their demands were not met by the West Bengal government, ABTA launched a sit-down strike in early 1954 asking for a salary of Rs. 180 per month (instead of Rs. 75) with a dearness allowance of Rs. 35 per month. An All Parties Teachers’ Struggle Coordination Committee was formed that provided the leadership to the movement. From February 10, the teachers began their indefinite sit-in demonstration near Rajbhavan. At least 3000 teachers participated. On 15th when, despite requests from the Opposition, the governor refused to meet the protesting teachers, the members of Opposition boycotted the session and

⁹ See Sandip Bandyopadhyay, *Ranaksbetra Rajpath: Ponchash-Shat Dashoker Kolkatae Jubo ANdolon*, Progressive Publishers, pp 17-24.

joined the protesting teachers. Teachers' movement turned violent on February 16 when there was a direct confrontation between the police and the participating teachers on their way to the Assembly to disrupt the ongoing budget session in order to draw attention of the House to their demands. The confrontation was severe, claiming 4 lives and injuring 65 others. Throughout the day there were several instances of burning down the buses and trams, smashing street lamps and traffic signals, barricading roads etc. even shops were looted at various parts of the city. As the ABTA narrative goes, earlier the "leadership suffered from hesitation of wielding the tools of the working class-street demonstration with shouting slogans, strike, mass squatting, courting arrest etc, against injustice, for winning rights and privileges. In 1954, under the new leadership A.B.T.A. broke down that barrier and decided firmly to wield those tools. Street demonstration, strike, squatting, courting arrest were taken up as in the teachers' movement in 1954. Doubt about its propriety was dispelled. A broad alliance was forged with students, guardians' all other working people and the left political forces."¹⁰ To combat such a movement, military was brought in. However, given the fact that the teachers were paid a pittance, their struggle received sympathy from the wider society and the media. Students and labourers came out in support. As Sandip Bandyopadhyay quoted an eye witness, "when the teachers sat down on the roads in protest, almost a drama began to unfold. People from all over the city came out in thousands to show solidarity to the teachers. Someone sent a basket full of oranges for the protesters. Dwariks, the owners of a famous sweet shop in Bhowanipore, sent *Luchi* and sweets to the teachers."¹¹ *Jugantar* noted that "if the teacher is starving, education system will never improve."¹² The same report also harshly criticized the government's attitude towards education: "the government is saying that it has no money – fine, but then how is this government spending so much money in deep sea fishing, underground railway system, manufacturing gas from waste, automatic Finish machine to count votes etc; how is it spending so much money for the expansion of the police and administration? Education and health is of pivotal importance in the making and the progress of a nation. And the government lacks money when it comes to these sectors. Actually, the West Bengal government does not even think that health and education should be their topmost priority."¹³

¹⁰ <http://www.abta-satyapriya.org/index.php>

¹¹ Sandip Bandyopadhyay, *Ranakshetra Rajpath*, p.26.

¹² *Jugantar*, 26 February, 1953.

¹³ *Ibid.*

How and why did a movement of the teachers attract other sections of the society to such an extent? What was the role of the Left parties in this movement? To what extent women, refugees and religious minority took part in the teachers' strike? These are some of the research questions that the project seeks to answer.

More importantly, my research tries to understand the decade of 1950s as a whole. The new born *national* government continuously faced violent protests on several issues. Was it because people expected much from their *own* government but the later failed to deliver. Why was '50s such a turbulent decade? Was it because of the refugees? But partition and its consequences may not have all the answers for the questions that I raise. Sekhar Bandyopadhyaya has already warned us that too much emphasis on partition "excludes endless complexities of decolonization as an experience."¹⁴ Answers need to be sought in peoples' expectations from a *national* government, in long tradition of political protests in colonial times, in involvement of people in violent forms of mass action (like communal riots), in particular Left political thoughts and traditions, in labour unrest, unemployment and food shortage, in the behaviour of police, bureaucrats and the government in handling popular protests, and of course in refugee crisis.

¹⁴ Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Decolonization in South Asia: Meanings of Freedom in Post Independence West Bengal*, Routledge, London, 2009, p.4.