

Changing Role of the Students in Post-Colonial Bengal: A Study on Refugee Movement

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Abstract: *The student movement was not only the origin of Modern Age, but also in the Ancient and Medieval period to the time and development of the civilization. But the phenomenal movement launched by the students of Bengal against the British imperialism which continued after the proclamation of Independence of India. The nature of the students' movement was changed after Independence. After independence, there cropped a serious of socio-economic problems such as the problem of refugee influx, food crisis, employment crisis, housing crisis etc. Especially problem of educated unemployment has assumed a menacing proportion in West Bengal. This has caused wide-spread discontent among the youth and the students. The present study deals with the Refugee Movement of West Bengal. In this movement the students played distinctive role, which is my matter of discussion.*

I. Introduction

It is not at all irrelevant to say that the student movement was not only the harvest of Modern Age, but also has clear evidence which took place during the Ancient and Medieval period as ongoing process of student agitation according to the time and development of the civilization.¹ Like India, similar incidents also took place in Western Countries. Researchers have studied on this matter earlier and even they have been engaging themselves to explore more information on this issue. But the phenomenal movement launched by the students of Bengal against the British imperialism which continued after the proclamation of Independence of India. The nature of the students' movement was changed after Independence. In this period their movement was against the unpopular activities of the independent Government and in favour of socio-economic development of the country. The proposal of the partition of the country raised by Lord Mountbatten evoked a sort of protest or rather upsurge of the student community of Bengal. They proposed that the Hindus and Muslims of Bengal should remain in India with their own religious beliefs. But the fact cannot be denied that the students standing on the threshold of independence could not remain outside the realm of political turmoil of the time. In reality, the student community was in the vortex of the political circumstances of the time. The students could not keep themselves off from the political fend that rocked the political firmament of the time.² Ultimately India achieved Independence at the mid night of 14th August, 1947. Immediately, after the proclamation of Independence the Indian subcontinent was divided into two parts- India and Pakistan. After Independence of the country there occurred a sort of change in the characteristics of the students' movement of the different students' organization.

After passing Indian Independence Act India became an 'Independent Union' w.e.f. the midnight of 14th August, 1947. Lord Mountbatten, the then Viceroy of India was transferred power to the hand of the Indian Parliament. Power was also transferred to the Pakistan Dominion in the same way. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, the First Prime Minister of Free India in a historic speech before the Indian Parliament on the midnight of 14th August said "On August 15, in a historic ceremony the Indian Tri Colour Flag was raised at the Red Fort at Delhi replacing the Union Jack. India started on a new course of her history after the dawn of her independence."³

The people of India, by and large, expected that freedom would beget for them food, dress and rehabilitation. They further aspired that freedom would be the source of illumination of the people through light of education and it would ensure opportunity for employment. The leaders of freedom movement in India promised those to the people at large before independence. They promised to develop India in a manner that would redeem the expectation of the people. They put before the people the image of Golden India. They also assured to build India in the manner where there would be no room for exploitation and black marketers. Even Pandit Nehru threatened to bash them in exemplary manner. In reality, what they did practically differed from what they pledged to do. Simultaneously with the independence there cropped a serious of socio-economic problems such as the problem of refugee influx, food crisis, employment crisis, housing crisis etc.⁴ The problem may be studied from another angle. *The modern sector of the economy in West Bengal is heavily dominated by Non-Bengalees. As a consequence, parts of the earnings are exported. Since expectation has been rising faster than economic output, it is not unreasonable to suppose that the degree of relative deprivation experienced by people living in West Bengal, Bihar and U.P. must be quite high. If this is true, a large magnitude of political*

*unrest in these states can also be expected.*⁵ Naturally unemployment problem, especially problem of educated unemployment has assumed a menacing proportion in West Bengal. This has caused wide-spread discontent among the youth and the students. A sizeable section of the youth has not only lost faith in the Congress, but also in parliamentary politics. Critics opine that parliamentary leftists have failed to provide leadership to the rural landless and the urban youth, burdened as they are with constitutional obligations and bogged down in electoral politics.⁶ The student community of Bengal failed to keep themselves off from those problems. They also rallied round the movement.

Immediately after independence the Congress Party proclaimed that the students needed not to get involved in politics. They needed to carry on studies for the development of the country. So, there was no need to constitute students' organization. The Congress Party showing instance immediately mangled the students' organization of their own. The other political parties failed to get on with the opinion of the Congress Party. The question of the crippling of the students' organization could not dent them seriously. The fundamental difference between the students' movement in pre-independence and that of the post-independence became blatant. Firstly, no students' organization had any independent entity in the post-independence period. They became completely absorbed with political parties of their linking. Only the AISF affiliated to Communist Party of India was the only students' organization that could dilate its influence throughout the country. It was only in West Bengal all the political parties gave birth to students' organization of their own such as Chhatra Bloc affiliated to Forward Bloc, Progressive Students' Union affiliated to Revolutionary Socialist Party, Democratic Students' Organization affiliated to Socialist Unity Centre of India, and Students' Association affiliated to Socialist Party etc. Even the Congress Party brought into being Chhatra Parisad as their students' wing in Bengal.⁷ Meanwhile, the disappearance of the Communal Student League affiliated to the Muslim League and pampering of the secessionist movement by the Hindu Communalist or Hindu Chauvinists extended lengthening shadow of impending danger in the students' movement in Bengal.⁸

After the achievement of Independence the students involved themselves in various socio-economic movements. The present study deals with the **Refugee Movement of West Bengal**.

As a fall out of the partition of the country, millions of refugees migrated to the West Punjab from the East Punjab and vice versa. The refugees also migrated from East Bengal to West Bengal. The problem of Punjab was resolved by the then Congress Government of Delhi as very human manner and with realistic perception. But in case of West Bengal the Congress Government of Delhi did not deal with the problem of the refugees in such manner. In reality the Union Government was reluctant to take responsibility for the rehabilitation of the refugees from East Bengal and as a result the Government exhibited sheer inhuman on that score.⁹

The history of the migration of the Hindus from East Pakistan after separation is one of the most terrible episodes of present-day history. It is the tale of the uprooting of a virile population extremely attached to their beautiful land. In Bengal, it was a heartbreaking prolonged process. It started before partition with the Naokhali riots of 1946 and continues downstairs to this day. The migrants came in impression. At times the migration hit West Bengal in the shape of terrible breakers and often subsided into a trickle. But, except for a very brief time, it never stopped. It will not bring to an end until the last of the non-Muslims is driven out of that country. This is the approved manner of solving the minority trouble in Islamic countries. So the frustrating treks from the East to the West countries. In the meantime, East Pakistan has transformed itself into Bangladesh. But the process has not been kept back except for the lucid interval of the Mujib Regime. Gradually but steadily a whole people is being squeezed out of the country by economic and social exclusion and by pogroms at regular intervals.¹⁰ The sense of uncertainty which developed among the East Bengal Hindus during the hatred campaign between the Nizam and the Government of India foregoing the police action led to a panicky migration from East Pakistan.¹¹ The refugees who sought shelter in Government camps represented only a small division of the total influx. A huge number of those who crossed into West Bengal, Tripura and Assam tried to fend for themselves. The Census of 1951 was at least 3.5 million refugees in West Bengal.

As a result of the large scale influx of refugees there cropped up the problems of food, dress and rehabilitation. On the other hand, the independent Government of India and the Provincial Government of that time did not deal with the refugees in human manner and it led the refugees to rise in movement. The then opposition parties also stood by them. On 11th January, 1949 the refugees brought out procession from Sealdah Station, Kolkata to place their demands, but the police resorted indiscriminate lathi charge and used tear gas to disperse the rebellious refugees in the street. On the next day i.e. 12th January, 1949 the students, as a mark of protest against the cruel act of the police, organized strike and supported the demands of the refugees. Thereafter, on 18th January, 1949 responding to the call of BPSF thousands of students assembled at the premises of Calcutta University. A meeting was held and they organized a protest rally after that. As expected, the police used force to disperse the protesting students. The agitating students also started brick ball upon the police. The students set ablaze the trams, buses etc. and erected barricades in the streets. In the police actions about six persons including four students were killed. Before that some refugees had to lose their lives in police

firing in Delhi while the refugees were in procession to place their charter of demands to the Prime Minister. To protest against these incidents the students organized meetings and decided to launch movement against police atrocities. In the next day when the rebellious students went to the Morgue of Calcutta Medical College for bringing the bodies of dead students, killed in police firing, there the police action too and even firing in which five students were killed. Mr. Dilip Basu, the student leader of Charu Chandra College, Kolkata and many others were hospitalized after undergoing police firing. When they were in need of blood hundreds of students flocked before the Blood Bank of Calcutta Medical College to donate blood.¹²

Some Communist leaders who came from East Bengal started association among the refugees. They insisted that refugees should be rehabilitated within west Bengal, before sending them somewhere else without making any prior preparations for their settlement. During the years 1948-1950, students often rupture into heated protests against police atrocities and terror. They demanded the release of the film entitled 'Forty Two', organized meetings, mass signature campaigns against precautionary detention, and sought to arouse public sympathy over mass hunger strikes and police firings in the prisons of west Bengal.¹³ The College Street area of Calcutta repeatedly witnessed violent student demonstrations in those days.¹⁴

It is worthy of mention that the friction between the students and the police stopped after the continuous fighting between them for four days at a stretch. The students failed to gain much for the refugees by dint of the students' movement.

After the formation of the United Central Refugee Council (UCRC), most of the problems of the refugees were removed. Leaders like Ambika Chakraborty, Abdul Halim, Anil Singha, Gopal Banerjee, Kamala Dasgupta etc. were prominent in this refugee movement. On the other hand, Sri Nripen Banerjee, Saroj Hazra, Kamal Chatterjee, Sukhendu Majumdar were the prominent student leader who led this movement in full swing. During this period, some of them arrested shortly. It can be said that gradually the refugee movement was transformed into a massive student movement and its main objective was to plunge into a confrontation with the police while it launched any rally on the avenues in Calcutta and the districts. Observing the trend of students' movement on the road, the CPI in its Secret Manifesto described that such students' movement should be spread and converted into a 'Barricade Movement', which would be helped to create an environment of revolt in a greater sense everywhere. Henceforth, these students' movement was guided with this intension through the Bengal to reap the harvest at large.¹⁵

It was carefully marked that while the students' movement in support of the demands of the refugees was shifted mainly against the then Congress led Government, in response to that anti-government attitude, the Congress Government with its police and official machineries initiated more aggressive and inhuman action to nip down students' agitation with strong handed attitude. To cope up with the situation created for the students' agitation, the then Police Commissioner of Calcutta openly declared that "to save lives of hundred people, it is better to take one life by firing".¹⁶ In one side, the theory and objective to convert the students' movement into a clashing with the police in general and on the other side, the drastic action and efforts taken by police force and its authority to resist such attacking activities by the students upon the police, as a result in between the two opposite pressures, the common and mass students kept them apart from such movement and tussle.

Notes and References

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