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Calcutta & West Bengal, 1950s - 1960s



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People, Politics and Protests I

Calcutta & West Bengal, 1950s – 1960s

**Sucharita Sengupta & Paula Banerjee
Anwasha Sengupta**

2016

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Refugee Movement: Another Aspect of Popular Movements in West Bengal in the 1950s and 1960s

Sucharita Sengupta & Paula Banerjee *

Introduction

By now it is common knowledge how Indian independence was born out of partition that displaced 15 million people. In West Bengal alone 30 lakh refugees entered until 1960. In the 1970s the number of people entering from the east was closer to a few million. Lived experiences of partition refugees came to us in bits and pieces. In the last sixteen years however there is a burgeoning literature on the partition refugees in West Bengal. The literature on refugees followed a familiar terrain and set some patterns that might be interesting to explore. We will endeavour to explain through broad sketches how the narratives evolved. To begin with we were given the literature of victimhood in which the refugees were portrayed only as victims. It cannot be denied that in large parts these refugees were victims but by fixing their identities as victims these authors lost much of the richness of refugee experience because even as victims the refugee identity was never fixed as these refugees, even in the worst of times, constantly tried to negotiate with powers that be and strengthen their own agency. But by fixing their identities as victims and not problematising that victimhood the refugees were for a long time displaced from the centre stage of their own experiences and made “marginal” to their narratives.

With the ascendance of cultural studies in West Bengal the refugee experience was reduced to the memory of partition that seemed to have traumatized refugees to such an extent that all other experiences paled in comparison. Historians and social scientists belonging to the genre of cultural studies, largely depending on oral narratives settled on the notion that the violence and trauma associated with losing one’s home was the definitive aspect of refugee psyche. Everything else was shaped by that experience. Authors such as Sandip Bandyopadhyay, Dipesh Chakravarty, Manas Ray and so on discussed the imaginative mappings of the refugee lives through memories.¹ The understanding was that a refugee lived in his/her memories whether they are of pre partition belongings or of post partition localities. In 1993 Sandip Bandyopadhyay found his refugee respondents still traumatized and bewildered when talking about their experiences of partition.² For Dipesh Chakrabarty what was definitive for the refugee was the memory of their *chere asha gram* which literally translates as the village that they left behind. This village symbolised their yearnings for their *desh* or home country.³ These writings did not contradict the victimhood narrative but added a new

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dimension to it. Such narratives were usually anecdotal and reductive challenging the understanding of refugee experience not through multiplicity but through singularity. Often it was the author's own experience that was privileged over group experiences and it is through such discourses that the author reclaimed agency. Scholars such as Udit Sen have challenged that the narrative privileged by these social scientists were universal even for Hindu Bengali refugees as the refugees settled in the Andamans do not conform to such received wisdoms.⁴ Therefore, it may be said that memory is a trope often used by refugees when talking about the partition but it does not explain how they coped with dislocations and transformed it into an empowering mechanism and in not being able to explain this, social scientists working on memory have left a lacunae.

Besides the memory lane there appeared a number of writings from the 1990s that discussed institutional responses to the arrival of forced migrants from both the west and the east. These writings by authors such as Samir Das and Monica Mandal discussed how the newly born governments operating within the imperatives of the state and nation building exercise came to terms with the influx of such huge population groups.⁵ Older scholars such as Prafulla Chakrabarti had argued that the government's work in the field of relief and rehabilitation was one of non-performance.⁶ The measures that were taken by these governments could be categorised under relief and rehabilitation and according to Das, Mondal and others, the government did the best that it could. Samir Das is of the opinion that the government had to respond positively to the influx of refugees because after 1954 the government figured that the refugees were unlikely to go back and "hence, had to be accepted as an inalienable part of the Indian nation."⁷ Authors such as Das critique how the state viewed refugees not as individuals but in terms of numbers, shelter, food, health, hygiene etc. By doing so however these administrative agencies made it possible for these huge groups to survive and prosper. These authors often conclude that given the challenges and obstacles, the administration worked creditably. They shifted the spotlight from the refugees to the administrators thus once again displacing the refugees from the main narrative of partition and displacement.

Apart from these, there are other scholars who have tried to understand the refugee experience through experiences of particular refugee communities. Shekhar Bandyopadhyay, Joya Chatterjee and also Udit Sen belong to this school of thought. These authors feel that by generalising much of the richness of individual or community, refugee experiences are lost. Also they feel that each population group had experiences that were unique to that group and cannot be reducible. Joya Chatterjee in one of her talks makes another argument that both India and Pakistan made identical responses to partition refugees who in turn influenced to make citizenship an issue far removed from the basis of *jus soli* to something much more ethnicised and complex.⁸ Although there is much that can be applauded in these writings but even these authors were overly concerned with state responses in creating the refugee identity. Although these authors argued that refugee experiences were crucial in creating the modern nation but they did not make any claim about the agency of refugees transforming notions of citizenship. Perhaps there is another way of looking at refugee experiences that has been undertaken by authors such as Dipankar Sinha who talks about the self help initiatives of refugees who set up colonies and markets and strategize on their lives and lived experiences of their neighbours for sheer survival. Sinha speaks of how these self-help initiatives have given the refugees from the east the image of being "hard-working, spirited and having 'never say die' attitude."⁹ The authors who have either dealt with communities of displaced or refugee activities in building localities have seen refugees as agents of their own lives. It is true that their own lives were sometimes torn apart by greater forces than their own selves. But it is not to be denied that they were agents and through their agentive and communitarian struggles they emerged as

empowered communities. However, to these authors question of citizenship of the refugees was not primary but they were more concerned with how the refugee identity evolved.

Although partition refugees in West Bengal has now become a favourite topic of research for many scholars and a number of research scholars in different universities in West Bengal are doing their PhD in this topic but still there are aspects that have not been studied adequately. One such aspect is how the refugee movement became part of the popular movements in West Bengal in the 1950s and 1960s. Refugees fighting for land titles and the role of UCRC has been studied by a few authors but has not been adequately connected to the larger popular movements. Most of these authors have not tried to portray its connections with movement against eviction, movement for land rights, food movements, tram movement or the still nascent women's movement.

In this paper we will endeavour to explore that connection. It is common knowledge that the decade of the 50s saw the birth of a number of micro movements in which refugees took active part. All these movements for instance, food, tram and teachers' had garnered massive support from the general mass of people. We investigate the reason in this paper and seek to understand what was so special in the 50s that saw the involvement of refugees in 'popular' or mass movements or were there a different logic behind these movements? This paper will thus seek to analyze the reason of visibility of a large number of refugees in these micro movements.

The argument that we make is that refugee leaders never perceived of themselves as refugees. They always considered themselves as citizens and to them the only known way of achieving that recognition was through strident claims. To establish this claim of nationality, of which they had firsthand experience of how vulnerable such claims can be, they tried to reinforce it by creating a movement. Whether such a movement was consciously created or not, it brought to the forefront issues that were highly contentious. Claims to citizenship could not be made without claims to land, food, right to politically represent oneself, right to mobility etc. All these issues had the potential of becoming another movement and with every movement the refugees started creating a vanguard of empathisers and sympathisers. Land movement brought them in direct confrontation with land owners but the movement swelled because it appealed to many people who may not have been refugees. Thus refugee leaders created the refugee movement that catapulted them into multiple other movements that inturn reinforced their claims to citizenship. But this citizenship was of a particular kind of avant guard; unsettled, strident and marginal form that found resonance with that of the oppositional left politics of the time. We argue that the refugee movement was not merely one of the many popular movements of the 1950s Bengal but the spring board for other forms of radical movements and that was the specificity of the 1950s refugee movement in Bengal. The voices of some leading refugee activists will reinforce this dynamics.

Voices of Refugee Leaders

Now we shall look into some of the individual stories of partition refugees to unveil the genesis of refugee movement(s) emanating from various colonies, the class of people that settled in these colonies and the pattern of their settlement. The colony refugees were distinct from refugees who were settled in camps aided by the government. The refugee narratives that we will present here are of two types of people: some of them were to begin with ordinary men without direct party affiliations and some others are important political figures but both these groups ultimately came to lead refugee movements. Through their narratives we intend to bring out the discursive politics of claim making in the nascent state of West Bengal in 1950s.

Tejendralal Dutta, who had hailed from Chittagong with his family, in his memoir notes how “snatching” barren lands deserted by Muslims were their right because they were forced to leave their own lands in East Bengal. Taking immense pride in his Chittagonian roots, a place known for its revolutionary activities for independence of the nation, Dutta emphatically states in his memoir that it was the support and sacrifice of millions that had ushered in the freedom of the country. Leaving their own home at the price of this hard earned freedom was also their sacrifice for the mother land. Hence it was the duty of the newly formed governments to honour this. Many refugees like Dutta were also quite resourceful in their own places. The partition, leading to their migration across the border, leaving behind everything was a very painful part of their lives. This was aggravated by the inadequate resources in the new place coupled with what they perceived as lack of support from the government. This created angst against the Congress, which was in power in Centre and West Bengal at the time. Dutta writes in his memoir that it was the duty of the government to resettle them adequately; instead the refugees had to spend days in Sealdah station before being taken away to refugee camps. Those like Dutta, who had relatives in this side of Bengal, did not rely upon the government to rehabilitate them. Instead they searched for places which could be turned into refugee colonies or in Bengali what is known as ‘Jabardakhal Colonies’, that is, lands which were occupied by force. Few days after reaching Calcutta, in a conversation with his mother, Dutta said they should live in a colony and join the struggle that other refugees were going through since the government was not doing enough for them which it should have especially because of the promise that the Congress had made before the partition. Hence despite getting a shelter, a place where they could stay by paying rent, Dutta searched for a land where few refugees were already trying to settle themselves. In his memoir, Dutta documents his active role in the formation of Vidyasagar colony near Bijoygarh Colony through extreme adversities.¹⁰ He vividly describes in his memoir the number of times they counter attacked the goons deployed by land owners and government officials. They used to build houses only after the sun had set in order to avoid attention. There will always be someone to keep an eye that will raise an alarm, in case someone was approaching to stop the work and many times when armed goons of landlords attacked them, the refugees overpowered them through strong will power and counter attack. It was their zeal to rebuild their losses that gave them the strength to fight. Dutta repeatedly states in his memoir that their loss was due to the “betrayal” of the Congress party that actively took part in partitioning the Indian nation. As a result, most refugees settled in various colonies were politically conscious and it was through politics that they decided to organize and combat the government. Dutta was only a student of standard nine when he had to leave his motherland. The tears of his own mother and the pain of leaving his motherland, school, friends and associates thus had made a deep impact in his tender heart, which also made him stronger to face the days to come. They left on 18 March 1950, in a ship named ‘Jal Gopal’ which was arranged by the government to take refugees from Chittagong to Calcutta Port.¹¹ After reaching Calcutta, persons who did not have relatives on this side were taken to government camps.

Dutta writes after reaching Kolkata jetty that, “the entire place was turned into an office. We were waiting for my brother in law (husband of my elder sister), and elder brother, who was already working in Calcutta, to take us to their place. However, probably for the huge crowd they could not find us. I asked mother should we also show our identification proof to the concerned official and leave for the camps like the rest were doing. She vehemently rejected the idea since she was sceptical of the food being served in camps which might lead to contamination. So we decided to stay back in jetty, along with 200 more refugees for that night. Later, at around 11 in the night, a group visited us led by a woman. She checked our documents and gave us a signed document which gave us a new identity. We now became *Udbastu* or ‘refugees’. I was stunned to see the name of the woman in the

document. She was Lila Roy, famous leader of Forward Block from Dhaka. Lila Roy was known for her work for the refugees. The next day I went to a book store in Gariahat where my brother in law was an employee and on finding him, later in the day shifted to kakulia Road near Dhakuria to my sister's place, along with mother".¹² Dutta after living with his sister for a few days shifted to another house in the neighbourhood that his family rented. It was here that Dutta heard the term 'colony' for the first time.

The entire process of forming a colony excited Tejendralal Dutta and as we have mentioned earlier, he was morally inclined to shift to a colony for the angst that the partition had evoked in him. He could find some of his friends and neighbours of Chittagong and heard from them how colonies or refugee squatters were established by refugees themselves solely through force. They appropriated lands of either Muslims or rich landlords (Zamindars). While his brother was terrified with the thought of living in an illegal squatter colony since he was a government employee in Calcutta, Datta was encouraged by his courageous mother to search for a colony. This fight for their colony for them was a continuation of the struggle for freedom. With slogans like "Yeh Azadi Jhootha Hain" (This freedom is a farce) Dutta had left East Bengal, believing that India was still not free, only the political power had shifted hands. Overnight they were turned into a new class of *Bastubara* or 'homeless'. The fight to establish and exercise their rights in the new land through force was thus the continuation of the revolution they were part of, in fighting the erstwhile colonisers. Also these colonies gave them the solidarity and feeling of neighbourhood that they had left. Almost all persons in his colony and neighbouring colonies were either actively attached to a political party or formed new organisations, manifesting a microcosm of burning issues plaguing the new state. Dutta's mother symbolised the figure of the new women who were neither docile nor helpless. They were someone who was strong enough to fight in order to recover their terrible loss that the partition had ordained. Dutta was a supporter of the Congress, although he despised Nehru for agreeing to the decision of partition and he had immense respect for Santosh Dutta, a fervent supporter of the "Cause" (cause of refugees) and main architect of the first squatter colony in Calcutta; and Dhirendranath Roy Chaudhury, famously known as Kalabhai. Both were famous freedom fighters and were supporter of the Congress.

While for Dutta it was the pain that led to his anger and protests, for Indu Baran Ganguly, another firebrand refugee leader belonging to the Communist Party of India (CPI), his protests against the Congress government embodied a glory that was much bigger than the pain that he bore for the partition. Expressing apprehension on how historians will read partition history and interpret their memories, Ganguly in his memoir states that for him it was not a history of loss or failure. It was instead a history of emancipation and victory of surviving all odds to emerge powerful citizens of a new state. He shares in his memoir the experience of actively forming a number of colonies near Tollygaunge, at that time it was in the suburbs of Calcutta. Ganguly was an active member of the CPI but left the party in 1942 when in his own words, the party became 'disillusioned' under the influence of the Comintern which resulted into its losing faith among the masses within the country. He rejoined the party in 1948, the year when he came to Calcutta with his family as a refugee.¹³ The CPI then was trying to build up a strong opposition against the government and the refugee issue provided them the much needed instrument to mobilize their protestors. Many persons, who did not necessarily believe in the party's political ideology, also rendered support to this "Cause" that the party took up.

Ganguly's memoir is interesting because it brings out contradictions among refugee populations over political affiliations. The structure of power blocks that some refugees, who were now the new landlords constituted, their political allegiance and using emotions to legitimize forceful

occupations of lands. Each colony had an individual committee which necessarily did not agree with the committee of another colony. For instance Ganguly says after being part of forming the second squatter colony in Calcutta— the Deshabandhu Nagar Colony in 1949 (the first refugee colony arguably was the Bijoygarh Colony) Ganguly was residing in the deserted house of the then prominent Muslim Leader and Zamindar, Ghulam Ali Minar near Tollygaunge since mid 1948 in exchange for a rent of Rs.50. The entire neighbourhood belonged to Ghulam Ali but the poor Muslims in the neighbourhood largely had cordial relations with Ganguly. By this time Ganguly had re joined the CPI and he was being aided by the party to pay the rent. Incidentally CPI was declared illegal in March 1948. The party was also facing other problems for which they couldn't continue aiding Ganguly to pay the rent which led to a scuffle between Ghulam Ali and Ganguly. Taking advantage of this situation, one group approached him to make false papers to confiscate the entire plot. They tried to evoke anger in him by saying refugees were forced to leave their land for Muslims and hence taking their land was their right. Ganguly, in his own words, was a man of high morals and could not accept this proposal. It is clear from the narrative that forming colonies in deserted lands was certainly not illegal to persons like him, but this certainly was. Another day, Santosh Dutta, along with Dhirendranath Roy Chaudhury approached him. Apparently, they told Ganguly that they wanted to make the area an extension of the Bijaygarh Colony. On the same evening, he was approached by a rival group of Santosh Dutta, belonging to the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP), to build an independent colony there, which will have a new committee with Ganguly as the new President. Ganguly writes about his apprehension that giving the plot to Bijoygarh Colony would mean making Santosh Dutta more powerful and resourceful. Hence Ganguly took up the proposal of forming an independent colony and this is how the 'Azadgarh colony' was formed.¹⁴ The plots of lands were then divided among refugee families on a first come-first served basis¹⁵ in exchange for a meager amount of Rs 10 per family. Members of the Azadgarh colony did not compel the Muslims living in the neighbourhood to evacuate the land but members of Bijoygarh colony, according to Ganguly, attacked them and they were forced to flee the entire area. Later, few residents of the Bijoygarh Colony came and helped Ganguly in building the colony and complained about concentration of power and corruption among few leaders within the colony.¹⁶ There were repeated clashes between the Azadgarh and Bijoygarh colonies and Ganguly himself was attacked by some residents of Bijoygarh mainly, as he contends in his memoir, because he was a communist and also because he formed an independent colony instead of giving the plot to Bijoygarh.¹⁷

Although Bijoygarh Colony is in paper the first squatter colony established by refugees, Ganguly rejects this claim owing to the nature of its establishment. He echoes what Prafulla Chakrabarty in his seminal work on refugee lives and movements, *The Marginal Men* writes about the formation of Bijoygarh Colony. He says that the colony was made possible due to the help it received from the government and that Santosh Dutta had taken verbal permission from both Jawaharlal Nehru and Bidhan Chandra Roy before establishing it with the help of Jadavpur Engineering students and Jadavpur Refugee Association. So it cannot be called a 'jabardakhal colony' or illegal squatter of the refugees. It was neither illegal nor legal but the tacit support of both Nehru and Roy cannot be denied in establishing Bijoygarh, writes Chakrabarty.¹⁸ Udit Sen in this context writes in her piece on Bijaygarh Colony that "the dispute over Bijaygarh's status" provides insights on the nature of refugee negotiations. It was the passive mode of protests that distinguished the Bijaygarh Colony from the rest. Leading members of the Calcutta society having close ties with the Bengal Congress like Santosh Dutta were invited to become the president of the association. The fact that Ganguly believed in a 'secret pact' between Santosh Dutta and Bidhan Chandra Roy was due to the difference in their political outlooks and modes of protests. While colonies like Azadgarh adopted

radical modes of protest, Bijaygarh refrained from violent opposition due to its allegiance to the Congress and hence the clash between Indu Baran Ganguly, as mentioned in his memoir with leaders of the Bijaygarh Colony was only inevitable.¹⁹

Later in his memoir, Ganguly talks in detail about his association with the CPI and refugee movement, where he was largely inspired by the likes of Ambica Chakrabarty and Forward Block leader Satyapriya Banerjee, who were given important positions after the United Central Refugee Council was formed in 1950.

Although Ganguly was a member of the CPI, he was often critical of the party's standpoint on several issues. There were other leaders who were not only prominent leaders and members of the opposition parties spearheading the movement, but later went on to become members of the state legislative assembly of West Bengal. One such leader was Ambica Chakrabarty. Chakrabarty in his early days was a part of the historical legacy of freedom fighters that Chittagong was famous for. He had joined the likes of Ganesh Ghosh, Lokenath Bal and Pritilata Waddedar under the leadership of Masterda Surya Sen to raid the armoury of the British India in Chittagong in 1930. He was later arrested in connection with the case and was made a life convict. However, he was released from jail in August 1946 after which he joined the CPI. A section of the revolutionary leadership, like Chakrabarty himself, was influenced by the Marxist Leninist theoretical discourse of left politics and so joined the CPI that he saw as an extension of the international left politics. Since the beginning of 1950, he became the General Secretary of the United Central Refugee Council (U.C.R.C) and started guiding the refugee movements. In this connection, he attended numerous meetings and led many processions. He was also the CPI representative in the Tram and Bus Fare Enhancement Resistance Committee. For this, he was detained under the P.D Act on 21 July 1953 and released after two days. He also took prominent part in the food movement launched in September 1953. The following year, he issued a joint statement in the *Swadhinata* (a CPI Daily) endorsing the decision of the teachers to resist. He also wrote in favour of the strike and figured prominently in the teacher's movement of 1954.²⁰ After his detention, it was alleged by the government that he had strong connection with the teachers' strike and the movement. Chakrabarty was tried, to quote IB files, for being "an active and important supporter of the All Parties Teachers' Struggle Co-Ordination Committee which took up a programme of actively supporting the Teachers' Strike in Calcutta and West Bengal, as sponsored by the All Bengal Teachers' Association (ABTA)". He was also considered of being 'guilty' of participating in the violent agitation over the enhancement of tramway fare.²¹ Since Chakrabarty was a very important figure of the refugee movement of the 50s and went on to become a member of the State Legislative Assembly later, we will keep on refereeing to him and his discourses on the state of political affairs in West Bengal throughout this paper. The point being made here is that most of the leaders who had taken the lead in the refugee movement were men who had profound political lineage and connections with revolutionary activities before Independence and were members of either the Anushilan Samiti or Jugantar (two pre independence revolutionary organisations). On being the new opposition in a new political order they again took up the onus in unifying against the political power in issues that had the potential to destabilize the government. Most of them also hailed from East Bengal and emotionally identified with the movement. While for others, refugees were the new proletariat who gave them the much needed space for radicalism to question the government regarding entitlements. This is how they legitimised their claims of becoming full citizens in a new land.

Control over land entailed a new power game through which the political economy of the new society was being shaped. This was fought out at times between the indigenous and the interloper and other times between the state and its citizens with the fringes joining to form the new

'core'. As a result, a series of micro movements generating mass destabilisation precipitated into a new form of movement where the line between the citizen and the alien slowly got blurred and the refugee movement became a platform for multiple radicalisms where the players were not confined to refugees alone. Samar Mukherjee in one of his Bengali essays talks about this blur by stating, "I belong to this part of Bengal, and my home is in Amta of Howrah district. I am a pure *Ghoti* (a colloquially used term to describe people of this side of Bengal) so how did I become a leader of the refugee movement"? In rest of this short piece he describes his early association with the CPI. During the early 50s he was the Secretary of the party's local district committee in Howrah. Later in 1953, he was given the charge of Refugee Affairs in the Party's state committee. This is how he got involved in the refugee movement and worked closely with important leaders of the UCRC such as Ambica Chakrabarty and Anil Singha. On behalf of the CPI, in association with the UCRC, Mukherjee concentrated on trying to solve the problem of rehabilitation. He also helped the refugees in finding lands where they could build up squatter colonies and helped them in making them economically independent. In 1957, he was elected as member of the State Legislative Assembly and hence he could highlight issues concerning the refugees within the House. He continued this work even after Left Front came to power in West Bengal in 1977.²²

Leaders like Manikuntala Sen along with leaders like Renu Chakrabarty were champions of women rights providing leadership to the women's movement throughout the 40s. Sen was also an important leader of the refugee movement, joining politics and CPI from her college days. Later, she was elected a member of the State Legislative Assembly in West Bengal. She was a prominent figure in Bengal politics during 1940-60. Originally hailing from Barisal of East Bengal, Sen was traumatized with the idea of partition and did not want to be part of Pakistan. Like many other Hindu families in East Bengal, Sen knew that her family would not leave their home and thus she was further upset with her party's decision to not oppose the partition. The poignant days of riots and distrust preceding the independence, triggering mass displacement of people has been mentioned in her writings, which further shaped her political activism between the period of 1940 to 1960. She often worked closely in association with women congress leaders, transcending party lines. In 'Riots, partition and independence', she recalls the ghastly communal riots around the time of partition, when on a number of occasions; she remained a mute spectator to brutal murders of Muslims in various parts of Calcutta. Her image of women being vulnerable and amenable to violence and not being a party to it also suffered a severe setback when she witnessed Hindu women taking part in mob killings of Muslim men and women. In recalling one such incident, she writes,

I was under the impression that women could not be party to violence. But thanks to what I saw in the Ballygunge area, I had to abandon this illusion. I will not mention the name of the road I was walking down one day on my way to the Rashbehari tramline from Fern Road. I noticed a slight stir. From the top floor of the houses, women were throwing stout sticks down into the hands of the men standing below. I wondered what the problem was. It seemed that the Muslims were coming, and I assumed that they were coming to attack in a huge group. I was slightly scared too as I was on the road. Then I was shocked to hear that all this excitement in the neighbourhood was about a person wearing a lungi. Was he or wasn't he a Muslim? Later when people found out who he was, they were reassured. I thought of something else. A few hundred brave people had come to put an end to this single individual. Why were the women handing down lathis to their husbands and sons instead of trying to stop them? Why does the madness engendered by the riots bring a person to such depths? Why does it wipe out the natural softness of a woman's heart? Why was this happening in our area? Had we inquired around we would probably have come to learn that the picture was the same in the

Muslim areas. This is probably what happens when the animal instincts of a person are aroused. Humanity survives simply because there are exceptions coexisting side by side.²³

During the Noakhali riots, Sen was sent to work in Chandpur, in a centre for women. She was given charge of administering the centre along with women leaders of the AIWC²⁴. Sen was also a founder member of the Mahila Atma Raksha Committee (MARS), which was formed in the 40s. Discussing the purpose of such an organisation, she states in her memoir that, “we felt that the AIWC (the All India Women’s Committee of the Congress, of which communist women had so long been a part) would not suffice anymore. We would form our organisation primarily with middle class and lower middle class working and peasant women”.²⁵

Although MARS was mainly formed with the initiatives of communist leaders like Sen and Renu Chakrabarty, there were prominent non-communist members like Rani Mahalnabis and Leela Majumdar who guided the organisation. The aim of the organisation was solely not gender rights but larger issues like class struggle, welfare of women, children, and addressing burning political issues of the time. Post independence, thus, it was not a surprise to see Sen and Chakrabarty taking important parts in echoing grievances of the refugees in meetings, processions and most importantly, on the floor of the Assembly House. Chakrabarty was elected as a Member of Parliament, representing the CPI.²⁶ MARS leaders of Calcutta also established contacts with refugee women and built up networks in several refugee colonies. Almost each colony had members of the Samiti. This is also mentioned in *The Marginal Men* of Prafulla Chakrabarty. In “the Second Congress of the Communist Party of India” held in February 1948 in Calcutta, the party gave a call for armed struggle with the slogan: *Yeh Azadi Jhoothi Hain* (“this freedom is fake”). After this when CPI was declared illegal many women leaders of MARS were put behind bars. In 1952, the name of the organisation was changed to ‘Paschim Banga Mahila Samiti’ (PBMS) and it was instrumental in shaping the future course of women’s movement in Calcutta.²⁷

In her memoir, Sen writes about the way CPI stood by the refugees when they had started pouring in the new state. She personally toured the government sponsored camps in Ranaghat and Dhubulia in Nadia witnessing the deplorable state of refugees living there. The quality of food and clothes given to the refugees in these camps were extremely poor. Among the mass of refugees settled in camps, there were peasant families who were later sent to Dandakaranya by the government and given cultivable land so that they could resume their work afresh as peasants. Sen also documents the transition of refugee women into being economically independent from being homemakers. She writes,

I noticed a positive awakening particularly among women. Had they not been uprooted this change might not have occurred so quickly. I was often on tour, and whenever I boarded a train I would run into these women who travelled up and down, crowding the compartments meant for women and men too. When I got talking to them, I learnt that some were at school, some at college, while others were teaching.²⁸

She further writes that displacement of these refugee women sparked an awakening into them when the comforts of their homes were no longer available. The daily struggle for survival pushed them to cross barriers and they merged “into the huge ocean of humanity in West Bengal”. They mainly took up work as teachers, nurses or clerks and constituted the majority of working class women in West Bengal, even helping women of West Bengal to find employment. They gave birth to a new class of women, the *Bhadramahila*. We thus see them taking major part in the teachers’ and food movement subsequently.²⁹ Here it is imperative to mention that women who essentially

constituted this Bhadramahila class belonged to middle class women hailing from East Bengal and working outside was something new to them but this was not true for women belonging to rural background or lower income groups, since they were used to working even before the partition either in fields or as domestic aids. Thus it was easy for the government to provide employment to these classes of women instead of finding 'suitable' jobs for the middle class women. Sen's involvements in these movements along with the refugee movement are charted in snippets in another section of the paper.

The refugee movement therefore was never a homogenous one. There was a distinction between how it emanated from government sponsored camps and colonies due to the distinct nature of refugee settlements in the camps and colonies. Colonies were formed by refugees who were mainly resourceful educated middle class persons with caste connections and having relatives who had migrated to Calcutta long before the partition in search of education and employment. The places they sought to build colonies also therefore were calculated upon this logic where rebuilding their lives through access to various institutions would be easier. Camp refugees on the other hand were mostly people of lower economic classes and they were thus dependent on the government dole to fend them. Hiranmoy Bandopadhyay writes in his famous work *Udbastu* that refugees who came before 1950 were mainly Hindus of educated middle class who left their country due to political reasons fearing loss of rights on their own land and lack of respect from fellow Muslim neighbours. Ranabir Samaddar argues that it was the gradual increase in discrimination by Muslims towards even lower-caste Hindus that caused them to continue leaving in trickles from East Pakistan.³⁰ Ramola Sanyal thus writes that the issue "of class and caste is particularly important in understanding the stance refugees took not only in refusing to return to East Pakistan, but also in engaging in politicising their right to shelter".³¹

This section clearly portrays that the activists and leaders of the refugee movement were not solitary figures. They were extremely well connected to the other participants in popular movements in West Bengal. They often had activist pasts that prompted them to take up leadership roles in the refugee movements. People in these movements did not consider that they were separate from the other movements. They were in fact part of a greater churning of society where old order was giving way to new and where groups were making claims and counter claims so that they could shape politics that would aid in their entitlements and recognise their claims to justice which was symbolised by claims to citizenship. They wanted a voice in the future that was being shaped for them. They wanted to be in the centre state of political claim making so that never again they could be driven out from their nation where they found themselves both advertently and inadvertently. But before discussing these movements that fostered such claim makings let us first briefly discuss the context that allowed these people to appropriate the space for such claim making.

The Context

"They came not in scores or hundreds" but in millions, "they came in an unceasing stream. They came distressed, diseased and disabled; they came as *displaced persons* from the Eastern Pakistan."³² Statistics solely can never gauge the magnitude of the tragedy that compelled the flight of millions across the new found borders. The first movement of large groups across borders could be said to have begun in October 1946 following communal riots in Noakhali and Tippera districts in East Pakistan. The second mass movement of people started from the end of 1947³³, continuing thereafter. There were three phases of refugee influx in West Bengal. The first was before 1946,

when people came in Calcutta for higher studies or jobs. The second was after independence and the third major exodus took place during the time of Bangladesh Liberation war in 1971.

Events immediately following the partition led to millions fleeing East Pakistan to take shelter in West Bengal. In August 1948, 'police action' in Hyderabad triggered fresh violence in districts of Barishal, Pabna, Rangpur and Bagura in East Pakistan resulting in a major wave of Hindu exodus. This was followed by another round of massive communal riots in 1950. This had started in Khulna but spread like wildfire in other regions too. The West Bengal government even wrote a letter to the government of East Pakistan requesting a probe into the matter and take steps to stop these riots. The government of East Pakistan however refuted the charges and blamed the Indian media for misleading the people by publishing false reports. By 1950, the figure of refugees in West Bengal stood at 2, 44,564 persons. In 1951, between 11-17 June, 33,499 Hindus and 11,941 Muslims migrated to West Bengal. In 1952, Pakistan government introduced the system of passport between India and Pakistan. Many thought applying and receiving a passport from Pakistan will be difficult and hence another fresh round of movement into West Bengal took place. 10,000 persons came just before the passport system started on 14 October, 1952.³⁴

The West Bengal government was not prepared for this massive influx and there was no proper system to rehabilitate everyone who came from East Pakistan as a 'refugee'. The government was thus faced with a complete breakdown of state machinery and challenges they could not combat with. Although a board to look after the rehabilitation of refugees was formed with the help of the then Chief Minister, Bidhan Chandra Roy, progress of work was slow. The main charge was given to Hiranmoy Bandyopadhyay (as the refugee rehabilitation commissioner) and he admits that the pace of work of the board in the initial years was very slow, especially because right after the committee was formed; Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy had to go abroad for two months. Hence progress of work was very slow in his absence.³⁵ On the other hand, there was unabated flow of refugee influx, their growing number in Sealdah Station, lack of places, food and most importantly sanitation compounded the horror of the situation. Many refugees were suffering from diseases like tuberculosis and cholera. Bandyopadhyay writes in his famous work *Udbastu* that refugees who came before 1950 were mainly educated middle class persons who left their country due to political reasons fearing loss of rights on their own land and lack of respect from Muslims, some of whom were their subordinates in work and status. These refugees were adequately settled by the West Bengal government. Problem started when the influx continued to grow. ³⁶ Dearth of resources from the government led to formation of unified refugee groups who started forming colonies and building resistance, whenever there was an attack on them. Strong emotive bonds were the basis of their survival in the colonies and fight against goons of land owners in a united manner was their main goal. Muslims were displaced and there were reports of communal tensions in pockets of West Bengal and attacks on Muslims by Hindu refugees.³⁷ We detail this later in this paper.

Initially, the central government tried to evade responsibility by feigning ignorance of the magnitude of problem. On 2nd March 1950, Mohanlal Saksena, the then central minister of Rehabilitation came to Calcutta and called a meeting in the Writer's Building. Hiranmoy Bandyopadhyay and other members of the State Refugee Rehabilitation Board were also present in the meeting. Bandyopadhyay writes the proceedings of the meeting surprised him to a great extent since Saksena declared that the centre will not take the responsibility of rehabilitating new refugees coming from East Pakistan to West Bengal. They will be at most given relief. Here was a clear distinction of refugee policy between refugees arriving from West Pakistan and from East Pakistan that the centre had adopted. While population exchange took place between the borders of West Pakistan and India, the same never happened for Pakistan's eastern counterpart. In 1950, on the

Assembly floors, a debate on this differential treatment took place between Dr. Syamaprasad Mookherjee and Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India. Nehru stated in the context of East Pakistan that the exchange of population between two countries was against the social and moral principles of the Central government. Mookherjee retorted back saying that Nehru had clearly forgotten this question of ethics and principles when the same policy of population exchange had taken place between West Pakistan and Punjab borders. But even Mookherjee could not change Nehru's stand on the issue.³⁸ Large sections of the refugees were thus left to fend for themselves. This was enough for refugees to organise themselves as their sheer survival was dependent on that, leading to formation of organisations like the UCRC which we have referred before in this paper.

The Movement(s) and the United Central Refugee Council (UCRC)

Although there were differences in the nature of the movement between different refugee groups, they more or less united on issues of opposing the West Bengal government. During the late 40s, Nikhil Banga Bastuhara Karma Parishad was the main refugee group. Later, in order to give a platform to refugee voices, two umbrella organisations were formed, the Refugee Central Rehabilitation Council (RCRC) and the UCRC with different political ideologies in 1950. Both these organisations tried to address the manifold dimension of problems that the refugees were facing during this time, although UCRC was much more successful because of its radical politics³⁹. UCRC, set up on 12 August 1950, was an amalgamation of the CPI, Forward Block, RSP etc. It was formed solely to give a voice to the various grievances of East Bengal refugees and their demands for economic rehabilitation. It started with Anil Singha being an important member and Ambica Chakrabarty as the Secretary. On 13 August an open session of the UCRC was held in the Maidan in Calcutta. Several processions joined the gathering shouting slogans like *Amra Kara? Bastuhara! Amader Dabi Mante Hobe*⁴⁰ (Who are we? The homeless! You have to fulfill our demands) against the government.

The UCRC was more active throughout the late 50s. The refugee movement around this time was centred mainly on refugees who lived in colonies. It was said that their lives were much more difficult than camp refugees; however this was not entirely true. Refugees in some camps were living in an extremely inhumane condition. Through accounts of these movements we shall trace their claims in a new social and political order. We chart issue wise evolution of relevant events that created the movement from mid 50s. The important issues on which refugees centred their movement were:

(a) On Land and Rehabilitation

If we look closely at some of the activities of the leaders of the opposition around that time, including protests made by MLAs of the opposition, mainly CPI, a natural connection between the refugee politics and the CPI emerges. Left politics became central to the refugee movement because both these politics appealed to the footloose population with a critical mind. According to one record of the West Bengal Government on UCRC, it was the unsettled conditions of the East Bengal refugees that presented an opportunity to the CPI to exploit them for the interest of the party. With this end in view the party had roped in as many leftist parties possible under the UCRC⁴¹. Hence right from the inception of the UCRC, the CPI took up the cause of the refugees and made antigovernment propaganda on the issue of their day to day grievances regarding relief, rehabilitation, high prices of food, control over land and so on.

The most important issue that UCRC took up right after its establishment was the issue of land. It was partially successful in its prolonged movement against the Land Eviction Bill of 1951 and Calcutta Slum Clearance Bill of 1957. In 1951, meetings were organized by the UCRC demanding withdrawal of the Unauthorized Persons' Eviction Bill and stressed on the speedy rehabilitation of all refugees. A memorandum was drafted by the Council in the same year, demanding the repeal of the Eviction Act, recognition of refugee colonies, formation of Rehabilitation Committees and formation of Enquiry Committees to survey the conditions of refugees.⁴² In a meeting in Bandhabnagar, Dum Dum, by UCRC on 7 December 1952 speakers like Pran Krishna Chakrabarty and Ambica Chakrabarty highlighted the plight of the refugees and criticized the rich landlords. As mentioned above, due to lack of help from the government the refugees had no other option than settling themselves in the vacant lands of Zamindars. For this, most of the refugees were even ready to pay a price to the landowners but the prices demanded by the owners were so high that the refugees were unable to pay it. The landowners then applied force to evict the refugees from these lands which were also known as refugee colonies. They failed because refugees also counter attacked the goons. So when all measures by the government had failed, they introduced the Land Eviction Bill in 1951 to evict the refugees from unauthorized possession. The speakers also admitted their great blunder for not opposing the bill when it was being introduced in the Assembly. In order to stand against the Eviction Order and to devise new ways, the following resolutions were adopted:

1. Withdrawal of Eviction Bill and to move against it in the High Court.
2. Withdrawal of recent eviction order upon Bandhabnagar Colony and Laxminagar Colony.
3. To start organisational work under UCRC in all colonies.
4. Refugees living in Muslim abandoned lands should not be evicted unless and until substitute houses or lands were given to them by the government.⁴³

In 1952, the UCRC continued its agitation on the issue of rehabilitation alongside protesting against the high prices of food, cloth etc. CPI also organized several meetings and demonstrations in Calcutta against the government. In its convention organized at Netaji Colony, Baranagar, on 29 March 1953, the UCRC passed a resolution asked the government, land owners and zamindars to accept it. This "Tripartite Conference" of government, zamindars and landowners was asked to settle the real value of lands forcibly occupied by the refugees without evicting them and the process of payment of prices was to be made in easy instalments. The UCRC also demanded recognition by government of all refugee colonies and asked the government not to evict any of the plot holders from possession of land; to finally settle the price of land occupied by the refugees amicably with the landholders having small pieces of lands and to launch a united agitation against the big land owners and zamindars and requested the refugees to make a difference between the small landholders and big zamindars.⁴⁴

In a meeting at Ghola, Baruipore, on April 1957, leaders like Prankrishna Chakrabarty (UCRC), Bankim Debnath (UCRC), Ambika Chakrabarty (UCRC), Manik Dutta (CPI) decided on a strong agitation "for the proper and speedy rehabilitation of refugees"⁴⁵. In order to organize the agitation against the government's refugee policy, a new committee was formed, the "Sonarpur Zonal Worksite camp Bastuhara Parishad", with 37 refugees of different camps in Ghola as members. In this meeting the following draft resolutions were adopted:

- 1) To change all worksite camps into rehabilitation centres and provide all refugees living in camps with lands and other sources of income.
- 2) Temporary tents should be built for refugees before making arrangement for their proper rehabilitation.

- 3) Cash dole should be increased from Rs 12 to Rs 18 and from Rs 8 to Rs 12 for adults and minors respectively.
- 4) Males should be distributed with 2 dhotis each and women with two sarees each in every 6 months. Minors should also be provided with adequate garments.
- 5) Benami lands (lands of unknown owners) and zamindars near camps should be bought by the government and distributed to the refugees.
- 6) Management of worksite camps should be conducted in co-operation and consultation with camp committees.

It was decided that these demands will be sent to the Chief Minister of West Bengal and other proper quarters. Leaders urged all refugees to unite under the Sonarpur Zonal worksite camp so that the government might be compelled to fulfil the basic demands of the refugees as enlisted above. Renu Chakrabarty also mentioned in the meeting that “there are enough lands belonging to the *Zamindars* and *Jotedars* in West Bengal for rehabilitation. The Government was not acquiring those lands and instead was acquiring lands of local peasants so that there is a clash between the locals and refugees”⁴⁶. She also alleged that the state government was spending only a fraction of the amount the centre has been giving to the state for relief and rehabilitation of the refugees. Lion’s share of the money was going to various government officials and contractors. Hence, refugees should no longer wait for the government to give the refugees with land to settle themselves; they should rather rehabilitate themselves by force in the lands of the zamindars. She also assured the refugees present in the meeting that all these demands would be placed by her in the floor of the assembly.⁴⁷ This meeting clearly indicates the support that left leaders had extended to the refugees in their movement for rehabilitation, and that even violence was not ruled out as a potential means to achieve their objective.

In another meeting, under the aegis of the UCRC, the following resolutions were passed:

- 1) To move the government against the Eviction Bill of 1951 and to introduce a new bill for the acceptance of resolution which was adopted in the Belgharia and Netaji Nagar colony conventions of the UCRC, regarding finding a solution to the problem emerging out of forcible occupation of colonies by refugees.
- 2) To start dry dole in every camp. Instead of providing the refugees with tents, they should be provided with 2 bundles of tins and Rs. 75 per family in order to build their houses. Refugees residing inside camps, who were not allowed to work, should be allowed to work and earn in order to sustain them. Doles were clearly not sufficient.
- 3) All possible attempts should be made for the upliftment of industries in West Bengal for generating employment. A committee has to be formed, comprising of members of Lok Sabha and the State Assembly which will impartially examine the decision of the government to send refugees outside the state of West Bengal to places like Dandakaranya.
- 4) To grant an interim relief to refugees who could not make themselves self supportive by that time. The government must increase doles for them.

It was also urged that the delegates in the meeting should strengthen the UCRC by recruiting more members so that it can take up all problems pertaining to refugees.⁴⁸

That refugees were also relying more on the UCRC than other refugee committees like the RCRC also becomes clear from their increasing participation in the protest rallies called by the UCRC. RCRC could not match how UCRC was able to orchestrate the refugee movement. In one important protest rally, called by the UCRC, Sara Bangla Bastuhara Sammelan (All Bengal Refugee Conference/ Convention) and East Bengal Refugee Committee on 11 July 1957, refugees from different squatter colonies of Calcutta, from Sealdah Station and suburbs like 24 Parganas, Hoogly

and Howrah assembled under the Monument, near the South gate of the Governor's House. Pran Krishna Chakrabarty and Ambica Chakrabarty of UCRC addressed the audience by criticizing the government in their respective speeches. They denounced the government for moving an Amendment Bill of Act XVI of 1951 to evict unauthorized occupants in all squatter colonies, without alternative rehabilitation of the squatters. Many Muslims have also been displaced who should also be rehabilitated. Refugee families were requested by Ambica Chakrabarty to donate Rs 8 per person in order to launch a direct action against the government if it fails to respond to the criticisms highlighted in this particular meeting. This rally was joined by thousands of refugees and it continued throughout the day. In the evening at around 5 pm, 15 left leaders, mostly members of Legislative Assemblies like Jyoti Basu, Manikuntala Sen, Subodh Banerji, Niranjan Sen, Chitta Bose, Renu Chakrabarty and others arrived at the rally and informed the audiences that the government had accepted some of the amendments that were recommended by the UCRC and that most of the demands in favour of the refugees has been conceded. UCRC therefore was successful on this occasion. The government had accepted the following:

1. That a visit to East Pakistan by a refugee to dispose off his properties would not debar him from getting the minimum privileges that a refugee is entitled here.
2. That no refugee family should be evicted from the squatter colonies without rehabilitating them elsewhere.
3. That no police force or armed men should be employed to evict them.

Refugees from 25 colonies carrying festoons were part of this rally, including Maniktala, Bagmari, Ultadanga, Muraripukur, Ambica Colony, Raja Debendra Colony, Durga Colony, Howrah Udbastu Shibir, Bhadrakali Mahila Samiti, Taherpur Colony of Nadia, East Jadavpur Colony, Azadgarh Colony, Bijoygarh Colony, Sahidnagar Colony, Ghuswei Camp of Howrah and so on.⁴⁹ Later, a memorandum of demands was also placed to the government comprising of the following:

1. Critique of the Rehabilitation Policy of the government. The failure was highlighted by giving several instances.
2. Those refugees who were being sent outside Bengal were facing tremendous animosity. Everywhere they were being looked upon as interlopers. On 18 August 1956, there was a deadly attack on the Bettiah Camp refugees in Bihar which injured a number of refugees but neither camp officers nor police came to their rescue. No step was taken to arrest the miscreants.
3. The memo also criticized the increasing food price, scarcity of employment opportunities which were all contributing in dividing the refugees and the poor locals.
4. Poor management of camp refugees was also detailed.
5. There was a suggestion that land available for agricultural purposes or fallow and uncultivated lands should be reclaimed and utilized for rehabilitating refugees who were agricultural labourers.⁵⁰

UCRC's policies regarding rehabilitation of refugees brought it squarely to the question of land and eviction. The refugee activists were concerned that over the question of land the government was pitting refugees against the poorer sections of the locals and returnee Muslims. The refugee leadership made an effort so that the rank and file realise that the landless locals and even small landowners should not be the focus of their agitation. The refugee agitation should be against the big landowners or the zamindars. This is how the land movement was born from the womb of the question of refugee rehabilitation. Land movement was syncretic to the refugee movement and not an add on issue. Rehabilitation brought refugee activists directly to the question of land and competing claims over it.

(b) On the 'Dispersal' Policy of the Government:

Another major issue that was taken up by leaders of the refugee movement was the 'dispersal' policy of the government, which is, relocating refugees outside the state of West Bengal. UCRC also held a number of meetings and processions against this move of the government some of which are listed below:

On 9 February 1956, in an open session of UCRC's Calcutta District Conference, attended by 1500 persons, including about 300 women, at the Raja Subodh Mallick Square, speakers like Shri Hemanta Basu (MLA), who also chaired the session, Ambica Chakrabarty (UCRC) and Dr. Narayan Roy (MLA) expressed strong criticism against the government's refugee rehabilitation policy and demanded their resettlement inside the state of West Bengal and not in places like Dandakaranya, as has been preached by the government for some time now. Failing this, it was said that a state wide movement would be launched by the UCRC in association with other political and trade union groups. The speakers were also against the West Bengal Rehabilitation Department and called for its abolition. This meeting is important because Ambica Chakrabarty informed the audience that at the District Conference of the UCRC, a number of important decisions including opposition to the government's Dandakaranya scheme have been adopted. It was also decided that an organized movement would be soon launched to oppose this move. Chakrabarty claimed in the meeting that 10000 refugees had agreed to volunteer in the proposed movement. This meeting is important because the leaders instigated the audience, mostly refugees, by saying how successful their earlier movements over food tram -bus fare enhancement, teachers and anti-merger issues were and hence opposition to the Dandakaranya scheme would also turn out to be a success.⁵¹

Hare Krishna Konar of the CPI, who later on went on to become the Land and Land Revenue Minister under the United Front ministries in 1967, was also a vociferous supporter of the refugee movement. In many meetings, he demonstrated full support to the refugee movement on behalf of the Krishak Sabha. He pointed attention to the peasant mobilization at that time and said that the peasants were also being organized to fight against the land distribution system of the government. He demanded that the government should distribute land both to the peasants of West Bengal and refugee peasants. Speaking on the movement Konar said the peasants should orchestrate their demonstrations in the West Bengal Assembly House in the first half of March of 1957. Denouncing the government, he further stated that all refugees could have been rehabilitated in West Bengal by now had the proposed sanction of 10 crore rupees by the central government had been spent for the cause.⁵² On 9 March, as planned in the meeting above, groups of refugees assembled in small batches at the foot of the Calcutta monument. Several processions were organized by UCRC's northern branch in what was termed by them as 'Protest Day', diverse groups such as Daspara Refugee Camp and Udbastu Mahila Samiti of Titagarh converged at the same place. In a meeting that followed later in the day, it was decided that the refugees would organize into batches and continue their *satyagraha* against the government. The government, it was stated, had already employed violent measures to stop the *satyagraha* of the refugees. It was alleged that police was forcefully picking up *Satyagrahi* refugees and dropping them in the dead of night at faraway places. The meeting was followed by *satyagraha* of 128 refugees including 48 females under the leadership of Sanat Chatterjee of Forward Block, who was later arrested.⁵³

In March 1958, the General Council of the UCRC met at the Poddarnagar Colony and took a decision to launch rigorous movement against the government's move to dispatch refugees outside

the state for rehabilitation. Satyagraha was also launched and withdrawn only after the assurance of the government that no refugee would be sent outside West Bengal against his will and that cash doles which had been allegedly stopped, would be restored to the refugees. During the first week of July 1958, a high level conference on the issue of the rehabilitation of refugees was held in Calcutta, where it was decided that out of the existing camp refugees in West Bengal, 10,000 families would be sent outside West Bengal and that refugee camps will be abolished by 1959, after rehabilitation of all camp refugees. However, this decision of the government was denounced by the UCRC and it organized meetings with camp refugees protesting against this policy on 5 July 1958 and 6 July 1958 in a camp at Habra.⁵⁴

Criticising the 'Dandakaranya Scheme', that is dispersing refugees to a place called Dandakaranya and also Andamans, Ambica Chakrabarty, in one such meeting remarked that bolder methods of agitation was needed to protest against the rehabilitation of refugees outside West Bengal. He claimed that there was as much as 25 lakh acres of fallow land in West Bengal, where these refugees could be rehabilitated. He also stated that an alternative proposal for rehabilitation of refugees within the state had been submitted by the UCRC to the government but the government showed no intention of acting on it.⁵⁵ Criticisms of the dispersal policy of the government brought refugee activists again to the land question. Land is one of the first claims made by the partition refugees and it is one of the most persistent refugee claims. It also portrayed how claim making brought refugees inadvertently to into the middle of other movements without which the refugee movement itself became meaningless.

(c) Impact on Women:

On 8 April 1956, few resolutions were passed in a meeting condemning the alleged action of the government against refugees, especially the violence rendered on refugee women and children.⁵⁶ In another meeting organized by Manikuntala Sen under the UCRC on 9 February 1958, Sen vehemently protested against the Calcutta Slum Clearance Bill. She also tried to organize demonstrations of protest by bustee dwellers in the early part of March. She was also an important member of the State Committee of National Federation of Indian Women (CPI controlled) who held a conference in Calcutta that year. She stressed the need for emancipation of women and demanded for them a status at par with their male counterparts in administrative and related jobs. Violence on women refugees was also highlighted in another meeting held on 8 April, where it was stated that women refugees had been allegedly dropped from police trucks in the dead of night in faraway places for protesting against the government. It was said in the meeting that the police was suppressing peaceful refugee movement with repressive measures like the Preventive Detention Act, lathi charge, throwing of tear gas and so on. Both Sen and Chakrabarty were also against the acquisition of lands of peasants by the government in order to rehabilitate the refugees. In one of the meetings, Chakrabarty requested the refugees to not take up lands of peasants even if the government is acquiring them for the refugees.

Tushar Singha in his memoir recalls the continuous hunger strike that women leaders of the Bhadrakali Refugee Women Camp of Nadia organised in demand of their basic rights inside the camps like sanitation for women. Coopers Camp was the largest refugee camp in Nadia followed by the Dhubulia camp, where at least 70,000 refugees were kept in extreme adversities. Repeated police violence was perpetrated on the women refugees in Bhadrakali refugee camps which were strongly condemned by Jyoti Basu in the Assembly House in March 1952. Women refugees like Sarajubala, Manjulika Brahma, Surbala Sheel and Priyabala De had thus taken up hunger strike in resisting the

police violence and other forms of torture including sexual abuses that the women refugees were facing inside the camps.⁵⁷ Probably at least in this respect colony refugees were still in a better position since they enjoyed relatively more freedom than camp refugees did. However this gendered mode of repression remained a question that was to be analysed in the future. What is important is that refugee activism brought forward questions of physical and economic protection of women, issues that would become the rallying cry for the women's movement much later.

(d) On other Movements - Food, Tram and Teachers':

As has been mentioned earlier, role of refugees and refugee leaders who were members of the UCRC was quite crucial in other popular movements of the time. Starting from archival documents to several memoirs including *Marginal Men* and newspaper reports indicate this. Chakrabarty writes, all refugee men from colonies near Calcutta had been actively involved in the tram movement of 1953. Various colonies of Dumdum, Azadgarh, Bijaygarh, Poddarnagar, Regent Colony, Nehru Colony, Ray Mallik Colony, Lake Colony, and Pratapaditya Colony of South Kolkata took active part in the movement. On 25 July 1953, these colonies were attacked by the police. Refugees who were seen participating in the tram movement were beaten up and arrested. Under the left opposition leaders a committee was formed against the '1 paisa war' i.e., increment of tram fare by 1 paisa. This committee, entitled, 'Tram Fare Enhancement Resistance Committee' had leaders like Suresh Chandra Banerjee, Hemanta Kumar Basu, Subodh Banerjee, Satyapriya Banarji and Jyoti Basu who were also active in their support for the refugee movement and were members of either UCRC or RCRC. Both these refugee organisations had joined the Resistance Committee. Prominent leaders of UCRC were to become prominent leaders of the Resistance committee as well, writes Prafulla Chakrabarty. On 27 July 1953, police again attacked the colonies. Indu Baran Ganguly, a prominent leader of the refugee movement mentioned before wrote how all refugee men had fled the Azadgarh colony in order to escape police atrocities. Refugee leaders of the colonies also used to collect 'chanda' (donation) from colony members so that this money could be used for the movement. One of the leaders of UCRC, Subodh Banerjee encouraged more refugee participation as this was a means for the refugees to gain power in the new socio-political order. In order to gain power and prominence they had to take up active roles in making these 'mass' and 'popular' movements.⁵⁸ UCRC too got more prominence through these movements and paved the way for the Left leaders to be prominent and popular among masses. UCRC thus became the symbol of resistance against all forms of movements that were taking place against the government during this period. This was again proven when another committee, the 'Famine Resistance Committee' appealed to the UCRC and few other refugee organisations to lend support to their demand for food. On 29 July a huge procession was organised that went towards the Assembly House by these committees for the demand of food. Peasants who had participated from different areas like Sonarpur, Baruipur, Canning and Joynagar were provided with food and water by refugee organisations like 'Dakhyin Kolkata Shahartali Bastuhara Sanghati'.⁵⁹ This organisation was mainly set up by leaders such as Indu Baran Ganguly.

That the leadership of these multiple movements often overlapped is clear from the involvement of leaders like Ambica Chakrabarty, mentioned many times in this paper. Satyapriya Banarji (MP) who was the member of Resistance Committee, took part in one meeting organised by UCRC in Cooper's Camp, Nadia, in October 1953. In this meeting the speakers unanimously criticized the refugee rehabilitation policy of the government and administration of the Cooper's Camp. In another meeting held on 29 September 1953 by the Famine Resistance Committee in

Wellington Square, Ambica Chakrabarty criticized severely the food crisis created by the West Bengal Government. The government's violent repressions of the food movement through police force and military were also criticized. He also observed that their movement was successful since it had compelled the Central Food Ministry to come down to Calcutta in order to take stock of the situation. This meeting was attended by 400 persons.⁶⁰ On the same month in another meeting at Hazra Park, Ambica Chakrabarty further expressed his gratitude over the merger of the 'Kendriya Khadya Abhijan Committee' which was a leftist organisation and added that they were now going to launch a vigorous campaign on the food issue. Jatin Chakrabarty added that despite warnings rendered by the Left parties regarding the deterioration of food situation in the province, government was paying no heed to them and was instead bluffing the people.⁶¹ In another meeting around the same time Satyapriya Banerjee and Ambica Chakrabarty strongly criticized the policy of the Congress government for the failure of its refugee policy. Reminding the audience that it were the leaders of the Congress Party who were responsible for the partition and creation of the entity 'refugee', they had fallen back on their promise of solving the problem of refugee. Thus a section of them were forced to construct huts on barren and fallow lands on their own initiative with a view to rehabilitate without the help of the government but with the backing of the government, the landlords of these plots were trying to oust the refugees from these colonies. Banerjee and Chakrabarty hence urged the refugees to unanimously condemn this step of the government under the leadership of the UCRC.⁶²

Series of meetings and processions took place on these movements where refugees actively participated and the IB files are proof of this. All leaders including Renu Chakrabarty and Manikuntala Sen were vociferous supporters of the refugee movement and used to participate in these meetings criticising the government on issues of land, food and so on. The authors have personally gone through these files and the link clearly cannot be missed. On 8 May 1955, a delegates meeting of camp refugees was held in Ranaghat which had prominent leaders like Renu Chakrabarti, Hemanta Biswas, Naren Guha (CPI), Gopi Shaha (UCRC), Suhrid Mullick and others. The open meeting was attended by 800 persons where the role of the government in solving the "refugee problem" was criticized at length. Resolutions were passed in demand of distribution of free cultivable land among the peasant class refugees, free education for refugee children, loans for building houses and so on⁶³. Under the chairmanship of Satyapriya Banerjee a meeting was organized by UCRC on 10 July 1955 in which 300 refugees, including 100 women participated. Speakers were UCRC President Pran Krishna Chakrabarty, Tarakesh Mazumdar, Renu Chakrabarty, M.P, Ranen Sen, MLA, Suhrid Mallick Chaudhury, Rani Bala Poddar and others who vehemently criticized the rehabilitation policy of the congress government. Slogans like 'Pashimbango Udbastu Shammelan Zindabaad', Amader Dabi Punorbashon etc were raised.⁶⁴

On Issues Relating to Camps and Colonies in Nadia

Nadia was a very important place in terms of the refugee movement. In a meeting organized on 29 September 1958, at Kampa, under Police Station Bizpur, Manikuntala Sen, along with other leaders like Jiten Sarkar, CPI and Kumud Bandhu Dey, CPI, criticized the food policy of the government and urged the people to support the candidates of Pragati Sil Nagarik Block (CPI) in the meeting. In the second Annual Conference of the Nadia District Bastuhara Parishad, on 21 and 22 June 1958, at Fulia Colony, Nadia, the refugee rehabilitation policy of the government was criticized by speakers like Sushil Chattarji, Indu Bhaumik, Amritendu Mukharji, Ambica Chakrabarty and others. They also

stressed on the need to raise agitation on the 21 point demands which had already been placed before the government.⁶⁵

In another meeting held in the same year in the Fulia colony of Nadia, many resolutions were adopted for the upliftment of Nadia. The Nadia District Bastuhara Parishad held at Fulia Colony under Police Station, Shantipore, had organized the meeting in June 1958. Speakers like Ambica Chakrabarty and Gour Kundu of Ranaghat delivered speeches criticizing the government of its Relief and Rehabilitation Policy. They also urged refugees in Nadia to get organized under the UCRC and fight against the government for their rights. Resolutions passed in the meeting expressed deep sorrow for the victims of Betiah Refugee Camp. Speakers at the meeting also demanded the conversion of the Cooper's Camp and Dhubulia Camp into townships, establishment of spinning machineries at the Taherpur Colony of Nadia, improvement of irrigation scheme in Nadia and improvement of the clay and other industries of Nadia. One member pointed out that in 1956, the newly elected state government had promised to convert cooper's camp into a township scheme. But no action has been taken till then. The same was promised for the Dhubulia Camp but that had not taken place either. Instead, the government has even stopped dole in these camps. Hence there was no alternative than to lodge a full fledged movement against the government.⁶⁶

Samar Mukherjee, in his speech, in the same meeting, strongly stated that the government has admitted the refugee problem to be a national one but no constructive, practical policy has been adopted till now to deal with the situation. He further stated that it was the duty of the government to rehabilitate the 32 lakh of refugees financially and that it was a commitment that the government could not evade. Criticising the government's decision to abolish the Refugee and Rehabilitation Department by 1961 Mukherjee also thrashed the Cleaning Survey Report of the government and stated that it was a political decision of the government to facilitate the colony refugees in order to divide the camp and colony refugees. As per the report, the condition of the camp refugees was better than the colony refugees. Mukharjee claimed this to be untrue. He went to say that since the Congress government had not received any vote from camp refugees in the last election and so it wanted to dismantle the refugee camps. In this situation the refugees should follow the policy of do or die that is, not to give up their struggle till all their demands have been fulfilled by the government. Manikuntala Sen, also delivered speeches in support of Samar Mukharjee. She stated that the government has spent by that time around 120 crore of rupees but the 'refugee problem' was still not solved. She called for the removal of the present government since this government was incapable of doing well to the refugees.

In the same meeting, Ambica Chakrabarty stated that the present government was a capitalist government and hence wanted to secure the welfare of only the industrial class. It never will look after the common people. He stated that the crisis was not limited to the refugees alone; the local people were also facing a myriad of problems that the government was being unable to address. Requesting the refugees to not fall prey to the government's divide and rule policy, he called for a united move of the locals with the refugees to combat the present government. The meeting was followed by songs and a drama 'Ajkal' by the Gana Natya Sangha of IPTA, Shantipur.⁶⁷

At that time several meetings were held under the UCRC that echoed similar concerns. Repeatedly the refugee and rehabilitation policy of the government was criticized and rendered as the major bone of contention. Radha Ballav Gope of RSP in another such meeting jointly organized by the UCRC, East Bengal Relief Committee and the Shara Bangla Bastuhara Sammelan (All Bengal Refugee Association) on July 2007, declared the government as a betrayer and the only solution to the present crisis can start by overthrowing it. He also levied charges of corruption against the present government and called upon the audience, over 1000 refugees, to launch a rigorous

movement in support of their various demands. On the same day, around 400 refugees from the Cooper's Camp and Rupashree Colony of Ranaghta, Nadia, were de-boarded at the Sealdah station with union banners and posters. They were coming to join this meeting, chaired by Ambica Chakrabarty.⁶⁸ Dispossession of local poor especially poor peasants and Muslims was also a major concern that repeatedly figured in refugee meetings and protest movements. For instance, Renu Chakrabarty, in one of her speeches stated that the government had not yet fulfilled its promises to rehabilitate the refugees and most shocking was the policy of the government to acquire 57 maujas within Rajarhat P.S, which were lands of local peasants, in order to rehabilitate the refugees. In this way, the local peasants were emerging as the new class of displaced persons. Instead, she urged the government to acquire lands of big zamindars and fisheries to distribute among the refugees. Many of these fisheries that Chakrabarty was referring to belonged to Hem Chandra Nashkar, a minister of the government. The nuances of Left politics in mobilizing refugees and peasants at the same time against the government also get clear through these meetings.

Many refugee narratives also testify to the eviction of Muslim dwellers and natives in order to rehabilitate refugees from East Bengal. There are several reports on this and let us give here one instance to make our point. On June 1954, trouble between refugees and local persons was reported to the OC of Chandipore of Police Station Baduria. It so happened, that one Mahammad Abdur Rahman gave word to refugees that he would not enter into the disputed lands where the refugees have settled without prior intimation. But he also contended that the ownership of the land stood disputed. On receiving such intimation, refugees arrayed themselves in groups in order to combat his entry.⁶⁹ The memoir of Samar Mukherjee also indicates this.

In one meeting held in 1952 in Ghola, P.S- Khardah, all speakers including Ambica Chakrabarty, Sushil Kumar Rai Chawdhury, Sayed Badraddoza, Asim Majumdar and others strongly condemned the government for acquiring wastelands, paddylands, religious places, graveyards and most importantly "dwelling houses of the Muslims" in Sodepur, Natagarh and Ghola areas with a view to rehabilitate the refugees of that area. The forceful acquisition of Muslim lands and lands of other poor were strongly criticized by the speakers.⁷⁰

Conclusion

To conclude one can say that the term 'Refugee' was also not naturally acceptable to the persons coming after partition from the east and trying to settle themselves in West Bengal. Not only the state used repressive measures such as lathi charge or crying gas, the refugees themselves also relied upon arms to 'snatch' their rights, in case of a denial by the government. They never thought they are in need of a charity from the existing government but their claim to resources in the new society was an extension of the political obligation that the two newly born states had reached at the price of freedom from the colonial rulers.⁷¹ In the pretext of refugee welfare, UCRC, guided by the CPI, was able to become 'the' voice of the refugees. We have seen how it is almost impossible to distinguish the two strands of movements- refugee movements devoid of any political colour and left movements that did not have reference to the problems that refugees were facing at the time. In a meeting organized by the Bengal Provincial Trade Union Congress (BPTUC), while the general secretary of the organisation, Jyoti Basu stressed on the need of industrialization, Ambica Chakrabarty, who was present on the behalf of UCRC, promised whole hearted support of all refugees in all future democratic movements that will be conducted under the BPTUC.⁷²

Partition refugees figured early on that partition profited the ruling class whereas they were the collateral damages of the fracture. They paid the price so that the Congress leaders could rule.

They never thought of themselves as refugees. Rather they thought of themselves as martyrs to the cause of freedom and so they figured that at least they had claims to rehabilitation and citizenship. As days went by their claims became more robust and they figured that they need to make claims more stressfully as they were being violently opposed by those in power. Therefore the kind of citizenship that they envisaged for their future was one of contention. Contentious politics steeped in violence would be the modality for their claim making. In making claims for citizenship the refugee leadership figured that they need to make claims to land, food, protection, mobility etc. To redress what they perceived as wrongs on their bodies and communities they needed to make their claims to citizenship more robust by assuming leadership in these ancillary movements so that never again they could be driven out from their territory and what rights they considered as their own. In the CPI they found a party that was willing to push forward their cause and become kindred in their movements.

For CPI, the main parliamentary opposition party during this time, any issue that caused slightest discomfort to the government figured in their political campaigns. Refugee issues were such issues that created great discomfiture among the ruling class because this dispossession of a huge group of people was derivative of their own claims to leadership and power. Through supporting and voicing out their concerns, the movement(s) got bigger eliciting more public participation and thus the Party, which had once lost faith among the general mass of people became 'popular' through these political agendas riding on which they came to power in West Bengal in 1977. Thus the coming together of the left parties and the refugees was a win-win for both at least in the 1950s and 60s. Therefore the refugees did not merely participate but perhaps gave birth to some of these movements that helped to sustain their own survival in a land that they made their own.

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- ⁶⁷ Report of this entire paragraph has been taken from the files on Manikuntala Sen, No. 619-36, Part VII, IB, WBSA, accessed on August 2016.
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Tram Movement and Teachers' Movement in Calcutta: 1953-1954

Anwasha Sengupta *

Introduction

“Calcutta constantly appears to be on the brink of violence”,¹ noted Myron Weiner in 1961, analyzing some of the political movements that the city had witnessed in the 1950s. Almost a decade back, similar observations were made by a journalist in *The Eastern Economist*: “The city of Calcutta ...has, unfortunately, a select band of goonda who wish to keep trouble going whenever it starts.... The middle classes of Calcutta, as of all Bengal, have quick and mercurial temper....”² The violence and “lawlessness” that the city witnessed in the '50s was the consequences of a series of political movements on issues relating to 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. Though the Congress government in West Bengal condemned the movements and their leaders as “hooliganism”/ “hooligans” or *goondas*, all these protests witnessed massive support from various sections of the society. This paper will study two specific movements: a) anti tram fare enhancement resistance movement of 1953, and b) the Teachers' Movement of 1954. The main purpose of this paper is to understand the nature and extent of “popular” participation in these movements.

Section I: The Anti Tram Fare Enhancement Resistance Movement

“In the last fortnight there has been a bitter confusion in Calcutta...on one night of darkness, an area of three square miles in the heart of the city of Calcutta was left to the rioters” – the above-mentioned report in *The Eastern Economist* began with these words.³ The reporter was referring to the protests and demonstrations that the city was witnessing since July 1, 1953, as a result of a hike in the second class tram fare by 1 paisa. By the middle of the month the protests were so widespread and intense that on July 16, the editorial of *Jugantar* noted, “The fight for one paisa has now turned into a struggle of millions of people...it has almost prepared the stage for a civil war.”⁴

This remarkable support for the movement was orchestrated from the beginning by the Left parties of the state. As soon as the decision of enhancement of the fare was announced in the end of June 1953, the Left leaders decided to oppose it. The leadership of the Tram Movement came from

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an all-Left Party 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. The committee as well as the individual parties began mobilizing people as soon as they realized the possibility of a fare hike.

On June 25, the fare hike was officially announced. Immediately there were several public meetings and protest demonstrations. On June 29, 150 people attended a meeting organized by the Tram and Bus Excess Fare Resistance Committee in front of Kidderpore Tram Depot. In this meeting the speakers requested the audience against paying the excess fare from 1st July as “people were overburdened already by high commodity prices, and the government instead of minimizing their trouble was going to tax them further.”⁵ When the meeting got over, a procession was taken out from Wellington Square. On the same day, 200 people gathered at Shradhdhananda Park to protest against the proposed fare increase under the banner of *Biplabi Sadharantantri Tram Bus Jatri Sangha*.⁶ Similar meetings continued on 30th June as well. The Tram Bus Bhara Briddhi Pratirodh Committee (Tram and Bus Fare increase Resistance Committee) met at Wellington Square and declared that public would not pay the increased fare. They regretted that the government colluded with a greedy private company against common people. The Committee urged all the Left parties to get united to resist this unjust demand.⁷ Public discontent was also apparent from the letters written to the editors of the popular dailies during the month of June.⁸

As the protest begun on July 1, it received widespread public support in Calcutta and Howrah where tram cars were the most important mode of public transport at that time. In this nearly month long movement, the city became a regular site of protest marches, meetings, occasional strikes, tear gassing, police firing and violent confrontations between the protesters and police. Instead of chronicling the day to day events of this month-long protest, I have prepared the following table on the basis of IB files and news reports of *Jugantar*. This will give the reader a sense of the nature of participation in the protests, various phases of the movement and important events related to the movement, the areas which became the epicentres of the movement, how violent the protest became and the attitude of the authorities towards the protesters.

Date	Places of Meetings, Protests, Processions	Observation about the Day
01.07.53		Tram Movement began with passengers commuting in the trams in large number but insisting to pay the old fare.
02.07.53	Wellington Square	
03.07.53	1.Public meetings at Shradhdhananda Park and Hazra More 2. Picketing at Park Circus Tram depot, Gariahat Rd and Rashbehari Avenue crossings, Russa Road and Hazra Road, Lower Circular Road and Elliot Road Junction, Curzon Park.	Jyotish Joardar, Satyapriya Banerjee, Jyoti Basu, Ganesh Ghosh, Subodh Chandra Banerjee were arrested. Also three women were arrested. Total arrests around 700. (major leaders received bail in the evening). The movement began to turn violent. Resistance Committee called for a strike on July 4 to protest against the police atrocities.

Date	Places of Meetings, Protests, Processions	Observation about the Day
04.07.53	Meeting at Maidan	Strike observed in Calcutta and Howrah. One railway boggy burnt in Dum Dum station by the protesters. Police vs protester clash in various parts of the city. Police used <i>lathi</i> (baton) and tear gas and people used brickbats, crackers. 10 police injured. More than 300 arrested.
05.07.53	Meeting at Deshapriya Park and Deshbandhu Park	More than 200 arrested. Police tear-gassed at various places including Deshapriya Park. Several, including children in the park, injured. <i>Shiksha Sankat Committee</i> called for a student strike on July 6 in support of the Tram Movement. Students were asked to assemble in front of their institutions and then to proceed to Wellington Square to take part in a public meeting. Trams targeted by the protesters. One tram driver injured. Police fired at the protesting workers of Barnpur in Asansol, killing seven, injuring many.
06.07.1953	1. Meetings at Hazra park and Wellington Square. 2. picketing at Bowbazar Street and Upper Circular Road junction, Shyambazar Junction.	New phase of movement: tram cars boycotted by the passengers. 150 people arrested including Jyoti Basu, Ganesh Ghosh (P.D. Act), Subodh banerjee (P.D. Act), Amarendra Nath basu (P.D. Act) and others. Students participated in strike in large number taking out processions from 12 noon, disrupting tram service. Fire crackers, acid bulbs thrown to the trams. One Uma Ray, faculty Lady Brabourne College injured. Students attempted to set tram cars on fire at various places. Tram service suspended from 4 in the evening. Students lathi-charged in front of Asutosh College.
07.07.1953	Procession from Wellington Square to the Tram Company office at Middleton Row.	90 people arrested from Calcutta and 13 from Howrah including Hemanta Kumar basu. Among arrestees, there were students from Asutosh College, Surendra Nath College and Vidyasagar College. Student strike continuing.
08.07.53		40 arrested.
09.07.53	Dalhousie	Police lathi charged. At least 32 injured, 1 critical. 50 arrested including the general secretary of Vidyasagar College. Few from the processions of the students from North Calcutta schools like Bharati school, Syamapada Institution and Maniktala High School arrested. Trams targeted by the protesters affecting their movements.

Date	Places of Meetings, protests, processions	Observation about the day
10.07.1953	1. Shradhananda Park 2. Hazra More	The speakers in the meetings condemned police action and asked the protesters to continue the movement peacefully. Called for a general strike on 15 July. 65 arrested. Police tear-gassed. Trams attacked with crackers, crude bombs, acid bulbs. Few including one kid injured. Tram Movement disrupted.
11.07.1953	1. Maidan 2. Town Hall, Howrah	14 people arrested.
12.07.1953		Trouble at various spots of the city, 24 people arrested.
14.07.1953	Hazra Park, Deshapriya Park and Shradhananda Park	Congress declared to actively oppose the upcoming strike
15.07.1953	1. General strike throughout the city and the suburbs 2. Public meeting at Maidan	One person, named Sanyashi Sardar, killed in Jadavpur in police firing. Many injured because of lathi charge and tear gas. According to unofficial sources, number of deaths in the city – 2. 550 people arrested till 8 pm in the night. Rail service in Howrah and Sealdah line completely disrupted. Huge meeting in Maidan. According to IB sources 10,000 people attended, including 200 women. ABTA organized a meeting at Students' Hall to protest against police atrocities. Sailendra Mohan Bandyopadhyay's death was condemned and he was marked as murderers. 70% absent in Writers' Building. 6 jute mills remained closed in Howrah and Budge Budge because no labourers turned up. Sealdah police station attacked by the mob in the night. Stone pelting on police at various places in Calcutta. The increase in the state bus ticket prices stalled for the time being.
16.07.1953	Meeting at Wellington Square with the dead body of Sanyashi Sardar. But because of police intervention, the meeting was disrupted.	Clashes between police and the protesters at Wellington Square, Shashibhushan De Street and Creek Row. According to the government sources 261 arrested. Police firing killed another person at Shashi Bhushan De Street. Army brought in. Suresh Chandra Banerjee arrested again.
17.07.1953	Meetings at Bijoygar Refugee Colony	Tram Workers Union and Tram Mazdoor Panchayet joined the movement and decided to strike work until there was some solution to the ongoing problem. One state bus completely destroyed and few others vandalized by the protesters. Street lights and electric wires were destroyed in large part of South Calcutta and long hours of power cut in Bhabanipur, Kalighat and Ballygunj.

Date	Places of Meetings, Protests, Processions	Observation about the Day
18.07.1953	Street squares throughout the city.	Police and protesters confronted in Shobhabazar Police firing, lathi charge and tear gassing continued at several places. Strike observed in Jadavpur area. Government proposed to reintroduce old fare for the time being.
19.07.1953	Protest meetings at various places.	The situation going back to normal.
20.07.1953	Meetings in defiance of Cr. 144 at Kalighat Park, Park Circus Maidan and Jatindra Maitra Park	Ambika Chakrabarty arrested under Explosive Substance Act. 48 protesters arrested (including two women) from Kalighat Park One reporter beaten up by the police in Kalighat Park.
21.07.1953	4 public meetings at various places in the city	Withdrawal of Section 144 Cr.Pc demanded in all the meetings.
22.07.1953	Meeting at Maidan against Cr.144	Attack on press reporters by the police – 6 arrested and 18 injured. Cameras destroyed by the police. Sibnath Banerjee and Satyapriya Banerjee detained again.
23.07.1953	Protest meetings against police action on reporters and against Cr.144 at Azad Hind Bag, Harish Mukherjee Park and Wellington Square.	144 withdrawn from the city except for Dalhousie Square Prominent individuals like Lila Roy and Prof. Mahitosh Roy criticized the government and the police. All India Christian Association and Jansangh criticized police attack on press.
24.07.1953	8 public meetings at Hazra Park, tarasundari Park, belegkata Subhash Park, Tala Park, Shradhhananda Park, Bijoygar College ground, Park Circus Maidan and Beadon square.	Indefinite tram strike announced by Tram Workers Union and Tram Mazdoor Panchaet on protest of police action on the press and trade union leaders. Suresh Banerjee announced to continue the movement unless and until everyone arrested in relation to the Tram Movement released. No newspaper on Tuesday to protest against police atrocities on press.
25.07.1953	Public meetings at Hazra Park, Shradhhananda Park, Howrah Maidan, Park Circus Maidan, Azaad Hind Bagh	Journalist associations of various parts of the country and of Pakistan condemned police action on press reporters. Celebration near Monument by the Resistance Committee. But the Committee warned the government that the movement will continue until and unless everyone is unconditionally released from bail and the government assured that no tram worker would be penalized for their strike. Jyoti Basu and Jyotish Joardar released from jail. World Federation of Trade Unions congratulated Calcutta citizens and trade union workers for exemplary protest movement.
26.07.1953	Meeting at Deshbandhu Park	

Date	Places of Meetings, Protests, Processions	Observation about the Day
27.07.1953	Journalists' meeting at Indian Association Hall to condemn police action on press.	
28.07.1953	Protest meeting at Wellington against police action on reporters.	No newspaper published on this day.
29.07.1953		Officially tram boycott movement ended Tram service resumed in the city. 105 prisoners arrested on the account of Tram Movement began hunger strike in Alipur Jail demanding "political prisoner" status.
30.07.1953		84 prisoners in Dum Dum jail joined hunger strike. But from July 31, large scale release orders were issued by the authority. Bidhan Roy returned from his Europe tour.
27.07.1953	Journalists' meeting at Indian Association Hall to condemn police action on press.	

Keeping the above chart in mind, we will now try to understand the nature of peoples' participation in the Tram Movement.

That a significantly large section of the urban population was participating actively in the resistance movement is evident from the sheer number of arrests made throughout the month and the frequent meetings and processions that the city witnessed in July. Reporting on the very first day of the movement when the Resistance Committee had appealed the passengers to continue paying the old fares, a staff reporter of *Jugantar* noted: "either to enjoy a without ticket tram ride or as a mark of support to the movement, the second class compartments were excessively crowded on this day."⁹ He added, "from early morning the leaders of the left parties and the volunteers of the Committee were seen with festoons and badges on both sides of the tramlines in the city asking the passengers not to pay the increased fare."¹⁰ Similarly when the Resistance Committee called upon the people to boycott the trams from Monday, July 6, the same newspaper reported, "during the office time, the buses were very much over crowded, while the trams ran with few passengers."¹¹ The strike of July 15 was described as 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 magnates."¹² Indeed, the Tram Movement became a benchmark of success for the Left Parties for some years to come, something that will become evident when we will discuss the Teachers' Movement.

Popular Participation

How did this happen? Why did the movement gather so much steam in such a short span of time? What was the nature of the popular participation that the movement generated? Let us go back to the chart once more. The active participation of the following groups in this movement can be noted from our table: students and teachers from high schools and colleges, refugees, workers from various fields and ordinary women of the neighbourhoods. Before trying to understand why these groups participated, I would like to elaborate briefly on the nature of their participation.



Jugantar, July 10, 1953.

Students and Teachers

The resistance committee, while enrolling volunteers for the movement, had called upon the students' community specifically to participate in the movement. Teachers affiliated to *Shiksha Sankat Resistance Committee* and All Bengal Teachers' Association (ABTA) participated in considerable number and encouraged the students to join the movement. The students' strike on July 6 was a success when "students of most of the schools and colleges of Calcutta participated in the strike and took out processions. The students of North and Central Calcutta assembled in the university campus and then went to two public meetings at Hazra Park and Wellington Square to protest against the government oppression."¹³ The day witnessed scuffle between the students of Asutosh College and the police, and some student leaders were arrested. Consequently, the *Shiksha Sankat Committee* asked the students to continue with the strike on the next day. Surendranath College and Asutosh College, both adjacent to the tram lines, became regular sites of protests. Participations of high school students were also significant. The students and the teachers were further enraged when one retired teacher, Sailendra Mohan Bandyopadhyay, was allegedly beaten to death by the police. ABTA declared him as a martyr and 3rd August was declared as a protest day against the killing of Sailendra Mohan.

Allegations were raised particularly against the students for rioting. A Calcutta based newspaper reported, "in fact it was they [the students], who caused the police the greatest worry."¹⁴ We get glimpses of students' and youth's role in the Tram Movement from the autobiographical

writings of Sunil Gangopadhyay and Dhritikanta Lahiri Chowdhury. Sunil Gangopadhyay, the famous poet and novelist, was a college student and a supporter of the Communist Party in 1953. He actively participated in the Tram Movement: “Every day we used to go to Wellington Square in the evening. This was the centre of the movement. Confrontation with the police was a regular affair. When the police chased us, we used to run and took shelters in the narrow lanes and by-lanes. We would again return after a while with stones and bricks to throw at the police.”¹⁵ Dhritikanta, a few years senior to Sunil, was then a masters’ student in Calcutta as well as a party member. One day, when the Tram Movement was on, he was sitting in the party office with others when a senior comrade brought some petty bombs to the office. They had to be thrown to the tram cars. It was decided that they would be used near Jagubabur Bazar at Bhowanipore. Another comrade of his, “bente Biren” (short Biren) was entrusted with the responsibility. He had not thrown a bomb earlier though he knew the procedure “in theory”. But things seemed more complicated at the “ground zero”:

We were standing slightly away from Biren, so that people on the road could see the revolutionary activities of Biren. Biren took out the bomb from his sling bag and also the match box... he put the bomb on the nearby footpath and squatted on the ground. Then he struck the match and put fire on the bomb. By then there were around 100-150 spectators. A tram was coming. Biren now threw the bomb targeting the tram. But nothing happened to the vehicle. Only there was smoke everywhere. The reactionary passengers came out of the tram and began shouting at us. We shouted back, “Long Live Revolution”, even if it was a slightly smoky revolution.¹⁶

Writing many decades after, Dhritikanta was now sarcastic of the movement and was also perhaps amused by the incident. But back in 1953, they participated earnestly to defeat a British-owned company and their Indian ally. Their natural propensity towards adventurism and their left ideologies made them dangerous in the eyes of the government. Though CPI had left the Randive Line, it was still influential to a section of the students and youths. Indeed, since independence, students had been creating continuous “trouble” in Calcutta. The city witnessed the first major student rally on January 18, 1949, which was to mark protest against police oppression on a section of the refugees in Sealdah four days back. On this occasion, the police had opened fire, killing four and injuring many, triggering off fresh series of protests throughout the city. This was only the beginning of many such student protests throughout the ’50s. More often than not, these protests turned violent.

Refugee Colonies and other Neighbourhoods

Prafulla Chakrabarty in his famous book *The Marginal Men* writes:

...the striking power of the TFERC [Tram Fare Enhancement Resistance Committee] came from the refugees in the squatters’ colonies who had nothing to lose but their hovels; stones, crackers and bombs – these were the weapons of the refugees. Colonies and the bustees occupied by the refugees became centres for manufactures of bombs and crackers.... participation of the refugees [in Tram Movement] was total.¹⁷

This was hardly surprising since at that point of time the refugees were trying to gain a foothold in the city and a scheme like this would quite naturally attract their attention.¹⁸ There were several overlaps between the various demands of the refugees and that of the general urban poor and middle-class population. UCRC extended support towards the movement quite early and appealed to

everyone to observe the general strike of July 15. Bijoygarh refugee colony and the college ground of Bijoygarh became a frequent site for public meetings of the resistance committee. Lila Ray, while giving a press statement in support of the Tram Movement, condemned “severe police atrocities in refugee colonies during last few days”.¹⁹ We get the most vivid description of refugee participation and mobilization from the memoirs. Let me cite a couple of passages from one such autobiography to understand the nature of refugee participation in the movement. Tejendralal Dutta, in his autobiography *Udbastu Andoloner Smriti Chitra*, wrote:

We became involved in the Tram Movement of 1953. This was a completely political movement. The young men and women of Jadavpur- Tollygunj area massively participated in this movement. The movement helped in giving a clear political identity to the refugee colonies.... Jatin Chakrabarty and Nikhil Das of RSP were the leaders of the movement. Jadavpur local committee was in charge of Ballygunj-Gariahat region and Shanti Sur gave leadership to in this region and we worked under him. Tollygunj local party under Pranab Mukherjee was in charge of Rashbehari More and Hazra More....one public meeting was held in the Naktala Udayan sangha play ground....hundreds of people from nearby colonies including Vidyasagar Colony, Ramgarh, Lakshminarayan Colony and Arabindo Nagar joined [the meeting]. We volunteers barricaded the main roads with big trunks of trees so that the police van could not reach the venue. The press photographers mounted the big trees to get a glimpse. But as soon as the meeting started the Garwali police surrounded us. They arrested Atul Pal and Pankaj Da. Atul was bleeding. We decided to *gherao* the Tollygunj thana. Procession of thousands of people proceeded towards the *thana*. The OC met some of them and promised that those arrested would get bail by the next day. A girl from Pannalal Dasgupta’s group was also injured....²⁰

Dutta’s autobiography is insightful as it gives a vivid description of the organization and the activities of the “workers” of Tram Movement, the kind of support they received, the nature of violence perpetrated by the police as well as by the supporters of the movement. On another occasion he mentions:

The group of Madhu Majumdar of Moore Avenue was picketing at Tollygunj tram depot when the police came and *lathi*-charged. At that very moment two bombs were thrown to the Tollygunj tram depot from the side of Indrapuri Studio injuring one tram driver and his assistant. They were immediately taken to the Bangur hospital. Everyone was running helter skelter, a great confusion was created and rumours were spread about many people being killed and injured. The protesters took chance of the chaos and fled. We again went out deep in the night and put up posters from Gariahat Market to Ballygunj Station.... There was a triangular park just before the Ballygunj tram depot. It had a few bushy trees that gave us some cover. Our team had Haren Ray, Ramkanai Deb, Subrata Das and Pankaj Da. Haren was a tube-well mechanic. He had all the necessary tools and he was given the responsibility to uproot the tram lines. He brought two other mechanics with him and they managed to uproot a portion of the tramline near Gariahat market. They took the Kakulia Road and went home by crossing the Dhakuria Level Crossings. I was walking towards Kashba by crossing the Ballygunj level crossing. Suddenly I realized a police van was following me. A rickshaw with a lady was also coming. I quickly boarded the rickshaw. The middle aged lady asked me “who are you? Where will you go”? I said I am a worker of Tram Movement and that I am going to my brother-in-law’s house near Saha Soap factory, Kasba. The police stopped the rickshaw immediately. The lady showed them some identity card and introduced me as her brother. The police left us. The lady dropped me at my destination...Next morning Shanti Sur was arrested from Gariahat More. We were very agitated. Some police rounded 10-12 of us also. Suddenly two Punjabi ladies from the first floor of a flat beside

us threw buckets of water on the police. The police was startled and we made use of the opportunity and ran.²¹

From the above extracts, we find that the movement gathered strong support in these neighbourhoods. The woman in the rickshaw or the ladies from the flat helped these unknown men to avoid arrest and flee. There was a belief that the fare-hike was unjust; it should be opposed. The movement became an ethical issue, people were ready to risk legal consequences. This sense of duty among ordinary citizens gave the protesters security, protection and support from very unlikely quarters. Often, it was not a single individual, but an entire neighbourhood that stood up against the police. This was very well reflected in a *Jugantar* report describing the situation of the nights of July 17 and 18:

We went to tour the area between Elgin Road and Purna Cinema a little after midnight. The residents of the locality discouraged us vehemently. We met a crowd at the Elgin Road and Asutosh Mukherjee Road junction and they also asked us not to proceed. It was pitch-dark. We could see the tramlines burning a little ahead of us. We switched on the head light of our car, but immediately the crowd shouted and hurled stones on us. We turned off the light. We could feel the presence of a huge crowd. Some of them were making *mashals*. A group came to us with two young men at front. We shouted: “we are from press”....then they allowed us to enter. Two young men with *mashals* in their hands showed us the way. The crowd cooperated now by removing tree trunks and junks from the road. We could see boys, young people and also elderly people among the crowd. We saw that some of them were busy uprooting the tram lines. Some middle aged men were supervising them. They told us, “write tomorrow that *we* have uprooted the tram line. We want to see what Atulya Ghosh can do to us, how powerful he is.” They showed that they were carrying fire crackers and acid bulbs. Our two young guides told us, “the government says that we are hooligans! Now we will show them what hooliganism means.” They were from middle-class educated families. We could see women standing at the terrace of the buildings by the roadside. We reached the Suburban School. In front of us, there was a wide empty main road. Across the road we could spot several police vans. Our guides told us that their area ended at that point and police’s area began from the other side of the road. The in-between area was ‘no man’s land’. They took us a little further and then shouted at the police, saying, “Comrades, they are reporters.” Then they disappeared in the dark while shouting, “now they are your responsibility”.²²

Paras or the neighbourhoods hold a crucial site in the biography of Calcutta. From the colonial period *para* as a space constituted social identities, shaped socialities, and forged emotive bonds in an alien city. Questions of honour and dishonour within these newly formed neighbourhoods were played out through confrontations and conflicts. The *para* thus defined the bounds of an affective space; sentiment became the basis of a new territorialisation within the urban. Ranabir Samaddar, writing on the Great Calcutta Killing of 1946, has described how during a riot, “respective zones and trenches are marked, how the technique of properly placing barricades is deployed, armed confrontations take place, how other techniques of urban warfare are improvised and polished....”²³ During the Tram Movement often the neighbourhood emerged as the territory that had to be guarded. Thus it was not a matter of few individuals participating in the Tram Movement, but the entire neighbourhood was there to protect the protesters. And this sense of duty came from the belief of an unjust act by the government and the tram company. These snippets help us to understand the essentially urban character of this movement.

The general sympathy of Calcutta’s educated middle-class was also evident from the letters they wrote to the editors of the newspapers. Some, of course, were wary of the violence. Amulya

Charan Mukhopadhyay wrote in a letter: “the responsibility is to make the resistance movement successful through sacrifices and great suffering. We should boycott the foreign company completely but continue our daily activities. There can be no shortcut to success. Burning down trams and buses, attacking the police and common people do not help a movement, rather destroy it.”²⁴ Another reader, Adhir Charan Chatterjee, was particularly against the participation of students from schools.²⁵ But the general tone of most of the letters was largely sympathetic towards the movement.

Workers

Tram workers initially stayed away from the movement and did not participate in the strike of July 15. This was very significant particularly given “their glorious tradition of struggle against the management and their long history of responsive reaction towards significant political issues...”²⁶ That the Communist party workers were surprised is evident from Jolly Kaul’s memoirs: “the party had taken it for granted that the [tram] union would respond to its call but it did not.as secretary of the district committee, I had been actively campaigning for the success of the strike and the news that the organization, which was the strongest base of the party, has refused to fall in line with the party decision came as a severe blow.”²⁷ Siddhartha Guha Roy provided the following explanation for this apparent disavowal of the party-line: “during the first few days of the agitation, tramway men despite their ‘help’ and ‘sympathy’ towards the agitators, possibly received some maltreatment from them.... however realizing their mistake, they soon joined hands with the people and decided to launch a continuous strike.”²⁸ One of the reasons cited by the tram company for the fare hike was increasing expenditure in employees’ salaries, bonus and dearness allowances. From the beginning of the strike, the company had been saying that the monetary loss caused by the movement would prevent them from paying the bonus to its employees. Possibility of financial difficulties might have prevented the tram workers in joining the strike as well. However, from July 17 tram workers joined the movement. And even after the movement died down, tram workers’ agitation continued demanding puja bonus, food security and employment.²⁹

A labour unrest in a factory of Indian Iron and Steel Company in Burnpur near Asansol had coincided with the Tram Movement. It had begun with a demand for certain risk benefits made by the workers in the early part of the year. The authorities dealt with it ruthlessly and suspended 400 workers immediately and the government imposed Cr.PC. 144. Consequently, the workers’ resistance movement strengthened. On June 23 they observed a strike which received an overwhelming support from almost all the workers. Anticipating trouble, armed security guards were posted within the factory premises.³⁰ The situation further deteriorated when the police arrested 25 leaders of the resistance committee. While the workers marched to Asansol and began a procession in front of the residence of the district judge, the police fired on them killing seven and injuring many. This incident was severely condemned by the opposition (as well as a section of the Congress leaders). Tram Fare Resistance Committee picked up the issue when they observed an All Bengal Protest Day on July 11. They condemned the police atrocities on students in Calcutta during the Tram Movement and in the Burnpur incident. They demanded for an independent enquiry board to investigate the reasons for police firing. From then on, Burnpur remained a constant issue in the protest meetings of Calcutta against the fare increase. At the huge meeting at Maidan on 15th July Suresh Banerjee emphatically pointed out that

the general strike on Wednesday (15.7.1953) though a unique success of the committee, would not mean the culmination of the movement which was no more directed solely against the increase in

tram fare but against the all sorts of wrongs done by the Congress regime, would be concentrated for achieving the following objectives – a) to prevent mass retrenchment, b) to stop increase in tram fare, c) judicial enquiry in the Asansol firing and d) to pull down the high prices of the food stuffs....the movement would be directed to emancipate the whole country from all sorts of injustice, corruption and exploitation.³¹

Thus, tram-fare became one more item in the long list of grievances against the government. An essentially urban movement based at Calcutta managed to have some impact on the regional towns and industrial areas of West Bengal because of the leaders' ability to club other issues with the main demand of reinforcing the old tram fare. The strike on July 15 was successful in Bardhaman, Siuri, Chandannagar and Baharampore. It received positive response from industrial areas of Calcutta and Howrah as well. 6 jute mills remained completely shut because no mill workers turned up.³² A few other jute mills witnessed a little more than 30% attendance and ran intermittently on that day. Only two mills worked throughout the day. Cossipore and Ichhapore Ordinance factory remained completely shut.

People's Movement

One of the main reasons for the huge support behind Tram Movement was due to the fact that it could be portrayed as a struggle against colonial power. According to the Calcutta Tramways Act, 1951, the Tram Company was given an assured tenure of 20 years after which the state government would acquire the right to purchase the Calcutta tramways at a fixed price of 3,75,000 GBP in 1972. This step was criticized by the Left parties who demanded immediate nationalization of the tram company. A movement against the British-owned tram company could get a nationalist colour very easily. Government bus fare had also increased simultaneously. But the tram cars became the exclusive symbol and the targets of the movement.³³ When the boycotting phase began, one of the popular slogans of the protesters was "*Bus e jabo, bete jabo, tram e jabo na*" [we will travel by bus or we will walk but we will not take the tram]. Throwing fire crackers and brickbats to the moving trams, uprooting the tramlines and obstructing the movement of trams in various ways became common modes of protests. This was evident in the estimates provided by the tram company agent that the protesters had vandalized 60 trams in the first 6 days of the movement.³⁴ This number increased as the movement progressed. While mobilizing the crowd, the Left leaders harped on the particular issue of British capital vs. peoples' interest. For example, on July 7, in a huge gathering of students under the banner of *Siksha Sankat Pratirodh Committee* and Tram and Bus Fare Enhancement Resistance Committee, a speaker appealed to everyone to boycott trams. Invoking the memories of the recent colonial past, he said, "Tram Movement is another version of the boycott movement of 1905."³⁵ A letter addressed to the editor of *Jugantar* compared the Congress Ministry with the colonial rulers: "like every Swadeshi movement during British rule was termed as hooliganism by the government, [the Congress government] also perceives the ongoing resistance movement as hooliganism."³⁶

There were certain other reasons that made this movement "popular". As already hinted above, the ability of the resistance committee to link the fare increase with other economic and political issues helped the movement to attract various sections of the society and also to take it, even though on a limited scale, outside Calcutta. High prices of food grains and scarcity of food was certainly one major reason for the public discontent and they were reported daily in the newspapers. Mass agitation on food security issues was led by *Sanjukta Durbhiksha Pratirodh Committee* of which

Hemanta Basu, Biswanath Mukherjee, Ramen De were the major leaders. Hemanta Basu and several other leaders were equally prominent in Tram Fare Resistance Committee. They could tie several issues together and could bring in a cross-section of the society. Refugee agitation was also making much news around this time. West Bengal was getting used to sporadic protests by the refugees, in the form of hunger strike, meetings and processions. Again, the leadership overlapped: Suresh Chandra Banerjee, Ambika Charan Chakrabarty, Sibnath Banerjee, Jyoti Basu, Hemanta Kumar Basu, Mani Kuntala Sen were prominent figures in these various movements.

Government's Attitude towards the Movement

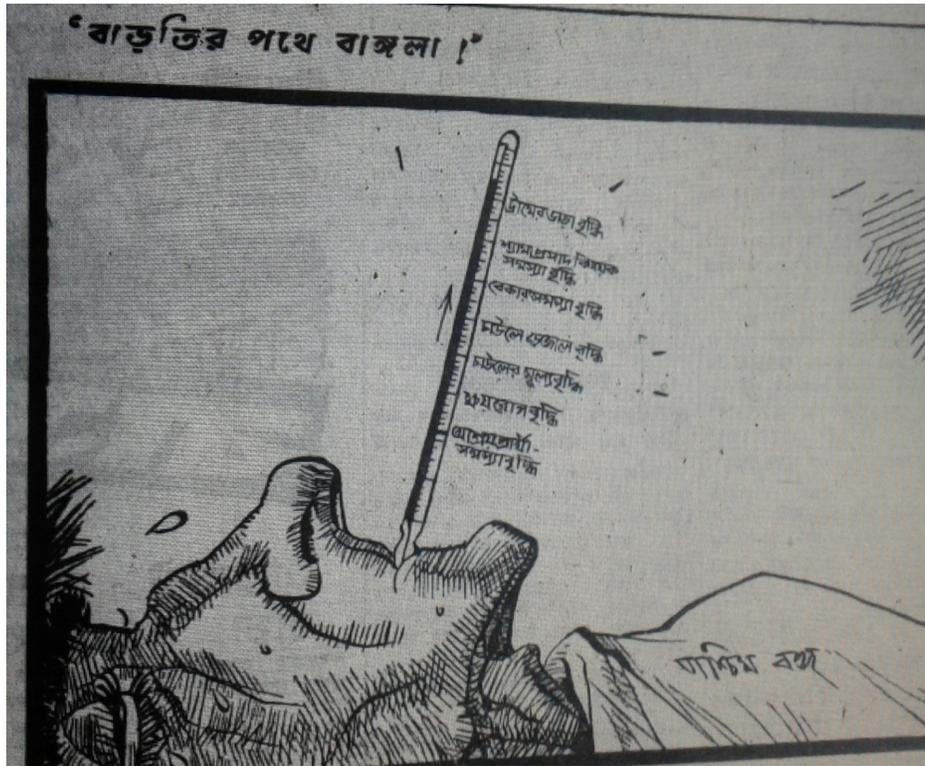
Before going to the next section on Teachers' Movement, let me very briefly touch upon the ways in which the government responded to the movement. When the city was witnessing massive protests against the second class tram fare hike, Bidhan Chandra Roy was mostly in Europe. Before leaving for the foreign shores, he had issued a statement in support of the fare hike saying that if the tram company could make some profit now, government would benefit when it would purchase the tramways in 1972 as the company would only get a maximum of 4% profit share.³⁷ In his absence, the government attempted to crush the movement with its trigger-happy police, army and by arresting the leaders and participants of the movement indiscriminately. Naturally, the government was accused of being in an unholy alliance with a British-owned company and was compared with the repressive colonial government.

The Tram Movement died down when the tram company, at the advice of the West Bengal government, agreed to postpone the fare hike, at least for the time being. A Tribunal was formed to look into the matter and to make necessary recommendations about tram fare. But it remained an issue of public discussion and political mobilization for months to come. When the winter session of the Assembly began, Manikuntala Sen moved a resolution demanding a discussion on the Tram Movement and the repressive measures of the government towards the protesters. Describing it as "peoples' protest", Sen said:

If the second class tram fare was hiked, the poor people who traveled in the second class would have to face the brunt. It is only natural of them to protest. People of the entire state of West Bengal protested against such a move and justly so. The Tram Company had no justification for this fare hike and that was very evident. When the common men had hardly any money to buy food, protest against the increased tram fare was an ethical protest. This was a peoples' protest. This was a huge peoples' protest. Apart from few supporters of the company and the government, there was no one in favour of the fare hike.³⁸

In her resolution, she tagged together other protest movements that followed the Tram Movement: the one in demand of food and the other was in demand of puja-bonus made by the workers. These were all just demands and the protests, therefore, were ethical. The government was accused of being authoritarian and ruthless in suppressing such movements. Outside the Assembly, the Communist Party was now busy campaigning for the South Calcutta by-election, where government's role in curbing the Tram Movement and its inefficiency in dealing with the food and refugee crises remained the major issues.³⁹ The Left continuously stressed on the need for more movements on the line of the Tram Movement against the unjust and corrupt government. And "hardly had the debris been cleared from the tram fare violence of 1953 when Calcutta was again plunged into violence in early 1954."⁴⁰ This time it was the teachers from Secondary School under

the leadership of ABTA who took to the street, demanding a pay hike and an increased Dearness Allowance.



A cartoon published in Jugantar (July 22, 1953) showing the “increases” of West Bengals. West Bengal seems to suffer from high fever, where various problems are increasing the mercury level. Refugee crisis, interestingly, seems to be the lesser concern here, whereas tram fare hike is the most acute problem.

Section II: Teachers’ Movement

Since independence, there had been a continuous demand from the secondary school teachers for an increased salary and dearness allowance. As early as September 1, 1948, a strike was observed by them on this issue. On their 28th annual conference held at Chinsura in April 1953, they announced their resolution to go for a Teachers’ Strike from February 10, 1954 unless their demands for higher pay were met. ABTA also announced that local and central executive committees would be formed to organize the movement and mobilize common people; signature campaign would begin to pressurize the government, teachers would donate Rs. 5 each to make the campaign successful and simultaneous fund raising campaigns would also continue.⁴¹ Keeping the demands in mind and to reach out to people, an “education week” was observed in Calcutta and West Bengal between August 3 and August 9, 1953, when the city was just recovering from everyday conflict between the Tram Movement workers and the police. But since the West Bengal government kept on ignoring the teachers’ demands, ABTA launched a sit-down strike from February 10, 1954. Their main demand

was salary according to the recommendations of Board of Secondary Education with a dearness allowance of Rs. 35 per month.

Support Base

Supports were extended towards the protesting teachers from various sections of the society and different political groups. The Communist Party formally extended their support to this proposed strike.⁴² Similarly the Praja Socialist Party too stood up for the teachers.⁴³ An All Parties Teachers' Struggle Coordination Committee was formed that provided the leadership to the movement. The members of the Committee included Subodh Banerjee, Dr. Kanailal Bhattacharya of Forward Block (Marxist), Jyoti Basu, Sudhamoy Dasgupta (RCPI), Nihar Ranjan Das of Hindu Mahasabha, Amal Roy (RSP), Satyen Basu of Jana Sangh among others. Bolshevik Party of India under the leadership of Sudha Roy was also actively supporting the movement. Manoranjan Sengupta, President, ABTA, and Satyapriya Roy, Secretary of ABTA were also members of the coordination committee initially. Later they resigned, perhaps to project a non-political face of ABTA. The ABTA had also appealed to the UCRC for support. On January 17, UCRC formally extended their support to the teachers' causes and promised to help the movement.⁴⁴

The Teachers' Strike, like the Tram Movement of the previous year, was successful in generating mass support in Calcutta and elsewhere. Throughout late January and early February, the city witnessed several public meetings, processions and protest demonstrations in support of the demands of ABTA. On January 25, in a mass meeting at Hazra Park, Satyapriya Roy dismissed the government's argument that it had not enough money to meet ABTA's demand. A meeting was held on January 31, at South Jhapardah Bazar, P.S. Domjur, under CPI banner where Manikuntala Sen and other speakers supported of the strike. Around 500 people attended this meeting. On 4th February, a meeting was organized in Gurudwara Park of Kalighat by ABTA's South Calcutta Unit, attended by 150 people. In this meeting it was decided that the teachers would organize public meetings to secure popular sympathy till February 7. After that "cease work" would begin from 10 February, followed by a general strike on 12th. On the next day, in the annual conference *Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti*, a resolution was passed in support of the strike.⁴⁵ The same day saw another solidarity meeting organized by Chetla Citizen's Committee. On February 6 similar meetings continued. Hiren Dasgupta, Gurudas Dasgupta and other student leaders spoke at Hazra Park, South Calcutta Teachers' Association held a public meeting presided by Sailendra Nath Banerjee of ABTA, attended by Manikuntala Sen, Subodh Banerjee, Tarapada Lahiri (RSP), Biswajit Dutta (Bengal Revolutionary Group) and Sudha Roy and others. From both these platforms, the speakers appealed all the teachers of West Bengal to cease work from 10th until their demands were met. It was decided that a procession would go out from Hazra Park on 11 February to the Writers' Building to place the demands of the teachers. Similar meetings continued throughout the teachers' protest.⁴⁶ Interestingly, in many of these meetings the government was warned about the possibilities of "untoward event" like the Tram Movement, if they did not accept the just demands of the teachers. Simultaneously, the people of Calcutta were also asked to get ready for a movement similar to the one against tram fare hike.⁴⁷ Thus, it seems that from the beginning of this struggle some of the leaders of the opposition sniffed an opportunity for another round of a violent movement against the government.

The Strike Begins

General sympathy of the students, teachers, city intellectuals, common people and also the working class was in favour of the teachers, even if not all of them were certain about strike as a mode of protest. Particularly prominent were women and students from various schools. On the first day of the strike, no classes were held in at least 130 schools in Calcutta. 30 schools that remained open had very few students present. Protesting teachers, students and other volunteers picketed in front of their respective institutions and several rallies were taken out in various parts of the city. A number of public meetings were also arranged where the leaders of coordination committee and ABTA spoke in support of the demands tabled by the striking teachers. Similarly, Teachers' Strike was successful in Asansol, Jalpaiguri, Krishnanagar, Kharagpur, Kalna, Coochbehar, Bankura, Siliguri, Tamruk and Siuri. In most of these places, students and their parents also joined the striking teachers.⁴⁸

The real drama, however, began to unfold on the following day, when the police force prevented a huge procession of teachers, students and sympathizer to proceed beyond the main gate of Rajbhavan. The protesters sat down on the ground and began their sit-in protests near the governor's house. Thousands of teachers sitting on the road and facing police barricade became a spectacle in Calcutta. Ordinary people, students, teachers and working class groups visited the teachers daily to express their solidarity and respect to the movement. The following extracts from three different sources will elaborate the nature of support and enthusiasm that the movement generated.

- i) *Copy of Telephone message dated 13.2.54 from S.I.S Sarkar of IB to S.S. I.B.*

As a mark of sympathy with the teachers squatting on the Government House East at about 11.45 hrs from students numbering about 500 including 25 females of Surendranath College, Charuchandra College and Bidyasaar College arrived there in a procession shouting usual slogans in connection with the ABTA movements and mixed up with them. the number of squatters at present has been swelled upto 1000 of whom prominent following members are seen Satyapriya Roy, Manoranjan Sengupta (president ABTA), Anila Debi (teacher, BPSF), Sudha Roy (teacher, BPI). On behalf of the Chamber of Commerce Employees Union [and] Metropol Hotel Workers, some food was sent to the teachers. Kashi Viswanath Seva samiti is supplying water and collection being made in full swing to continue their struggle....so far it is learnt that the sum of Rs.500 have already been realized from the sympathizers of the teachers' struggle....⁴⁹

- ii) Describing the situation of the next day (14.2.54) *Jugantar* reported on 15.2.54:

The hundreds of squatting teachers in the Government Place East, facing the police barricade for last 83 hours, has become a symbol of protest of all laboring class people. On Sunday, labourers, workers, common people visited them throughout the day. They donated money and foodstuffs.... Generally we see very little people in Dalhousie area on a holiday. But on Sunday from noon to 10 in the night this place was crowded. Many came with their children and family. Teacher and student volunteers controlled the crowd efficiently and made a human chain around the protesting teachers. The police force has shown remarkable restraint and they also formed a human chain surrounding the teachers. The teachers are also very polite towards the police....the college and university teachers' association also extended their support to the squatting teachers. They came in a procession from Maidan and congratulated the teachers...one gentleman from Howrah and one primary school teacher have donated two gold finger rings to the satyagrabi teachers. Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti, Lichubagan Refugee Association,

Motijhil Students' Union, Deshapran Birendranath Institution, Naktala Government Colony Cultural Association, Nayamichhil, Rakhi sangha Chetla, Sealdah Hawkers' Corner, Jagubabur Bazar, Deshpriya Institution, Palpara Deshpriya Nagar Colony etc have send money to the protesting teachers.

iii) Description of February 15 from Shachindra kumar Mazumdar's *Chuannor Smaraniya 12 din*⁵⁰

250 teachers came and sat with us in the protest. The cold nights and very warm days took a toll on many teachers. A temporary medical camp was opened where 30 teachers were treated. A relief committee with many students from Medical College came to treat us. They also gave us vaccine to prevent cholera. Several departments were operational – publicity, finance, store and volunteer. A bakery sent 250 breads. A grocer sent around 92 kgs of muri (puffed rice). A student of class five brought with him some luchi for the teachers. It was an emotional scene. Processions of various labour unions and workers union of several merchant firms came to the spot. We collected Rs.2500 that day. A terribly ill little boy sent Rs. 3 from Howrah Hospital. From almost all the schools of Calcutta two representative teachers came. Teachers also came from Bongaon, Shantipur, Ranaghat, Katwa, Daihat, Hatgobindapur, Jonai, Mahesh, Rishra, Asansol, Kolaghat.

One may note here that the emotion and sympathy that the Teachers' Strike invoked was reflected in contemporary literature and films as well. "Kaste Kabi" Dinesh Das (who was also a participant in the strike) wrote in one of his poems, "Samabedanae anuraage Banglar puritan writpindo jaage/ akasmat/ tomar amar haate haat dae lakhho lakhho haat."⁵¹ The celebrated film by Ritwik Ghatak *kamolganbar* (1961) also referred to the teachers' struggle.⁵²

Is Teachers' Strike "Ethical"?

Among a section of the teachers and the wider public there was a discomfort regarding the "ethics" of a Teachers' Strike. It was an old debate. Shachindra Kumar Roy wrote that in a preparatory meeting for the token one-day strike of September 1, 1948, ABTA's senior leader Anila Debi spoke in favour of putting up posters in various parts of the city to mobilize support. Satyapriya Roy objected to this proposal saying that such were the methods of labour strikes. But strike itself was the weapon of the labourers, pointed out Anila Debi. After much discussion Roy agreed to her.⁵³ 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.⁵⁴

The issue might have been resolved among the leaders of ABTA, but for many other sympathizers of the teachers' demands, strike was not the "ethical" path. Teachers were the moral force of the society; they had a national duty, so for them it was not proper to come down to the level of street politics. Among the supporters of the Teachers' Strike, there was always a tendency to emphasize on the difference between a teacher and a labourer, even if both of them might use strike as a mode of protest. So, a senior teacher who participated in the movement opined that, "I fully

realize that the position of a teacher is not the same as that of an industrial worker because the mission of a teacher is entirely different. In this context a strike by teachers is in itself a deplorable thing...⁵⁵ But then he justified his action and that of his colleagues saying: “still [the strike] came because it had to come, for whatever noble mission might inspire the teacher in his life, he is a human being after all. A whole life time spent in poverty may at weaker moments rob one of all ideas when children cry out of hunger. The callousness of society has made even stones melt.”⁵⁶

There were two broad current of thoughts among the protesters and their sympathizers regarding the Teachers’ Strike: while one group conceived the movement along the lines of the previous year’s tram fare agitation, the other group was anxious to keep themselves distinct from labourer/workers, even if their modes of protest were similar now. That the teachers had a crucial role to play in nation-making and their movement was not only for increasing their salary, but for a greater good like ensuring overall up-gradation of the education system, were frequently repeated by them. Even if the teachers were in abject poverty, they were not yet ready to be equated with the blue collared workers. Making such claims became particularly important in a context where a section of the bureaucracy and also some members of the government were raising questions about their qualification and were criticizing their protests. For instance, when a representative of ABTA said that even the bearer (*chaprashi*) of the Writers’ Building received more DA than the teachers, the education secretary DM Sen replied that the teachers could very well apply for those posts and if they were qualified enough, they would be considered. Of course, such a statement was seen as deeply humiliating to the teachers and they began signature campaign demanding Sen’s resignation.⁵⁷

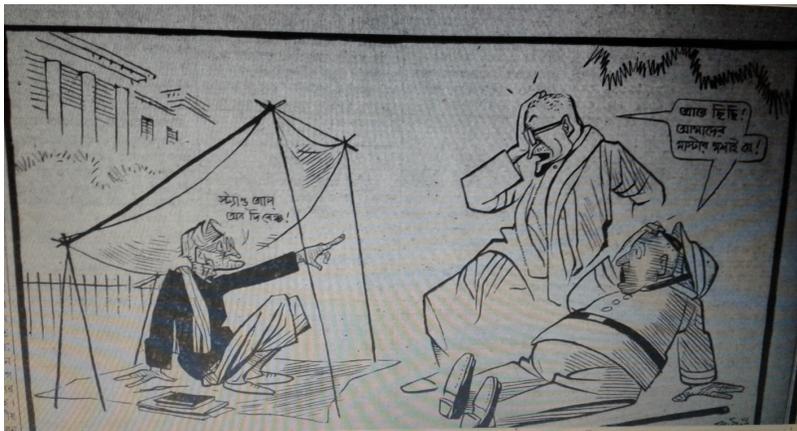
Response from the Government

Unlike the Tram Movement, the Teachers’ Movement remained peaceful in its initial phase. The police was, if we may recall the extract from *Jugantar*, restrained in their behaviour towards the teachers, volunteers ensured that the teachers were not provoked. Bidhan Chandra Roy was also somewhat more cautious in his approach to the teachers. Though initially the government tried not to pay much attention to the squatting teachers, soon they realized the emotional charge of such a situation and began negotiations with the representatives of ABTA. Satyapriya Roy, Anila Debi, Phoolrenu Guha. Manoranjan Sengupta and three others met Dr. Roy on the evening of February 13th to discuss their demands. Though nothing came out of this initial meeting,⁵⁸ the Teachers’ Movement was also discussed at length in Congress Working Committee meeting on 15th.

The budget session of the Legislative Assembly began on 15th, when the Teachers’ Movement had entered into its fifth day. Not surprisingly, teachers’ demonstration outside Rajbhavan emerged as a major issue in the Assembly. When the governor began to deliver his introductory speech on the first day of the session, the members sitting in the opposition interrupted him through continuous sloganeering in support of the protesting teachers. *Jugantar* reported, “amidst unprecedented chaos and agitation began the budget session of the Legislative Assembly this year.”⁵⁹ After around 15 minutes of protest, all the members of the opposition except three walked out.⁶⁰ But the contestations were far from over, as the events of the following day would reveal.

On 15th, after a late night meeting, ABTA declared that they would defy section 144 Cr.PC the next day and would march to the Assembly. While some of the satyagrahi teachers were patiently sitting near the Rajbhavan facing the police barricade, the volunteers of left political parties were busy organizing “squads, street corner meetings and meetings in bustees...in every locality to attract mass sympathy in support of the movement.”⁶¹ All the units of Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti were mobilized and their members from the districts had begun to assemble in Calcutta. The CPI and RCPI aimed to

build up a general mass movement around the teachers' agitation, as it had happened to an extent during the Tram Movement. There was a growing anxiety that if there was no confrontation and if things settled down somewhat amicably, the space for a general movement would not open up. An entry dated 15th February in Mani Kuntala Sen's IB file mentions that: "the teachers struggle coordination committee on the night of 14.2.54 decided that if no settlement was reached by 15th February, the left political groups will mobilize strong at the Calcutta Maidan on the 16th afternoon. [then they would proceed towards the assembly and surround it]..the party workers would be instructed to give provocation to the police, if necessary, by forcibly breaking through the cordon or violating 144 Cr.PC orders, if there be any such, and invite police action without which the intensity of the situation would gradually die out."⁶² On 15th some leaders from a few left parties had also threatened from a public meeting at Maidan that they would not allow the ministers to enter the Assembly until and unless the demands of the teachers were met. Anticipating serious troubles, the police arrested some of the prominent leaders and ABTA members around 2 AM on 16th under Preventive Detention Act. This was going to be a long day marked by violent clashes, as we shall see in a while.



From Jugantar, February 14, 1954.

As the Assembly session began on 16th, several adjournment motions relating to the strike were tabled by Opposition leaders like Hemanta Kumar Basu, Jyoti Basu and Ranendranath Sen. Though they were dismissed by the Speaker, no longer the government could refuse to address the situation in the Assembly. Dr. Roy gave a speech on the ongoing Teachers' Movement and announced the following measures: a) non graduate non trained teachers would receive Rs. 10 as interim grant, in addition to their monthly salary of Rs. 50, for next three years within which they should get the necessary training; b) the DA that the teachers of government aided schools were receiving was Rs. 20, of which Rs. 10 came from the government exchequer and the rest from the school funds. Now the government would provide Rs. 17.5 for each teacher and would request the managing committees of the schools to give matching grant from January 1954, if not sooner.⁶³

Merely addressing the demands, however, was no longer sufficient. About 300 people had been detained by then in connection with the movement. A procession of around 10,000 teachers, students, party members was proceeding from Maidan to the Legislative Assembly, determined to break the police cordon and defy 144 Cr.Pc. A violent clash seemed inevitable between the police

and the protesters. As they reached near Rajbhavan, the chief whip came running towards them and requested the leaders to stop. But this had no effect and the rally continued to move forward. Inside the Assembly, the opposition leaders demanded a statement from Roy regarding the arrest of the teachers. A promise from Roy about their early release would bring the outside situation in control, they opined. But Dr. Roy, while taking “full responsibility for getting these men under arrest”,⁶⁴ blamed the teachers and the left leaders for creating confusion in the city by occupying public streets and causing inconvenience to the common people. He refused to make any statement on the release of the arrestees saying that the court would decide that. By then the police had begun to *lathi-charge*, opened tear gas. The mounted police ran through the crowd to disperse them. When Bankim Mukherjee came out of the Assembly with an all party delegation to convey the latest proposals of the government, there was no one to negotiate with. The whole area had turned into a battle field and soon trouble would break out in various parts of the city.

On that evening, at least 5 people were killed and thirty were injured, 6 government buses and 7 trams were set on fire, electricity connections were cut off in some parts of the city, news of arson came from Jagubabur Bazar and few shops were also looted amidst the chaos. When the confrontation began in Central Calcutta’s office *para* the offices were just closing down and the region was crowded. This added to the chaos. Khagen Roy Chowdhury, one such office-goer, complained, “suddenly there was tear gas and people started running wherever they could. Amidst this, stone and brickbats were being thrown in every direction. To escape the situation alive seemed impossible...we office goers were in serious trouble. Then police firing began. While fleeing, our clothes tore and became dirty. I lost all the money that I was carrying in my pocket.”⁶⁵ Military was brought in by the government. The front-ranking leaders and hundreds others were arrested. Amitabha Sen, who participated in the rally as a student activist, later wrote, “As the police opened fire and started beating up the protesters, the entire city rose in protest. The police had to backtrack at Chowringhee area. We put up barricades everywhere, from Hazra to Shyambazar. Confrontations continued till 9 at the night. Section 144 was imposed on the entire city and the army was brought in.”⁶⁶ Interestingly, a group of *satyagrahi* teachers remained seated where they had been squatting for last few days, throughout the chaos. This gesture, once again, indicates two distinct trends of the movement.

The violent turn in the movement was criticized by a section of the people who had been otherwise sympathetic to the teachers’ causes. A letter published in *Jugantar* noted: “I am unable to understand the logic of burning down the buses and the trams. The indiscipline and reckless crowd must remember that repeated destruction of public property only causes harm to the movement. They have destroyed 6 government buses; who will suffer its consequences – Bidhan Roy or the ordinary people?”⁶⁷ Similarly, another letter in the same daily reminded the protesters that the destruction of public transports would affect the lives of common people who use them for commuting and not the leaders.⁶⁸

Many blamed the attitude of the government and the aggression of the police for the disturbances of 16th February. Jyoti Basu described Bidhan Roy as “our Nero in West Bengal sitting there [inside Assembly House] while firing is taking place outside, tear gassing is taking place and lathi charge is taking place outside the gates of the Assembly”.⁶⁹ If they were allowed to enter the premises of the Assembly the situation would remain peaceful said Basu. Bankim Mukherjee echoed the same opinion when he said, “if the government did not stand so much on prestige and ceremony in defending the sacredness of Section 144 and allow the procession to come up to the corner of the Assembly this would not have happened.”⁷⁰ Bidhan Roy, the sole spokesman of the ruling party for the day, however justified Section 144 and police action by saying, “whenever there is any likelihood

of disturbances the privileges of members of the House required that they should not be disturbed when they were busy with such important functions of the State.”⁷¹ But such separation between people and those who were in charge of the “functions of the State” was no longer possible in a parliamentary democracy where the governments ruled in the name of the people. Therefore, Bankim Mukherjee could claim that “it is the inalienable right of members of this House to receive individuals, groups or deputations...”⁷² and Jyoti Basu could ask whether “this House belong to the Chief Minister or it belongs to all of us – the people of Bengal?”⁷³ Because of such actions like bringing in the army during protest movements, standing by the British owned tram company, imposing section 144 or arresting people under Preventive Detention Act, the Congress government had repeatedly been compared with their colonial predecessors. But in a parliamentary democratic form of government, where members of the Opposition bench were also the leaders/representatives of the protests outside, the Chief Minister could not get away without addressing the situation.

Despite the disturbances of 16th, the movement gradually died down as ABTA accepted Dr. Roy’s offers. For the next few days the major issue for agitation and mobilization remained the police atrocities on the protesters and the arrests of the teachers. By February 20, Calcutta seemed peaceful and the military was withdrawn from the street. From 22nd the teachers joined work and the protest was formally withdrawn. 392 arrested teachers were also released on the same day.⁷⁴

Calcutta as a Site of Popular Protests in 1950s

Densely populated with a significantly high number of urban poor (of which refugees were a dominant section), Calcutta in many ways was Hobsbawm’s “ideal city for riot and insurrections.”⁷⁵ The Great Calcutta Killing of 1946, the February Riots of 1950, movements of the refugees and the Tram and Teachers’ Movements confirm this. As Myron Weiner observed, Calcutta seemed to be on the “brink of violence” throughout ‘50s. Similar observations were made in the columns of popular dailies. For instance, Pranab De from Cuttack wrote a letter to *Jugantar* saying:

Riots and disturbances have become a yearly affair in Calcutta. Writers’ Building had been the eye of the storm in last year’s “struggle for 1 paisa” and same is the situation now with the Teachers’ Movement. Protesters take out rallies and march to writers’, the police resists and riots break outevery riot means destruction of government properties, closing down schools and colleges and utter confusion...if we can move Writers’ Building and the Legislative Assembly outside Calcutta, I think we can control the situation of the city. The protesters will also then move out of the city with their demands and common people of the city will be able to live in peace.⁷⁶

De had reasons to write such a seemingly bizarre letter. Hobsbawm also writes, “...in capital cities the presence of governments...tend to make riots effective...”⁷⁷ Then again he writes: “rulers who brood over a hostile city from some isolated stronghold...may intensify popular hostility, but are technically designed to withstand it.”⁷⁸ Pranab De was simply suggesting that the sites and the symbols of the government, like the Writers’ and the Legislative Assembly, should shift outside Calcutta.

What made Calcutta an “ideal insurrectionary city” further was the presence of the huge concentration of the refugee population.⁷⁹ Since 1947, Calcutta had witnessed massive influx of refugees. By the end of April, 1949, nineteen lakh and fifty thousand Hindus had migrated from East Pakistan. Of this displaced population, nine lakhs and seventy thousand people came to Calcutta and its neighbourhood.⁸⁰ The numbers swelled massively in 1950 in the aftermath of the February Riots.

An estimate suggested that at least 10,000 refugees were squatting at the Sealdah station

complex itself in March/April of 1950. A staff reporter of *Amritabazar Patrika* described: "...Sealdah station has become a veritable hell on earth; it is emitting that odour which the famished crowd of '43 used to spread wherever there was any congregation of theirs."⁸¹ From early 1949 the city had witnessed rallies and protest marches by the refugees and in support of them. As the government tried to pass West Bengal Act XVI to evict the refugees from the lands they had illegally occupied, refugee movement in the city intensified. Their leaders were the same as those who led the Tram Movement and Teachers' Movement, a point that I have already mentioned. Mobilizing the refugee population of Calcutta was easy for the left parties as a vast section of them were *bhadraloks* of upper/middle caste, educated and well off background. They were articulate and political, often with past associations with revolutionary terrorist groups (like Anushilan Samiti) and left parties like Communist Party. With grievances of their own, they were almost always ready to take the streets in demand of jobs, a place to stay or voter's right; but also to protest against the tram fare hike and in favour of teachers' demands. Their sheer number in Calcutta and their support to the left parties made Calcutta the major site for mass movements, rallies, street corners and protest marches. The refugee colonies emerged as the strong bastions of the left. That from 1949, the government would initiate a scheme of "dispersal" and would send the refugees from Calcutta (and its suburbs) to scarcely populated areas within West Bengal and also outside West Bengal (including Andaman, Orissa, Bihar and later Dandakaranya) and also specifically encourage the refugee students to enroll in colleges outside Calcutta, indicates that the refugees were emerging as one of the most formidable oppositions to the Congress ministry. I will not go into the details of refugee politics of the time as it has been thoroughly discussed in another paper under this project. But their centrality to the oppositional politics of the time explains the essential urban character of the mass movements of early 1950s.

Conclusion

Why, a reader may wonder, the Tram and the Teachers' Movement are studied as a part of a single essay? The more fundamental question would be – why does someone choose to study these movements at the first place; to what extent they provide entry points to an understanding of the popular politics of West Bengal in '50s?

The Tram Movement and the Teachers' Movement had some similarities. Both of them had short spans. But they were very intense in nature, capable of mobilizing a large section of the city population in their support. The political leadership was also similar. They had their differences too. The Tram Movement was spread across the city; people directly participated in it either by refusing to pay the enhanced fare or by boycotting them altogether. The Teachers' Movement, on the other hand, was more performative than participatory. It had a particular site where the teachers were squatting. People of Calcutta came to that site in thousands. But they did not come to join the sit-in, rather they came to *watch* the spectacle, express their solidarity. There was always an attempt to widen the scope of the Teachers' Movement, fashion it in the way of the Tram Movement and to take it beyond the site of the teachers' sit-in. But such attempts only had very limited success. Anyone in Calcutta and Howrah could get directly involved in the Tram Movement, whereas the Teachers' Movement was only for a particular professional group.

Despite their differences, it is worthwhile to study them together. Because, that such two intense and violent movements could take place in Calcutta in a less than a year time indeed provide us with a few important insights to the politics of the time. They showed how volatile the situation of Calcutta was and also the extreme ineffectiveness of the government and its machinery to handle

such situations. The fundamental problem was caused by the mismatch between peoples' expectations from a national government and the reality. Freedom, for many, was equivalent to a just society, an end to famine and a government sensitive to the needs and demands of the people. But the reality seemed otherwise: high prices of food grains, acute scarcity of clothes and housing, unemployment, in-fighting and corruption in Congress shaped the experiences of early years after independence. To this was added the refugee crisis. On one hand that aggravated food scarcity, unemployment, housing crisis etc., and on the other hand it also helped in creating enough "people" ready to protest against the unjust government. Indeed the refugees emerged as the most essential and crucial component of the crowd. They were joined by students, teachers, working class and the middle class. Often these were overlapping categories. They constantly complained: instead of providing the teachers with a decent salary, giving bonus to its workers, keeping a check on the food prices, stopping a British company from looting people, the government was spending millions in "absurd and bizarre projects" like underground rail, deep sea fishing, using waste to produce gas, maintaining a huge police force etc.⁸² In such a context, a spark could ignite a huge fire. Many were surprised to see Calcutta ablaze in 1953 after a somewhat nominal fare hike in second class tram. But that a British company could do so and the national government could support such an action were reasons enough to push the people on the streets. Similarly, the Teachers' Movement could gather such a momentum because people believed and expected a national government to be responsive to the needs of its *own* people.

Notes

¹ Myron Weiner, "Violence and Politics in Calcutta," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 20, no. 3 (May 1961): 275-281, 276.

² "Confusion in Calcutta", *The Eastern Economist* (July 24, 1953): 123.

³ "Confusion": 123.

⁴ *Jugantar*, July 16, 1953.

⁵ "External C.'s Report of 4.7.53". File on Jatin Chakrabarty, F. No – 153/45, S.No. 1. 1945, IB, West Bengal State Archives (WBSA), Kolkata.

⁶ "External C.'s Report of 4.7.53".

⁷ "External C.'s Report of 4.7.53".

⁸ *Jugantar*, June 26, 1953.

⁹ *Jugantar*, July 2, 1953.

¹⁰ *Jugantar*, July 2, 1953.

¹¹ *Jugantar*, July 7, 1953.

¹² Siddhartha Guha Roy, "Fare Hike and Urban Protest: Calcutta Crowd in 1953," *Economic and Political Weekly* 25, no. 52 (December 1990): 2863-2867, 2865.

¹³ *Jugantar*, July 7, 1953.

¹⁴ Guha Roy, "Fare Hike", 2864.

¹⁵ Sunil Gangopadhyay, *Ardhek Jiban* (Kolkata: Ananda, 2006), accessed September 25, 2016, www.amarboi.com.

¹⁶ Dhritikanta Lahiri Chaudhuri, *Jibaner Indradhanu* (Kolkata: Ananda, 2011), 91-92.

¹⁷ Prafulla Chakrabarty, *The Marginal Men* (Kolkata: Nayaudyog Edition, 1999), 344.

¹⁸ Sandip Bandyopadhyay and Sidhartha Guha Roy were the discussants of the proposal of this paper in a consultative workshop at Swabhumi on February 28, 2016. There they made these observations. I am immensely grateful for their comments and suggestions on the abstract.

¹⁹ *Jugantar*, June 24, 1953.

²⁰ Tejendralal Dutta, *Udbastu Andolonar Smriti Chitra* (Kolkata: Pratay, 2011), 51.

- ²¹ Dutta, *Udbastu*, 51-52.
- ²² *Jugantar*, July 18, 1953.
- ²³ Ranabir Samaddar, "Policing a Riot-torn City: Kolkata, 16-18 August, 1946", *Journal of Genocide Research*, (published online 21 September 2016): 1-22, 9.
- ²⁴ *Jugantar*, July 7, 1953.
- ²⁵ *Jugantar*, July 18, 1953.
- ²⁶ Guha Roy, 'Fare Hike and Urban Protest', 2866.
- ²⁷ J. M. Kaul, *In Search of a Better World: Memoirs* (Kolkata: Stree Samya, 2010), 182.
- ²⁸ Guha Roy, 'Fare Hike and Urban Protest', 2866.
- ²⁹ See File on Jatin Chakrabarty, F.No 153/45, S.No. 1, 1945, IB, WBSA.
- ³⁰ *Jugantar*, June 24, 1953.
- ³¹ Extract from the report in connection with the tram fare enhancement resistance committee in Calcutta (South Zone), 15-7-1953, File on Satyapriya Banerjee, F.No. 321-22 (Part III), S.no. 41/1922, IB, WBSA.
- ³² *Jugantar*, July 16, 1953.
- ³³ There has also been a long history of protest movement in Calcutta where trams had been the targets of the protesters. Siddhartha Guha Roy has written that "one of the interesting features of crowd action in Calcutta, during both colonial and post-colonial periods, was the attack on tram cars by frenzied mobs." However this is nothing particular to Calcutta it seems. As Eric Hobsbawm noted " tramways, whether in Calcutta or in Barcelona, are unusually convenient for rioters; partly because of raising fares, which tends to affect all the poor simultaneously, is a very natural percipient of trouble, partly because these large and track bound vehicles, when burned or overturned, van block streets and disrupt traffic very easily. Buses do not seem to have played anything like as important a part in riots, underground railways appear to be entirely irrelevant to them (except for transporting rioters) and automobiles can at best be used as improvised road blocks and barricades....". Guha Roy, 'Fare Hike and Urban Protest', 2863; Eric Hobsbawm, "Cities and Insurrections," *Global Urban Development Magazine* 1, no. 1 (May 2005): 1, accessed October 19, 2016, <http://www.globalurban.org/Issue1PIMag05/Hobsbawm PDF.pdf>.
- ³⁴ *Jugantar*, July 8, 1953.
- ³⁵ *Jugantar*, July 8, 1953.
- ³⁶ *Jugantar*, July 14, 1953.
- ³⁷ *Jugantar*, July 3, 1953.
- ³⁸ *West Bengal Legislative Assembly*, 1402-1403.
- ³⁹ See for instance Meeting report dated 8.11.53 at Park Circus Maidan, Manikuntala Sen, F.No619/36, S.No – 106, 1936.
- ⁴⁰ Weiner, "Violence and Politics in Calcutta", 276.
- ⁴¹ Shachindra Kumar Mazumdar, *Chauannor Smaraniyo 12 Din* (Kolkata: ABTA, Nd), 49-50.
- ⁴² *Jugantar*, February 1, 1954.
- ⁴³ *Jugantar*, February 2, 1954.
- ⁴⁴ Prafulla Chakrabarty, *The Marginal Men*, 345-346.
- ⁴⁵ Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti was formed sometime in April, 1942. Though it was set up as a "broad front of women with non-Communist backgrounds...Communist women took the initiative and the leading role in planning and doing the organizational work." For details of their activities, see Gargi Chakravartty "Emergence of Mahila Atma Raksha Samiti in the Forties – Calcutta Chapter" in *Calcutta: The Stormy Decades*, Eds. Tanika Sarkar and Sekhar Bandyopadhyay (New Delhi: social Science Press, 2015), 177-203, 181.
- ⁴⁶ See IB files on Manikuntala Sen, Sudha Roy and others for an idea about the nature of these meetings in terms of participation, location etc.
- ⁴⁷ See the detention order of Manikuntala Sen dated 18.2.1954, File on Manikuntala Sen, F. No. 619/36 (Part II), S.No 106, 1936, IB, WBSA.
- ⁴⁸ *Jugantar*, February 11, 1954. Some of the sympathizers of the Teachers' Movement were uncomfortable with the extent of students' participation in this struggle. Manikuntala Sen, for instance, wrote: "I do not know who

encouraged the students to come down to the street in support of the teachers. But I think it would have been better if this could have been avoided. I know the teachers will not agree with me. But I think this disrupts student-teacher relation to some extent.” Manikuntala Sen, *Janajagarane Narijagarane* (Kolkata: Thema, 2010), 227.

⁴⁹ File on Sudha Roy, F.No 67-39, Part II, 1939, IB, WBSA.

⁵⁰ Mazumdar, *Chanannor Smaraniyo 12 Din*, 97.

⁵¹ The rough translation will be: In sympathy and love Bengal’s old heart is awakening/ suddenly/ millions of hands are joining my hand and your hand. Cited in Sandip Bandyopadhyay, *Ranakshetra Rajpath* (Kolkata: Progressive, 2002), 25.

⁵² Bandyopadhyay, *Ranakshetra*, 26.

⁵³ Mazumdar, *Chanannor Smaraniyo*, 18.

⁵⁴ <http://www.abta-satyapriya.org/index.php>, last accessed on August 2, 2016.

⁵⁵ Letter of Bonomali Dey, *Amritabazar Patrika*, February, 21, 1954.

⁵⁶ Letter of Bonomali Dey, *Amritabazar Patrika*, February, 21, 1954.

⁵⁷ *Jugantar*, February 15, 1954.

⁵⁸ *Jugantar*, February 14, 1954.

⁵⁹ *Jugantar*, February 16, 1954.

⁶⁰ Two of them were representatives of Legislative Council and one was elected member from the teachers’ constituency.

⁶¹ Source No. 2, 13.2.54, File on Manikuntala Sen.

⁶² Source No. 3, 15.2.54, File on Manikuntala Sen.

⁶³ For the full text of Bidhan Roy’s speech, see *West Bengal Legislative Assembly Debates*, Vol IX, No.1, Budget Session, 1954, 47-93.

⁶⁴ *Legislative Assembly*, 58.

⁶⁵ Letter by Khagen Roy Chowdhury, *Jugantar*, February 22, 1954.

⁶⁶ Amitabha Sen, *Padatik* (Kolkata: NBA, 1998), 48-49.

⁶⁷ Letter by Subodh Ch. Das, *Jugantar*, February 23, 1954.

⁶⁸ Letter by Chunilal Dasgupta, *Jugantar*, February 23, 1954.

⁶⁹ Sen, *Padatik*, 89.

⁷⁰ Sen, *Padatik*, 90-91.

⁷¹ Sen, *Padatik*, 91.

⁷² Sen, *Padatik*, 62.

⁷³ Sen, *Padatik*, 60.

⁷⁴ *Jugantar*, 23 February, 1954.

⁷⁵ Hobsbawm, “Cities and Insurrections”, 2, 2-4.

⁷⁶ *Jugantar*, February 18, 1954.

⁷⁷ Hobsbawm, 3.

⁷⁸ Hobsbawm, 2.

⁷⁹ Hobsbawm, 2.

⁸⁰ *Amritabazar*, August 27, 1949.

⁸¹ *Amritabazar*, April 21, 1950.

⁸² This was a constant complain of the Opposition in the Legislative Assembly and also same sentiment was prevalent among the public, as evident from letters to the editors of newspapers. For instance see the letter written by Amaresh Bagchi in *Jugantar*, February 4, 1954.

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