

Making of the Political Consciousness
within the Student Community of
Bengal

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Making of the Political Consciousness within the Student Community of Bengal

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the Dissertation titled “**The Making of the Political Consciousness Among the Student Community of Bengal**” submitted by Mriganka Mukhopadhyay in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the award of the degree of **MASTER OF ARTS** is his original work and has not been submitted for the award of any other degree of this university or of any other university.

We therefore recommend that the dissertation may be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

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Abstract

This paper talks about the growth of the political mind in the students of Bengal. The era that this paper segues into roughly stretches from late 19th century to the early 20th century.

One of the key ideas of this paper is to view the student body Bengal as a community with close associational ties or *Gesselschaft*. It aims to take the research done by John Berwick on *Chhatrasamaj* a step ahead.

The introduction of this work gives the reader a brief glimpse about the various angles and dimensions of student activism. At the same time an attempt has also been made to define student activism at a broader level.

In the next chapter I have tried to analyze various factors behind the growth the consciousness among the student community and these factors formed an important background of the making of the consciousness.

After situating the student activism of Bengal in the broader national level youth and student activism, a detailed discussion have been made of the activism in Bengal and its several trends has been judged. Special attempt has been made to look differently into the activism of the Swadeshi days and that of the post-Swadeshi era.

One chapter has been dedicated to the activities of Presidency College which has been seen a case study of student politics. However, the similarity and differences of Presidency College with the politicking of other institutions has also been incorporated into the discussion in a strategic way.

Finally, the concluding section of the thesis has looked into the ideological drifts in the discourse of student activism with course of time and changes in the dimension of social and intellectual space.

DEDICATED

To the

Memories of

PRESIDENCY COLLEGE

(1955-2010)

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List of Abbreviations

W.B.S.A –West Bengal State Archives

P.C.M.—Presidency College Magazines

I.B.—Intelligence Branch

A.B.S.A—All Bengal Students’ Association

A.B.Y.M.A/Y.M.A—All Bengal Young Men’s Association

A.I.S.F—All India Students’ Federation.

B.T.I. – Bengal Technical Institute

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Acknowledgement

I dearly wish that this thesis, so passionately written, will make some contribution toward the history of student politics: a genre of history learning that has immense potentials to develop itself. My own student life spent well in Presidency College/university in the last five years remains crucial in the development of my understanding that helped me to produce this thesis. Thus I express my biggest gratitude to my institution itself. Thus this work is an outcome of my role as an onlooker of the campus politics in Presidency. As I witnessed it, I was always curious to know about the genesis of student activism. But as I began my work on this topic, I came across the unpublished thesis of John Berwick which has already done my work easier. I am really thankful to my department for immensely helping me in my work by providing me access to a lot of materials. As I proceed, I take this opportunity to thank a large number of people who helped me in many ways in my work

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However, I biggest thanks go to my parents. My father provided me some vital information while I was working for this thesis but more importantly, it is my mother whose tireless effort behind my own 'making' always makes my every work possible. Without her shelter, life would never have been so smooth and enjoyable for me.

Kolkata,

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Chapter 1

Introduction

What Is Student Activism?

“Amra Shakti amra bal,

Amra chhatradal.”

(We are power, we are strength,

We are the group of students)

“K acho joyaan, how aaguaan

Hnakichhe bhobishyot”

(Oh young man, move ahead

Future is calling you)¹

Activism is such a process that may continue throughout a person’s whole life. It invariably indicates an active participant in the growth and development of society and its politics. However, a person’s activism may begin from a very early stage of life indicating his actions in the future ahead. However, it is an irony that academics can hardly be strictly apolitical and, more importantly, a modernized and westernized student is the most easy ‘victim’ of political activism. Hence, in that case, what is more necessary than the activism itself is the growth of political consciousness—the politicization of young minds. This making of the political consciousness remains the starting point of student

¹ Kazi Nazrul Islam, *“Sanchita”*, Calcutta, D.M.Library. I am grateful to my mother for reminding me of both of the verses of Nazrul Islam’s poems mentioned above which remain appropriate as the starting point of this thesis.

activism. Thus in my thesis I wish to probe into this preparatory phase, that is, the ‘making’.

Nevertheless, the group in which the political consciousness concentrates itself is the most important factor in the whole argument. The question remains that whom should we call a Student? Is any learner who studies in a ‘suitable’ educational atmosphere qualified enough to be tagged as student? But this simple categorization can be wrong as it undermines the age factor in one’s student hood. The very idea of ‘youth’ is a modern one in India. This idea is absent in the ancient Indian/Hindu civilization where the term *Brahmachari* is not exactly analogous to a modern student. Even the student of modern world is different from a learner of medieval South Asia. Hence the circumstances make the student a product of colonial discourse, an indirect outcome of the Bengal ‘Renaissance’.² The students and youths thus portrayed in the novels of Rabindranath Tagore are searching for new standards. According to John Berwick, student life is the vehicle through which the ‘idea of youth’ emerges.³ This newly developed category of youth and student created a social and political space for itself thus giving rise to a new socio-political community in Bengal. In this context, it is essential to view the student mind and, sometimes, even the student body as a political space. This space soon became the centre for development of public opinion. In fact, student activism had a definite target group whose minimum age limit was already set. The constitution of All Bengal Students’ Association mentioned that its delegates attending its conferences should not be aged less than thirteen years. This reflects that the official starting point of student activism was accepted as thirteen years—the age of early adolescence.

However, the factors behind the growth of political mind had an important role to play. These factors formulated public opinion among the students and gradually taught them to be vocal in social and political issues. The close bonding among the students themselves gave rise to a sort of *Gesselschaft* or ties based on associational or community life. This

² In this respect, I have used the concept of ‘colonial’ and ‘modern’ interchangeably. However, it has been a part of the broader Eurocentric narrative that whatever is colonial is modern. But the beginning of British rule brought in a gradual change in South Asian society, polity and culture and introduced certain vital changes. These changes were important for the rise of the several communities such as the students.

³ For a detailed discussion on this, see John Berwick, “*Chhatrasamaj: student life in Bengal*”, University of Sydney, unpublished thesis, 1986. p.7.

was a natural and spontaneous development and at times was imposed by the Government in Bengal. The British Raj planned to develop schools modeled on the British Public schools and Universities and Colleges like Oxbridge. As a result, colleges like Presidency were developed in Calcutta. The evolution of the Hindu College into Presidency College was indeed a government initiative. It was a conscious effort of the government to maintain Presidency College as an elitist institution with generous funding towards it.⁴ These initiatives in Presidency College, as Berwick has suggested, reached its height during the tenure its Principal, Henry Rosher James (1907-1916). James sought to create an “elitist sub-culture”⁵ in the college by involving students actively in sports, cultural activities, debates, and of course with the formation of a students’ union. These activities formed important moments in the rise of the political consciousness.

However, in this connection, it seems to be quite important to situate the discourse of activism in India in a global context and see the international influences in South Asian student activism. The early precedents of student activism were already present in European politics and Mazzini remained an important inspiration for the activists of Swadeshi days. Activities in pre-revolutionary Russia and the May 4th Movement of China had some influence upon the students. However, the greatest influence came from the French Revolution, Italian Unification Movement and the Russian Revolution. However, the May 4th movement of China was a climax in the student politics. The Chinese society, much like its Indian counterpart, had no pre-conceived notion of ‘youth’ and ‘students’ in the modern/colonial sense and the student developed in china as a product of Western democratic, liberal and nationalist ideas. However, the traditions of May 4th Movement would be soon replaced by Communist tendency with the dominant political ideology falling into the established “party line”. The first strike on this “party line” also came from the students itself: Tiananmen Square of 1991 epitomized student activism and established the fact that students contain the best potentials to bring about the Change—to develop itself as the vanguard of Revolution.

⁴ This fact of generous funding is repeatedly expressed in the Annual Register of Presidency College, Calcutta: 1927 and Presidency College Centenary Volume, Calcutta: 1955.

⁵ John Berwick, op. cit. p.11

There were two different dimensions of student activism and their politicking. One was the activities within the campus which involved the students' participation in Students' Union, organizing debates and staging various social and cultural activities. Occasionally, they even got embroiled in conflict with some professors at government colleges and launched complaints to the authority about respective teachers. The events often ended up with expulsion of the concerned student(s).

However, the other dimension of student activism was their activities outside the campus. They often volunteered to several relief works and participated in *Sabhas* and *Samitis* in which they were one of the biggest support bases.⁶ They also took part in the voluntary corps of the Congress. They also participated in the University Corps. Even Surendranath Banerjea, an important student ideologue of late nineteenth and early twentieth century, stressed upon active student participation in the University Corps in order to prepare themselves as future nation-builders.⁷ Besides, one of the key activities of the students was participation in Revolutionary Terrorism which, according to the British officials, expressed 'anarchical' tendencies. As Berwick has rightly said the students were vital links in Revolutionary activities. Though not every terrorist was a student but without the student sub-culture of messes and hostels and their communicative networks the extremist movement would not have been able to survive. Many students were on the border-line of terrorist groups and only gave them moral and material support. The British Raj saw Revolutionary Terrorism as a movement of educated young men.⁸ Even the Sedition Committee Report spoke about the connection between students and terrorist groups.⁹ It was quite common that some students played a dual role in Nationalist movement: they served as the volunteers of the Congress and simultaneously worked for the secret societies.¹⁰

Even the women were not lagging behind in student activism though Berwick has not delve into this aspect of Bengal's political life in details but the question of women participation in

⁶ West Bengal State Archive, I.B. File Number 378/16, Serial number 49/1916

⁷ S.N.Banerjea, "A Nation In Making"

⁸ Berwick, op. cit. pp.8-9

⁹ See Sedition Committee Report, Calcutta, 1918, chapter 2 paragraph 23

¹⁰ This kind of activism was more profound during the Swadeshi movement and the Non-Cooperation Movement. Many students of East Bengal were involved in such acts.

student politics cannot be undermined. The girls of Bethune College, the “*Shikshita Bhadramahila*”, or the educated middle class women took active part in students’ demonstration and organized campus politics. Even young school girls were recruited for secret societies and Voluntary Corps. In this respect the names of Bina Das and others deserve special mention. The role of women (and the girls) deserves mention in this issue because women developed as the vanguard of mass movement in twentieth century Bengal. The space of student activism was not a gendered one. Though there was male domination but the educated middle class women put up a brave front in the scene of activism. It was a moment when the women coming out of the segregated household was trying to create an identity of her own. So their activism had a dual purpose to solve. First, they were creating a gender consciousness and identity for their own self, and secondly, they were also forging a political consciousness as a student. This double identity-making process of a student as well as a woman is important in this respect.

Alongside, political activities gained great momentum at Colleges of Technical Education. The Bengal Technical Institute was surely the frontrunner in student activism. Being a National College, its authority and the students were strictly anti-British and hence it developed itself on ‘Nationalist lines and under Nationalist control’. It had an active students’ union and an active branch of the Students’ Association flourished in Jadavpur. Student activities were rampant in other technical colleges as well including the Shibpur College of engineering which a government-run institution. Even the medical colleges of Calcutta and Dacca played vital roles in student activism of early twentieth century.

However, the question of Change (with a capital C) brings us close to the issue of the ideological drifts on the part of the students. They strengthened both the movement at right as well as the movement of the left. In this respect, the era to which the student belonged to mattered greatly in the shaping of the political ideologies of the students. So it was a trend in the Swadeshi days to remain a Hindu revivalist and a part of the broader Right while this trend saw a change since the 1920s when Leninism and Marxism began to influence the student society towards a radical Leftism. However, this kind of generalizations does not explain the entire scenario and at times, exceptions became the rules.

The making of the political consciousness indicates towards the genesis of student activism. It was the starting point from where the organized student politics of the later days would take off. Hence the story took a much more concrete shape from 1936 when the All India Students' Federation (AISF) would be established. This work ends much before 1936 and mostly tries to segue into the activities of the period between 1870s and 1920s. However, some stray references of the early part of 1930s have also been made at some cases and a few, though very scattered, references has been drawn to the Chittagong Uprising of 1930.

This thesis also talks about certain features and moments of student life such as the rise of the Young Bengal Movement, importance of public lectures and debates, rise of student unions in different colleges, the Oaten Incident in Presidency College, formation of students' and youth organizations and obviously, two important movements, namely, the Swadeshi and the Non-Cooperation movement etc. from the smaller issue based politics the students moved towards wider mass movement and all through its urge to produce an impact in the society led them to create an identity of their own. Students developed themselves as a community in course of time. Berwick is not wrong when he calls this corporate body of students as "*chattrasamaj*" or a "students' society". (However, whether the term 'society' or 'community', which one is more apt for the description of *Chattrasamaj*, is open to debate. I have personally used the term 'community' in this thesis because the *Chhatrasamaj* was not as self-sustained as a society. He borrows this term from Tagore's novel 'Chaturanga'—a poet who always sang the praise of youth. The growth of awareness and rise of social and humane spirit was always welcomed by him. This awareness, however, remains key to the idea of progress.

Thus the *Gesselschaft* that forms carves out a social, political and intellectual space for itself. This space is certainly a monopoly of student life and is handed over from one generation to another. This inheritance of spaces occurs on an ideological plane. Whatever, the formation of political 'sense' and outlook prepared the groundwork for the spontaneous, unregimented (or even regimented at times) and passionate outburst of students' mind. The concept of "*Chhattra-Rajneeti*" (literally, student politics) was a much later terminological development and is often identified with the political activities of the

students in the post-independent era. But before that the formative years had a greater significance and require a deeper attention in order to understand the above mentioned concept.

Chapter 2

Factors behind the Growth of Consciousness

The growth of the political mind of the student community of Bengal took place gradually. The student himself, in the academic and socio-cultural sense, was a product of the mid-nineteenth century. The factory that manufactured this 'product' had a colonial setting but the ingredients were not only western imports, but some were also indigenous. In this chapter we will try to segue into the factors that led to the formation of political consciousness among the students.

1) Growth of Western Education

It all began with the Wood's Dispatch of 1854. However, before 1854, the prospects of western education was very narrow and only a few schools and fewer colleges came up in the period between 1835 and 1853 in cities like Calcutta, Bombay, Madras, Poona, Amritsar, Lahore and Benares. The aim was, obviously, to create a professional and educated bourgeoisie who would be better equipped to serve the colonial government. Definitely, the western education was a part of the government initiative and the Anglicists of Bengal such as Rammohan Roy, the Tagores, and a few other educated *Babus* took the leading role in promoting western education. It was a Utilitarian ambition that the new middle class, developed as a product of western education, would become the greatest consumer of western goods and, hence, would help the Raj to expand its market. Thus we can say that the creation of the intellectual space in Bengal was nothing but a consequence of a newly created economic/commercial space. In the whole scenario, the students can be situated as the 'future customer of the British metropolitan'. The formation of a new society depended much on the formation of a thoroughly westernized, socio-culturally aware student community. However, this argument developed by us is open for an argument and there is enough scope to discuss this issue.

The direct and most visible outcome of the Wood's dispatch was the establishment of the Universities of Calcutta, Bombay and Madras in 1857. By taking this step, the

Government gave greater stress on higher education than the primary education. In all the three Presidencies, a Department of Education was established and the office of the Director of Public Instruction (DPI) was created to look after higher education.

However, the seed of western education was sown much earlier. In 1817, the Hindu College was established by a few leading Bengali elites as a private initiative. But the syllabus that was adopted was largely Anglophile¹¹ and the Bengali Hindu elite students took great interest in learning western literature, philosophy and sciences. This model was soon applied in Hooghly College and other colleges of Bengal.¹²

The statistics given in the three corresponding tables reflects a clear picture that how the importance of education increased and in what ways the growing number of educational institutions encouraged the growth of a growing student community.

Table 1¹³

Number of Colleges

The first table gives us a nationwide figure in the 20th century and shows that does number of government colleges increased all over India with passage of time. However, the decrease in the number of colleges during the 1907 and 1912 is due to the affect of Swadeshi in Bengal and also in other areas of India:-

YEAR	1902	1907	1912	1922
NUMBER OF COLLEGES	192	174	170	207

¹¹ Berwick, Chapter 2

¹² Ibid. passim; also see Kuruvilla Zachariah, "*History of Hooghly College*"

¹³ The figures are taken from Aparna Basu, "*Growth of Education and Political Development in India*"

Table 2¹⁴

This table shows the increase in the number of College students in Bengal with figures from individual districts:-

<u>DISTRICTS</u>	<u>1883-84</u>	<u>1888-89</u>	<u>1893-94</u>	<u>1898-99</u>	<u>1903-04</u>
CALCUTTA	2282	4065	3453	5076	6481
BURDWAN	445	738	569	838	982
PRESIDENCY	144	288	308	351	427
RAJSHAHI	98	47	138	186	238
DACCA	272	682	721	1363	1248
CHITTAGONG	22	55	45	62	181
TOTAL	3263	5925	5234	7876	9557

Table 3¹⁵

This table shows the increase in the number of secondary school students in Bengal with figures from individual districts:-

<u>DISTRICTS</u>	<u>1883-84</u>	<u>1888-89</u>	<u>1893-94</u>	<u>1898-99</u>	<u>1903-04</u>
CALCUTTA	14278	16456	20593	20066	18816
BURDWAN	29864	39979	38607	44598	49912
PRESIDENCY	31780	41712	37359	40978	42514
RAJSHAHI	13010	17599	17492	18095	31493
DACCA	28266	38624	36911	44811	53174
CHITTAGONG	10048	12923	14052	16100	12469
TOTAL	127,426	167,293	165,014	184,648	218,378

¹⁴ Berwick, Chapter 2

¹⁵ Ibid.

2) Role of Literature

The growth of western education encouraged the growing fondness of literature among the students. In 1882, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's novel *Anandamath* was published. This text, in the course of time, became the new testament of Bengal politics. In the early decades of the twentieth century, *Anandamath* was one of the compulsory readings for the members of the secret societies. Bankim's *Vande Mataram* became the anthem of patriotism and, eventually the anthem of the Indian National Congress itself.¹⁶ Not just *Anandamath*, Bankim Chandra's other novels like *Devi Chowdhurani* (1884), or *Rajshingha* (1882) also grew popular and influenced the young minds of Bengal. However, the apparent Hindu overtone of these novels of Bankim Chandra cannot be ignored. Since the majority of the students in the colleges of Calcutta came from upper caste Hindu families, hence they were easy target group for these nationalist novels.

If Bankim Chandra's novels became the starting point of literary inspiration for mass politics and youth awakening, then Rabindranath Tagore was also not lagging behind. However, Tagore's works marked a remarkable paradigm shift, nevertheless, some of his early novels had a sophisticated Hindu revivalist undertone. His celebrated novels like *Gora*, *Ghare-Baire*, *Char Adhyay*, *Chaturanga* or *Chokher Bali* spoke about social cultural and moral regeneration of educated youth in a Universalist trope and this proved highly inspiring for the elite and urbane youths of Calcutta. However, Tagore's works, unlike that of Bankim Chandra, were not considered seditious by the British government.¹⁷ Tagore's songs and poems influenced the Moderates and Extremists alike. The brigade of Tagorean literature was led by *Gora* (1909) which was followed by *Ghare-Baire* (1917). Tagore's characters—Gora and Sandip—redefined Bengali masculinity in a new way and outlined the growth of Extremism in the setting of the

¹⁶ *Vande Mataram* was sang a number of times in the annual sessions of Congress. Rabindranath Tagore sang it for the first time in the Calcutta session of 1896. Sarala Devi Chowdhurani sang it a few years later in Benares session. However, Tagore once again sang it in 1906 during the Calcutta session of the Congress.

¹⁷ *Anandamath* was banned after a few years of its publication. In future, Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Pather Daabi* would also receive a similar treatment.

Swadeshi movement.¹⁸ Even *Chaturanga*, from where John Berwick borrowed then term *Chhatrasamaj* for his PhD dissertation, is a glowing account of student community of Bengal, more specifically, of Calcutta. This novel, along with *Char Adhyay* gives us a hint that how Radical Positivism became the corner-stone in the discourse of youth politics. A good number of Tagore's literature also shows that students of Calcutta working as members of *Sabhas* and *Samitis* or going to some remote areas of Bengal or Bihar for relief work.¹⁹ This portrayal of students in novels is also significant for our understanding of student and youth activism and problematise the issue of the growth of awareness among the students. As far as the influence is concerned, a number of biographies and memoirs of the students of Swadeshi and post-Swadeshi phase notes the influence of Tagorean literature in social and political life.

Twentieth century novelists like Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay also had a profound influence on the student community. Sarat Chandra's novel *Pather Daabi* (1926) proved to be greatly influential for Revolutionaries and actually portrayed a life of a secret society activist. However, it was banned immediately after its publication. It is perhaps a coincidence that in Sabyasachi, the leading protagonist of *Pather Daabi*, we can see a shadow of the future Netaji—Subhas Chandra Bose. Did the novel indirectly influence the making of Netaji? This, however, cannot be ascertained. Besides, the Swadeshi songs also played an important role in moulding the passionate minds of the young students.

However, the biggest boosting came from the essays of Swami Vivekananda. ('Karma-Yoga', 'Raj-Yoga' and 'Bhakti-Yoga' were published in 1896). These essays contained moral messages and gave the youth a space to develop his intellectual prowess and encouraged the growth of physical culture. These texts with their 'fiery' ideas infused vigor amongst the youth. The overt spirit of masculinity multiplied with Neo-Hindu spirituality and Bengali sentimentality made the writings of Vivekananda attractive for the student community. However, in the post-Swadeshi era, Vivekananda's ideas became influential amongst the students of North India and Deccan. When Vinayak Damodar Savarkar and his ideological heirs like M.S. Golwalkar mentioned Vivekananda's

¹⁸ Sumit Sarkar, *Swadeshi Movement in Bengal*, New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1973.

¹⁹ Novels and stories like *Strir Patra*, *Gora* etc. has portrayed quite a few characters like this.

writings in their works, then it can be easily traced that how the process of ideological shaping occurred among the Right Wing students of India.²⁰

3) **Rise of Youth Icons**

Along with the writings of Vivekananda his persona and his spirituality blended with western rationality attracted the Bengali youths to a great extent. In the schools and colleges of every districts of Bengal, there was a large chunk of students who were admirers of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda.²¹ The message of Vivekananda—playing football is more helpful for the youths than reading Bhagavat Gita—boosted the students to a great extent.

However, there was no dearth of political activists and eminent public figures among the older generation of leaders who were idealized by the students. Even before the rise of Vivekananda, Surendranath Banerjea played an important role in politicizing the student community. In 1875, S.N. Banerjea, along with Ananda Mohan Bose established the Students' Association. He addressed a large student gathering by the middle of 1875 and it was this student body which provided a vital support base for the Indian Association founded in 1876. Several accounts and memoirs record that Banerjea was a frequent visitor to the Eden Hindu Hostel which became a “natural centre” for political discussions. Surendranath's influence was, however, remained confined within the moderate students' circles in the swadeshi days.²² It is important to note that these public figures formulated the growth of public opinion among the students. Students got involved in public debates and cultural activities. They attended debates and lectures held at Calcutta Literary Society, University Institute Hall and at other places and patronized the theatrical culture in Calcutta.

The students with Extremist ideology also discovered an icon in the figure of Chittaranjan Das. C.R. Das won his fame with brilliant pleading in Alipore Bomb Case which led to the acquittal of Aurobindo Ghosh, the chief ideologue of Revolutionary

²⁰ V.D. Savarkar, *Hindutva. Who is a Hindu?*, Bombay:1923; M.S. Golwalkar, “Bunch of Thoughts”, Bombay: RSS Publication.

²¹

²² Presidency college 175th Anniversary Volume, p.335

Terrorism. C.R. Das build up contacts among the students of Calcutta. Being a great orator he easily attracted a substantial number of students to his side thus producing a separate trend in Bengal politics. He drew not only the revolutionaries, but also the non-violent nationalists. Most importantly, Subhas Chandra Bose looked up at C.R. Das as his political mentor and gained great moral and material support from him. During and before the Non Co-operation Movement Das became a significant reference point for student activism and several youth demonstrations.²³

Even the disciple of C.R. Das, Subhas Bose became an important youth leader in the 1920s and '30s. Bose, along with Jawaharlal Nehru, was invited at Sraddhananda Park to address the supporters of All Bengal Student Association (ABSA).²⁴ A report of the Intelligence Branch mentioned that Subhas Bose became the vice president of All Bengal Young Men's Association because he wanted to gain control over the student body of Bengal. For this P.C. Ray played a key role as he was popular amongst the students and thus became a connecting point between Subhas Bose and the students.

However, the influence of the revolutionaries was not negligible among the students, more particularly among the students of the *Mofussils*. Aurobindo Ghosh and his associates in Jugantar Party were successful in recruiting a good number of youths from schools and colleges. Later, Bagha Jatin became influential for small town and rural students of Bengal.²⁵ Later, it was heard that Bagha Jatin and his comrades used to visit the hostels and messes of the students. Meghnad Saha's room in Eden Hindu Hostel was an important centre for discussions of the revolutionaries. It is a well-known fact that Meghnad Saha was indoctrinated to revolutionary politics in his student life. And his radical outlook never left him.²⁶ The 'heroic martyrdom' of Khudiram Bose, Kanailal Dutta and others reached legendary heights. The panegyrics composed on them²⁷ inspired generations of students to get drawn towards revolutionary politics or carry out individual

²³ John Berwick mentions several incidents where students clashed with the Europeans in their Colleges or with some Government officials and then went to C.R. Das who sheltered them from prosecution of the authorities.

²⁴

²⁵ "Smara-Baran", Autobiography of Gopal Das Mazumder, chapters 5 and 6.

²⁶ Autumn Annual, Volume XXIII, 1994-95, pp.18-23

²⁷ "Ekbaar Bidaay De Maa", written by an anonymous poet, which is famously associated with Khudiram, showed the zeal of patriotism and also had a homely touch in it.

sporadic attempts to assassinate government officials. Often this created a lot of drama and ended with futile death or life deportations of young students which were considered 'heroic'. Blown over by their role models, some students lost judgmental power and went over to the side of anarchy and destructive politics.

4) **Important Social and Political Events**

The period under discussion witnessed several social and political movements in Bengal that took the society a few steps ahead. Though the idea of this 'progress' is not unanimously accepted and the degree of progress varied to a great extent still the importance of these movements cannot be undermined. The changes they brought in were not radical enough to be termed as 'revolution', nevertheless, they contributed to the formation of socio-political consciousness. The students being educated in urban and western ideals were one of the first groups to be affected by these events which played a substantial role in politicizing the students' minds

One of the earliest of these movements was the rise and growth of the Brahmo Samaj.²⁸ The Brahmo leaders had a deep impact upon the society. Being a sophisticated and elitist movement, it attracted a large number of urban students and, interestingly, the Brahmo movement left out a good number of rural or non-Calcuttan students who largely stayed orthodox Hindus. Leaders like Keshab Chandra Sen and Ananda Mohan Bose attracted large number of students at their meetings. The moral and social questions raised by Brahmoism influenced the thought process of the students of late nineteenth century. Several contemporary newspapers reported the protest of Brahmo students over the marriage of Keshab Chandra Sen's underage daughter. One particular student mess of Central Calcutta was famous liberal ideas and Brahmo inclinations.²⁹ Even Ananda Mohan Bose lived there as a student. The Brahmo students build up a wide network amongst them and maintained strong social and religious ties. Keshab Sen's 'Brahmo Niketan' often supported students with financial and other material issues and

²⁸ Though the Young Bengal Movement was an important event which radicalized the outlook of its supporters but its influence was mostly concentrated in Presidency College and hence we will discuss about it in the chapter concerning Presidency College.

²⁹ Berwick, *Chhatrasamaj*, chapter 2

organizations like this made the bonding closer. The students came together, discussed religious, social and moral issues thus developing an organized public opinion. Throughout the 1880s, Brahma students published their own tracts and maintained a Students' Weekly Service of lectures and prayers that survived for more than three decades.³⁰ The idea of becoming Brahma itself had a radical dimension and the students in this period had a foretaste of radicalism, at least socially and culturally, if not politically. The protest against the marriage of Keshab Sen's daughter, we can say, was only an early spark of the wider social and political activities of the students from the 1880s.

The last three decades of nineteenth century set a trend of the rising consciousness. A bigger upsurge came during the Swadeshi movement.³¹ The different trends of Swadeshi movement greatly influenced and involved the students. As we will later see, the Swadeshi Movement gave the students a platform to launch themselves in mass politics. Two particular developments of Swadeshi viz. growth of National Education and boycott of government institutions and the idea of *Atmashakti* or growth of self empowerment greatly influenced the students. National schools and colleges were flooded with students who boycotted British education and expelled after the protest against the Carlyle Circular. The nationalist institution founded at Jadavpur, in October 1905, was a huge success and many students came and joined this institution. It gave them a prominent platform to voice their anti-British sentiments and they also set up a branch of the Students' Association.³² Even the curriculum prepared by the National Council of Education in 1905 gave stress upon nationalist learning and made the students aware of the social and political realities of the nation. Quite naturally, this syllabus grabbed the attention of the British authorities.³³ Besides, eminent Swadeshi leaders like Bepin Chandra Pal, S.N. Banerjea, Aurobindo Ghosh, P.C. Ray (who actively encouraged students' participation in Swadeshi and setting up of private enterprise as a part of *Atmashakti*), and obviously, Rabindranath Tagore made repeated public appearances and

³⁰ For details on this, see Berwick, op. cit. pp. 79-86

³¹ Sumit Sarkar, "*Swadeshi movement in Bengal 1903-1908*", New Delhi, 1973

³² B.T.I. Magazine, vol. 1, no. 1, December 1928, pp.11-12.

³³ WBSA, File no. 83-25, Serial No. 83/1925.

addressed the students' in public meetings. The nationalist newspapers published essays which were strong enough to influence the students' mind. All these made the Swadeshi movement an important catalyst in the making of the political consciousness among the students of Bengal. It was the students who became the key to the success of the Swadeshi movement.

However, the next important conjuncture came in the form of the Non Co-operation Movement. The beginning of the 1920s once again brought the students on the roads and they became more active than ever before. It seems that Non Co-operation Movement taught the students the tactics of organized politics and they took up strikes as an effective weapon of movement. So *hartal* emerged as a trend of student activism in the early 1920s. Students also joined the Voluntary Corps of the Indian National Congress and took part in several social and political programmes. 1920s saw the rise of new youth icons in the form of C.R. Das and Subhas Chandra Bose. The Non Co-operation Movement greatly politicized the environment of the college campuses. In every sense, the student activist was truly born by now.

5) The Mess System

The practice of the students staying together in the messes of Calcutta (*Chhatrabaash*) has been highlighted by John Berwick in his unpublished thesis.³⁴ Even the autobiography of Nirad C. Chaudhuri also wrote about the student mess life in Calcutta.³⁵ These messes were the hub of students from small towns and villages of western and eastern Bengal who usually flocked together with the people from their own districts. Most of these messes were in North and Central Calcutta. After the University Act of 1904, the Principals of the respective colleges were responsible for maintaining the messes attached to respective hostels. In Dacca, there were 650 boarders scattered in 30 supervised messes and the number increased to 44 in 1917 which housed over 1000 students.³⁶ However, sometimes the messes were organized on caste and religious lines as well. It was not quite common to find a Brahmin student residing with a student of Namasudra origin. For the former group the government opened a supervised hostel-cum-

³⁴ John Berwick, "*Chhatrasamaj: Students in Bengal 1870-1922*" Chapter 1, 3 and 6.

³⁵ Nirad C. Chaudhuri, "*Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*"

³⁶ Berwick, op. cit. p.244

mess in June 1918.³⁷ There were separate hostels for Buddhist and Brahma students as well. Thus what we want to suggest is that these messes actually developed themselves as agencies of development of public opinion. Students often sat together, at the evenings or at weekends, and debated over the political and social situations of Bengal. These messes or *Chhatrabash*, to use Berwick's term, actually initiated the students into an associated life, which we may see as a *Gesselschaft*, and made them politically aware.

6) International Influences

Too many events of international importance took place from the last decades of the nineteenth century till the first few decades of the twentieth century. Nirad C. Chaudhuri's biography notes the influence of politics of Europe in contemporary Calcutta.³⁸ The influence of the French Revolution, the Unification Movements of Germany and Italy and, of course, the Russian revolution was overwhelming amongst the young men of Bengal.

By the nineteenth century, the events of France in 1789 had become very popular with progressive elements of Bengal. As they learnt about the western history and politics, they got acquainted with the high ideals of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. Almost all Europhile and westernized public figures and leaders quoted from the Charter of 1789. Even the National Council of Education included the History of the French Revolution written by Thomas Carlyle in its syllabus.

Very soon the French Revolutionary ideas were joined by Mazzini's Young Italy Movement. In fact, Mazzini's writings were among the compulsory readings for the young members of Anushilan Samiti and Jugantar Dal. Mazzini along with Garibaldi provided the biggest inspiration for the Extremists of Bengal. The Young Italy movement provided a European precedent to the radicals of Bengal and it was easier for the revolutionary leaders to indoctrinate educated and semi-westernized youths by giving European examples. Bengal borrowed the ideology of Radical Positivism from Europe.

³⁷ Rajat Kanta Ray, "Social and Political unrest in Bengal", pp. 233-235; C.U.M. Syndicate, 7th June 1918, vol. 2, p.557.

³⁸ Nirad C. Chaudhuri, *Autobiography*, pp. 306-307.

The ideology of Bomb imbibed with the ideology of Gita radically influenced the students' mind.

Another important impetus came from the western world in 1917 when Socialism was introduced in Russia. The Revolution in Russia, like many other territories, influenced India to develop its own Communist Party and, more importantly, indoctrinated youths like Bhagat Singh, Soumendranath Tagore, Virendranath Chattopadhyay and the rebel activists of Chittagong among many others. From the 1920s thus we can notice an ideological drift amongst the students. Though the rise of the Communist tendency was an undercurrent and became the dominant factor in mainstream student politics in a much later period, nevertheless, world Communism and Bolshevik revolution had a vital influence over a larger section of student community.

Thus after analyzing all the factors mentioned above, it becomes easier to trace the background of the growth of political consciousness. The developments which made the student community politically and socially viable were, actually, important agencies in the whole narrative. And with these antecedents let us move on to the scene of actual development of the political mind.

Chapter 3

Situating Bengal in the Wider Scenario of Indian Student Activism

The political space amongst the youths of Bengal that was to develop in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was an outcome of the growth of western education and educational reforms. Though Bengal saw the first spark of a growing student community, but other regions of India were not lagging behind. Student and youth activists gradually developed in Nashik, Poona, Lahore, Allahabad, Delhi, Aligarh and several other places.³⁹ However, no attempt is made here to produce a comprehensive account of the activities in various regions of India, but it is important to segue into the growth of political tendencies among the students of these regions in order to locate the position of Bengal in the whole scenario. However, we think, that Bengal was not an island of student activism; neither had it had an isolated existence. The activism and movements in other parts of India, not unlike Bengal, were largely urbane and were generally radical in nature.

One of the earliest student activities in India came from the Bombay Presidency. The students of Elphinstone College in Bombay attended the meetings of the political associations since the 1880s and some later alumni of the Elphinstone College later rose to become eminent political and social figures. The list of its alumni included illustrious names like Dadabhai Naoroji, M.G. Ranade, Gopal Krishna Gokhale and several other Moderate congress leaders.⁴⁰ Though there is not much evidence to show that these men engaged themselves in activism in student life, but their years as students of an important centre of western learning were important in formulating the political consciousness among them.

However, the radical extremism was brought in the political life of Maharashtra was introduced since the revolutionary activities of Chapekar brothers and by the extremism of Bal Gangadhar Tilak. Maharashtra was a budding region of extremism and both

³⁹ For a detailed account of the growth of education and student community in India, see Mushirul Hasan (ed.), *“Knowledge, Power and Politics”*, New Delhi: Roli Books, 1998.

⁴⁰ Naheed F. Ahmed, “Elphinstone College” in *“Knowledge, Power and Politics”*

Nashik and Poona were centers of student activism on Hindu militant lines. Vinayak Damodar Savarkar was an activist right since his student life (1901-1905) and was expelled from Fergusson College of Poona in 1905 for propagating radical views.⁴¹ The vital connection can be established between terrorism in Maharashtra and Bengal when an Intelligence report of Bengal mentions the name of Narayan Damodar Savarkar, younger brother of V.D. Savarkar in a list of terrorist students of Bengal in 1916.⁴² It was also quite common for the members of secret societies in Bengal to read Sakharam Ganesh Deuskar's '*Desher Katha*'.⁴³

However, the activities of this period were well connected with the swadeshi movement. Even the 'Mela' movement of Tilak and Savarkar, drew inspiration from the Hindu Mela of Calcutta.

The extremism had a strong influence in Punjab as well. Here Lala Lajpat Rai, for a long time remained an important youth icon and inspired the radicals for a few consecutive generations. Bhagat Singh and his comrades were products of mid to late nineteenth century and had a close connection with the Ghadarists. However, student activism of India spread outside the borders of India in England, Germany, France, and America and in other parts of the world. It spread in London under the guidance of Shyamji Krishna Verma in his India House, in several German cities like Berlin, Stuttgart, Munich and others under initiatives from Virendranath Chattopadhyay, A.C.N. Nambiar and others and, more importantly, in America where the Hindusthan Association and the activities of Ghadar Party gained footholds. As Berwick writes, the universities of Oxford and Cambridge were important centers for student activities that the British government considered 'seditious'.⁴⁴ Both of these universities had a considerable number of Indian students who had anti-Imperialist inclinations.

The student activities in the campus of Aligarh Muslim University were quite pronounced.⁴⁵ In the later period, Aligarh developed itself as the epicenter of communal

⁴¹ Chitragupta, "*The Life of Swatantrata Veer Savarkar*", Bombay: 1956, chapter 2, pp. 38-60.

⁴² WBSA File No. 655/16, Serial No. 79/1916

⁴³ Sumit Sarkar, "*Swadeshi Movement*"

⁴⁴ John Berwick, op. cit. pp.

⁴⁵ For a detailed account of activities in Aligarh, see David Lelyveld, "*Aligarh's First Generation*", New Delhi.

politics and also housed Fascist elements inside the campus. Abdur Sattar Khaeri and his brother Abdul Jabbar Khaeri had clear Nazi links and were well known admirers of Adolf Hitler.⁴⁶ At the same time, Aligarh also witnessed several vital moments of campus politics with the trends of student demonstrations and strikes and developed a unique political trend of its own.

⁴⁶ Mushirul Hasan, "Aligarh Muslim University" in Mushirul Hasan (ed.) "Knowledge, Power and Politics".

Chapter 4

Tensions in Bengal

From Late Nineteenth Century to the Pre-Swadeshi Days

As we enter the political scenario of Bengal, the core area of this thesis, the formulative years of the late nineteenth century becomes the first phase that we need to encounter. In a way, this period acts as a period of ‘take-off’.⁴⁷ The account on this period is rather infrequent. Most of the incidents were sporadic and political activism, in the proper sense of the term, was yet to develop. We have to greatly depend on the unpublished thesis of John Berwick, “*Chhatrasamaj*.”⁴⁸ The making of the political consciousness and the politicization of the students’ mind had its genesis in the 1870s. This decade was broadly known as the ‘Age of Association.’”

However, this remains an important phase in pre-Swadeshi Bengal and Surendranath Banerjea played a key role in politicizing the students in this period. Thus in 1875, the Students’ Association was established under the guidance of Surendranath and Ananda Mohan Bose. It was a platform open to both Hindu and Brahmo students though Berwick notes that the influence of Brahmo radical ideology and the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj in the political associations of the students.⁴⁹ Calcutta, by this time, already had a long established tradition of public lectures and debating sessions and Banerjea capitalized this tradition. His lectures on various issues—both indigenous and European—proved influential amidst the students whom he considered as a key to large scale bourgeois political movements. Thus students attended the meetings of the Indian Association in large numbers clearly indicating the growth of political consciousness among the youth and the students.

Protests against professors were common in colleges like Presidency College. Bepin Chandra Pal in his autobiography notes a students’ demonstration by the first and second year students against an English professor who offended a second year student by forcing

⁴⁷ I have borrowed this idea from W.W. Rostow’s “*Non-Communist Manifesto*”

⁴⁸ Berwick, “*Chhatrasamaj*”, pp. 67-121

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* pp.79-87.

him to stand in front of the class like a school boy. However, the Principal, J. Sutcliffe reconciled the matters and the troubles settled down.⁵⁰

However, the frequency of such events increased in the next two decades and spread to the other colleges of Bengal. These incidents got enough attention from the contemporary print media and the Bengali *Bhadralok* became aware of the rise of the student activities. Though the clashes were mainly between the Bengali students and the European professors and had a racial content in it, nevertheless, through these events the students began to carve out a space for themselves in the canvas of Bengal politics.

In the early 1880s student community began to be regular featured in the press. When the DPI forbade the students from joining the “*Niti Sabha*” which were apparently apolitical in nature, the nationalist media criticized the Government of Bengal freely in their pages.

The next event of some importance came in 1883. During the Ilbert Bill controversy the student community became vocal in the defense of the elders in the society. The imprisonment of S.N. Banerjea, in this connection, raised a huge furor in social circles of Calcutta and three meetings were held in mid May in the theatres of Calcutta. Some young men attacked the High Court, shattered its doors and windows and clashed with the police. When an English professor at Presidency scoffed at Surendra Nath Banerjea and the temerity of Indians who thought that they were capable judging Europeans. This led to a student agitation followed by a student strike. The agitation spread to Dacca when two boys were whipped for insulting a European. This agitated the students. But a student, who proved to be blackleg by withdrawing his complaint against a teacher at Dacca medical School, was severely criticized by the press.⁵¹

Throughout 1884, reports of disturbances came from Chittagong, Berhampore, Krishnanagar, Howrah and several parts of Bengal. Some of the newspapers, especially those which had a nationalist inclinations lend support to these activities and encouraged the students to carry ahead their activisms.

⁵⁰ Bepin Chandra Pal, *Memoirs of My life and Times* reprint, Calcutta: 1973, pp.166-167.

⁵¹ Mentioned in Benjamin Zachariah, Subhas Ranjan Chakraborty and Rajat Kanta Ray, “Presidency College: An Unfinished History” in Mushirul Hasan (ed.) *“Knowledge, Power and Politics”*.

When the Indian National Congress was formed, many students attended its session in Calcutta in 1887 sending alarms to the DPI and several college authorities.⁵² The colleges outside Calcutta and the smaller towns were booming with student activities in 1880s and 1890s.

The nineteenth century also witnessed the formation of public opinion through public meetings and debates among the students. The largest meetings were held at the Calcutta Literary Society which remained the most important centre of theoretical political discourse. The sessions were attended by many students from colleges and Calcutta University and one of its objectives was to develop an “intellectual culture” among the students.⁵³ Even the University Institute played an important role in the making of the political consciousness. One of its founder-members was Surendra Nath Banerjea though he later turned bitter against it sensing his authority is clearly losing from the student community.

Satish Chandra Mukherjee’s “Dawn Society” met regularly at the Metropolitan College and acted as a debating society and a young men’s club. The members discussed the growth of education and ethical and religious issues in a “Hindu moralist environment”.⁵⁴ Hindu revivalism was still an important issue in elite Bengali circles and Sir Gurudas Bandopadhyay was closely involved with it suggesting its cultural environment. Later on the Dawn Society would play an important role in the Swadeshi movement.

However, the activities of nineteenth century, barring a few sporadic incidents, were largely an era of moderate politics. Within a few years, S.N. Banerjea would be replaced by Bepin Pal as the chief ideologue of the student community. This development of the Swadeshi days would mark a paradigm shift in the discourse of student politics. But in this phase on moderate politics, the nation was still in making, so was the political consciousness of the future nation builders.

⁵² Berwick, p. 90.

⁵³ CLSP, 4th January, 1875.

⁵⁴ Haridas and Uma Mukherjee, *“Origins of the National Education Movement”* chapter 5, point 1.

The Twentieth Century: A Century of Actions

Student activities became most pronounced in Bengal during the Swadeshi era. The discourse of Swadeshi is very closely linked to the activism of students who formed the biggest support base of Swadeshi. It was a time when the student community properly developed as a *Gessellschaft*. So when the Partition of Bengal was announced on 8th July 1905 by Lord Curzon, series of students' movement came to surface. Trend shows that most of these sparked off from the eastern districts though Calcutta still served as the nerve centre of activism. Students of Dacca College walked barefoot in protest of the decision in the months of October and November 1905. In September, the student members of Dawn Society issued a manifesto calling for the boycott of M.A. examinations. Benoy kumar Sarkar and Radha Kumud Mukherjee were some of the first ranked leaders of this movement. By late October their ranks were joined by more than 10,000 students. The Examination boycott movement attracted substantial support but was dropped by the end of 1905 at the insistence of the senior leaders. However, the swadeshi movement, for the first time, produced a few student leaders who were a bunch of young students dedicated solely to the cause of student movement. The most important of them was definitely Sachindra Prasad Basu who remained a key student leader up till the second decade of the century.

From this time physical culture began to develop among the youth circle of Bengal. The art of wrestling or *Kushti* was present even in the nineteenth century but Swadeshi made it a fashion. In a way, this development was a reactionary one as physical culture gained popularity in order to challenge the colonial discourse of Bengali as an effeminate race. Hence the intention was to express masculinity and change the image of Bengali heroism. The invention of Raja Pratapaditya as the Bengali hero was part of this narrative. However, Swadeshi witnessed the growth of *Akharas* in several areas of Bengal. These *Akharas* were a sort of 'training centers' that aimed at an all around development of a Bengali youth. The center established by Sarala Devi Chowdhurani deserves special mention. Though set up by a woman, it was a training center exclusively meant for the male students and other young men and achieved an early landmark in the history of physical culture in Bengal. Thus the dualism of the growth of mind and development of a healthy, masculine body comes into play. Both the mind and the body of the Bengali youth aimed to be developed as the site of growing political consciousness in this newly formed community.

Hence, not just a healthy body, but a celibate body was also required for the worshipping of Mother Nation. Thus we see a large number of youths and students remained unmarried throughout their revolutionary life. (This was quite contrary to the contemporary era when a boy as young as eighteen would get married and have children making him a complete undergraduate *babu*). As a consequence of this sexual abstention, as John Berwick has shown, a few members of revolutionary groups developed homosexual practices including the famous names like Pulin Behari Das. But at the same time Berwick reminds us that this issue should be dealt cautiously as this could have been a British propaganda to prove the revolutionaries as degenerated by showing them involved in such ‘immoral’ activities. It became necessary on their part to restore effeminacy in the suddenly growing masculine Bengali society.⁵⁵ Thus this portrayal of body as a political space entered the discourse of youth politics right from the swadeshi days.

However, the ever growing social space that the student community began to occupy was, nonetheless, very important. Student demonstrations never ceased to exist throughout the period of Swadeshi and the one which took place at Calcutta on 8th August 1908 was typically one of them. On this day hundreds of students gathered at College Square which became a sort of ‘base camp’ of student activism and took out rallies in several parts of Calcutta. These rallies were joined by the students of colleges like Banagbashi, Ripon, Metropolitan, City and many others.⁵⁶

When the students of the government institutions were debarred by the Government of Bengal from joining the education boycott programme by passing the Carlyle Circular on 10th October, 1905, the students became more rebellious and formed the Anti-Circular Society: one of the oldest platforms in student activism to participate in issue-based politics. Some of the important leaders of Anti-Circular Society were Sachindranath Bandopadhyay and Phanindranath Bose⁵⁷ Regular meetings of this society were held at College Square where the students were urged to leave the government institutions like Calcutta University—‘*Goldighir Golam-khana*’ – and to join the National Schools and Colleges.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Berwick, op. cit., pp. 206-209

⁵⁶ Ibid. p.183.

⁵⁷ BTI Magazine vol. 1, no. 1, December 1928, pp.10-11.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

On 14th November 1905 an educational conference was convened by Sir Ashutosh Mukherjee to discuss the problems of British educational system. By this time, leaders like Bepin Pal, Rabindranath Tagore and others planned to set up National council for Education. Prasanna Kumar Ray, the Principal of Presidency College became a member of the governing body of this Council. The syllabus that was formulated included vocational and technical education besides the mainstream academic teaching. Under its initiative, several National Schools and colleges were set up. The Bengal Technical Institute and Bengal National College were established at Jadavpur in October 1905. This institute became a hub of anti-Imperialist student activism and a prominent recruiting ground for both non-violent mainstream politics as well as of revolutionary terrorism.

It became easier to group students for a movement and raise a common platform for them as most of them belonged to an economic monolith. A good number of students were sons of lawyers while some others were sons of clerks or other middle ranked government owners. Only a handful of student activists belonged to the landowning class and never formed the main chunk of the politically active youths.⁵⁹ This class composition of the students made it easier for the leaders to select their recruits. It became a trend that the more urbane and economically affluent students of western Bengal went in favor of moderate mainstream politics while the less economically affluent students of Eastern Bengal drifted towards the more radical and ‘anarchical’ revolutionary groups.

Hence by this time Surendra Nath and his Association based politics of nineteenth century were gradually losing popularity and Bepin Pal and his Extremism was coming to the forefront. The tone of student activism was reasonably more anti-British and with the spread of education in peripheral or semi-peripheral regions of Bengal, the support base of student activism was spreading to several parts of Bengal. By this time theatres of Central Calcutta became centers of student meetings. In one such meetings at the Star Theatre in September 1905, 200 students signed a pledge of not to join government service. They were soon joined by the members of the Dawn Society. Support poured in from other parts of Bengal and the Dacca College students made a successful strike. In some cases students were actively supported by teachers as well.

⁵⁹ Berwick, op. cit. pp. 185-187; also see, Gopal Das Mazumder's autobiography, "*Smaran-Baran*", chapters 5 and 6.

P.C. Ray was a key sympathizer of student activism and their endeavors and Uma Charan Banerjee, Principal of Burdwan Raj College actively supported the agitating students.

The Swadeshi Movement also witnessed the formation of several voluntary organizations like Brati Samiti, Students' New Society, Swadeshi Sebak Samiti, Bandhab Samiti etc. the Intelligence Agencies saw these groups as front organizations of revolutionary groups like the Anushilan Samiti.⁶⁰ This was, however, not absolutely wrong and in many cases the secret societies and the voluntary groups and the Byam Samitis had the similar group of people and leaders involved and shared similar set of objectives. This new trend of voluntary groups also facilitated the growth of *Akhara* movement and established Pulin Behari Das as one of the leaders of physical culture movement. It is worth noting that impressed by the bravery and the stout physique of Bagha Jatin, Swami Vivekananda advised him to learn wrestling under the tutelage of his wrestling coach, Ambu Guha, who was a famous wrestler of his times. This reflects that youth activism was demanding the growth of masculinity. The dependence on physical prowess in radical politics and the growth of revolutionary terrorism became a trend in the politics of twentieth century Bengal.

Revolutionary Terrorism

The growth of Voluntary groups and *Akhara* movement along with favoritism for everything that was indigenous facilitated the rise of revolutionary terrorism in the political culture of Bengal. As Sumit Sarkar has shown, terrorism was a much late entrant in the politics of Swadeshi.⁶¹ Though all the members of secret societies⁶² were not students but students provided a key support base for terrorist movements. It was the schools and colleges of Bengal that acted as chief recruitment bases of terrorist groups. There were many students, however, who were not active but were at the fringes of revolutionary groups. Many of these students acted as linkman in maintaining the network of the revolutionary groups.⁶³

⁶⁰ Berwick, p.188.

⁶¹ Sumit Sarkar, Swadeshi Movement. He has identified four trends of Swadeshi movement, of which Revolutionary Terrorism was the last one.

⁶² I have used the two terms "secret society", "terrorist group" and "revolutionary party" interchangeably.

⁶³ Gopal Das Mazumder, op. cit. chapter 5. He mentions names of several such individuals who were link man of Anushilan Samiti and Jugantar Dal. However, there are many such accounts which talk about these students who played marginal, but often important roles in revolutionary networks.

The Mess system of Berwick comes into play once again at here. Bagha Jatin visited many messes and hostels of Calcutta and developed contacts among the student community. These contacts among the student community helped the revolutionary leaders from Aurobindo Ghosh to Bagha Jatin and later even ‘Masterda’ Surya Sen to build up their organizational bases.⁶⁴

However, terrorism grew in great momentum throughout the early twentieth century and names of several students appeared in the police files as suspects. There were also some students who left studies but continued to mingle with the student community given to their various political commitments to campus politics and student activism. This created a complex web of social and political setting in the life of the students which not just involved their compatriots but also several “*Dada*”s or the leaders.

The activities of Scottish Churches College in the late Swadeshi era attract our attention in this case. Scottish Churches College, being a non-British missionary centre of learning had housed vital terrorist links. The hostels associated with the college like Oxford Mission, Tomory, Lady Jame Dundas acted as important centers of terrorist activities. In the years from 1908 to 1916 a series of revolutionary activities or the admission of members of secret society as the students has been reported by the Intelligence Branch. The hostel rooms were used as store rooms of bombs and weapons and several students were arrested or detained from these hostels or from the College in connection with the murder of DSP Basanta Kumar Chaterjee and Sub Inspector Madhu Sudan Bhattacharjee. One important member was Abinash Banerjee who seem to be a leader of the ‘Scottish Gang’⁶⁵

Post-Swadeshi Era

However, terrorism was only one side of student activism. There were several minor incidents that sparked student mobilization and led to frequent clash of the student community with the British State. In one such incident, before the beginning of Rowlatt Satyagraha, in February 1919, the Principal of St. Paul’s College threw a statue of Saraswati (perhaps, a clay model) into

⁶⁴ Aurobinda was a teacher for many years both at Baroda and at Calcutta. Bagha Jatin had followers among the youths of Calcutta and small town students studying in Calcutta. Later, Surya Sen, the most important revolutionary leader of 1930s, was a school teacher and also gave private tuitions to the high school students.

⁶⁵ WBSA File no. 1955/17, Serial no. 109/1917, Government of Bengal Record.

the dust-bin and a number of students immediately withdrew from the college hostel. They further met Jitendra Lal Banerjee, an organizer of Civil Rights' Committee and one of the deputies of C.R. Das, who sued the Principal Mr. Johnston thus raising tremendous public concern. By this time both Surendra Nath and Bepin Pal have faded into oblivion and C.R. Das has emerged as a common reference point for the students.

The demonstration grew more vigorous as the Non Co-operation Movement approached and once again the students became the basis of the success of the Movement. But the mood was more militant during this time than it was during the Swadeshi. In January 1921, there was a general student strike in Bengal. However, the students of Presidency College stayed aloof from this strike and even resisted the attempts of the striking students to close down the gates of the college. Several new volunteer groups emerged and the politicization of the students entered a new phase.

However, the student volunteers were active in several non-political programmes throughout the first three decades of the twentieth century. They engaged at relief programmes at several parts of Bengal as well as in Tippera and Bihar. Both P.C. Ray and C.R. Das led students in these activities which proved to be vital for the students in gaining work experience in non-urban areas and also in setting up political contacts in several parts of Bengal. The social and political impacts of these activities of disaster management were immense and took out the discourse of activism from the sophisticated halls and debating societies of Calcutta to the practical world of harsher realities. Even in one occasion, the students of Presidency College carried out a census programme in Calcutta under the supervision of their Principals W.C. Wordsworth in 1921⁶⁶

In the 1920s, Colleges like Bangabashi, Metropolitan, City and Ripon remained the epicenter of student activism. Before the strike of 1921 there were several smaller agitations where the students played a significant role. At the Calcutta Madrassa, which developed as a base of the Khilafatist students, a strike was organized on 29th October 1920. This strike was characteristically similar to the strikes that took place at Khalsa College of Amritsar, and colleges of Delhi, Peshawar. These movements reflected solidarity among the Muslim students of India who showed their grievances in a unanimous voice. Other student gatherings also took

⁶⁶ Presidency College Centenary Volume, Calcutta: 1955, Government Of West Bengal Publication.

place throughout India. As a matter of fact, one of the speakers at the Students' Conference in Karachi referred to the May 4th Movement of China that occurred in 1919.⁶⁷

It is worth noting that from this phase the students started to get engaged in the working class movements and the college campuses of Calcutta were used to promote Bolshevik propaganda.⁶⁸ Soumendranath Tagore who later became an unorthodox Socialist and an important student leader was a student in the early 1920s. Even Muzaffar Ahmed and Sripad Amrit Dange, who later established the Communist Party of India, were prominent youth leaders during the Non-Cooperation Movement. So from this time the growth of Leftism started making its presence felt and with the growing trend of Leftist radicalism, Mazzini took a backseat and Lenin rose as an international youth ideologue.

However, this ideological drift was not a sudden event. It gradually came with the rise of national consciousness, with the growth of the sense of being oppressed. It is always a characteristic of any movement that it introduces new ideologies and new waves of thought that fits with the time and circumstances. It is a question of liminality and the existence of ideas and ideologies are child of mass movements.

However, from 1920, efforts started to build up an organization exclusively meant for the students. Thus meetings were held throughout Bengal, as in other parts of the country to elect delegates for the All India Students' Conference at Nagpur. The Jagannath College of Dacca remained a prime centre of student activism and an operational base for both the Indian National Congress as well as for the Dacca Anushilan Samiti. Even the teachers played an important role in indoctrinating the students. This trend can be noticed in several institutions of Bengal—both private and government aided. So when Jyotish Chandra Ghosh, an important member of revolutionary politics, left the Chinsurah Training Academy to join the Garbeti School, some 20 students transferred themselves from Chinsurah to Garbeti.⁶⁹

However, to return, the strike of 1921 began in January and lasted for two months. The disturbances were most in the areas which the students knew best—College Street, Mirzapur Street, Harrison Road etc. As a part of the boycott of education around one-tenth of the students

⁶⁷ Berwick, pp. 310-313.

⁶⁸ WBSA File no. 20/1921, Serial No. 66/1921

⁶⁹ WBSA File no. 281/16, Serial no. 81/1916

left the government institutions.⁷⁰ The strike of 1921 formed a crucial conjuncture in the Non-Co-operation Movement affecting over a few thousands of students at various colleges of Bengal. Successful students' demonstrations took place at parts of Central Calcutta and from the middle of January a large number of colleges were closed down. However, the storm passed over after a successful carnage for around two months and government colleges were re-opened on 20th February. This event proved a few things: for the success of any wide-scale mass movement the support of the student community was indispensable and thus the newly aroused community or *Chhatrasamaj* needs a greater attention in broader national politics; secondly, strikes can be used as an effective political weapon to terrify the authority. Students throughout the entire period of our discussion effectively organized strikes in all over Bengal and thus established their identity as a political group.

However, the *Akhara* Movement had its continuation even in the 1920s. In December 1923, the Hindusthani Seva Dal was formed under the guidance of the Indian National Congress. Its objectives were:-

- a) To train and organize people for national service
- b) To discipline all existing voluntary organizations.⁷¹

Though this group was a believer in non-violence, but not all *Akharas* had similar intentions. In fact the ideal of non-violence was quite unique and odd for *Akhara* movements. Groups such as 'Bani Sevak Sangha', 'Rangpur Seva Samiti', 'Saraswati Club' of Ahiritolah, 'Bowbazar Byam Samiti', 'Chhatra Sangha' and other groups came up. Most of these groups had connections with secret societies and ideologues such as Bhupendra Nath Dutta and Pulin Behari Dutta were involved with these groups and taught *lathi* and dagger play. Even Subhas Chandra Bose formed a group called South Calcutta Sevak Samiti and ran a Hockey League. One important initiative came in the *Akhara* Movement when the All Bengal Young Men's Association (ABYMA) set up an *Akhara* on 12th January 1928.⁷² It should be kept in mind that this date was the birthday of Vivekananda

⁷⁰ Berwick, op. cit. pp.315-316.

⁷¹ WBSA File no. 354/26, Serial no. 186/1926.

⁷² Ibid

and thus a clear connection between Vivekananda's ideas of masculinity, or his Neo-Hindu spirituality, and the physical culture in Bengal was established.

The ABYMA reflected the combined ideology of the Voluntary Corps and the *Akharas* or physical training institutes. The initiative to start the Young Men's Association was taken by Prafulla Chandra Ghosh and Sir P.C. Ray. It gave a platform to the youths and students and served as a proto-type of the students' organizations that would soon follow. Subhas Bose, as the vice president of the organization, controlled the student community of Bengal. He utilized his connection with P.C. Ray who had a considerable influence over the student body.⁷³ Many student members of the ABYMA served a dual role of a Congress volunteer as well as a member of the secret society.

The organization arranged Faridpur Students' Conference in February 1925. The government alarmingly reported of this Conference saying that two groups, namely, Jubak Sangha and Jubak Samiti played important role in Faridpur. While the former acted as a recruitment base the latter was a proper revolutionary organization. The students of these organizations spread revolutionary propaganda in the whole town of Faridpur.⁷⁴

The ABYMA held Annual youth Conferences and some of the speakers in these conferences noted that the political consciousness of the students had remarkably increased since the the previous 30 years and the newer generation has become more progressive⁷⁵

With ABYMA the initiative to develop student organization began in full fledged. On 8th September 1922, a meeting of the Reception Committee was held under the President ship of Dr. Meghnad Saha. Here, a plan was made to launch a weekly paper called "Student" with the object of "organizing student community of Bengal into a corporate body with a view to utilize its power for the solution of questions affecting the interests of the country."⁷⁶

Later, in 1924, Nrisingha Sengupta, a B.A. 3rd year student at Ripon College wrote a letter to the Secretary of YMA, Naresh Sen, expressing his wish to start a student organization at

⁷³ WBSA File no. 320/22, Serial no. 170/22

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ *Bangiya Jubak Sammilani*, Presidential Address by Jatindramohan Ray in Faridpur, 1925

⁷⁶ WBSA File op. cit.

Ripon College and planned to keep his organization a separate body from the Students' Association.⁷⁷ However, another source reports that in 1919, an elected students' union has been already formed at Ripon College and it was "one of the earliest" of its type. The authenticity of this latter source can be doubted.⁷⁸

Student politics finally got its own platform in mid-1920s when the All Bengal Students' Association (ABSA) was formed under the leadership of Pramod Ghoshal, Birendranath Dasgupta of BTI Jadavpur, Sachindranath Mitra of Scottish Churches College, Rebati Burman and a few others. A few hundreds of representatives attended its meetings in Calcutta and a good number of students came from Eastern Bengal.

ABSA was formed in 1924 under the chairmanship of P.C.Ray. The organization's aims were to foster friendship between the students of different colleges; to start a student home for the needy students; to organize academic lectures by eminent scholars; to provide financial help for the poor students. However, the paper aims did not cover all its intentions and activities.

The ABSA gave a call for student strike on 3rd February 1928 in order to boycott the Simon Commission. The activists arranged picketing around College Square and made desperate attempts to close down the government institutions. This movement saw the rise of Pramod Ghoshal who can be called the 'the father of student politics in Bengal'. He was badly beaten by the police and was expelled from the Presidency College. Presidency College developed as an epicenter of the agitations of 1928-29. In 1929, there were prolonged strikes at many schools and colleges which were led by ABSA. And frequent agitations were reported from St. Xavier's College and several other places. By now a new trend emerged: an inter-racial clash could be seen within the student community. The Bengali Hindu students clashed with the Anglo-Indian students where the latter group was always seen as loyalists. So the apparent monolith of the *Chhatrasamaj* was now losing its luster.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ <http://www.sfi.org.in>.

⁷⁹ Benjamin Zachariah, Subhas, Ranjan Chakraborty and Rajat Kanta Ray, "Presidency College: An unfinished History" in "Knowledge, power and Politics" pp. 348-352.

The ABSA was split into factions in 1928 on ideological lines and gave a call of strike on 5th September 1929 after which it was banned in 1929. However, its last Governing Body met and decided to call a Students' Convention in 1929 to carry forward the already developed tradition of student movement in Bengal.

Thus the student movement, by the late 1920s has already got a standing of its own. The political consciousness has already been formed. From this scenario, it was only a few years wait before the All India Students' Federation (AISF) would enter in the political scene of India in 1936.

Chapter 5

Two Loci of Student Activism: The Technical Colleges and the Women

Student Activists of Bengal

Student politics in Bengal had a lot many varieties. We have already discussed about several trends of students' movements in the last chapters. In this chapter we are going to discuss about the activities in the colleges of technical education. Besides we will also segue into the activities of the girl students of several schools and colleges of Bengal. Though the two activities had no apparent connections between them, except their fight against Imperialism (which may be seen as a 'common minimum' in this case) and were far away from each other, nevertheless in some ways both of these movements stood out from the activities in other institutions. We have already talked briefly about the activism in these two centers right in the beginning, at introduction. Here we shall try to segue into these activities in some detail.

I

The activism in Engineering Colleges dates back to 1881. In the month of April, a supervisor at the Shibpur Engineering College assaulted an Indian student. This action led to a strike organized by the Indian student body of the college. The Anglo-Indian students, however, showed pro-authority sentiment and this led to bitter relations between the Indian and Anglo-Indian student community. The event received wide coverage in the Press and an element of racism within the student community was noticed for the first time. As a consequence of the strike, a few students were expelled from the college.⁸⁰

Several students participated in Revolutionary Terrorism from the technical colleges like Bhawanipore technical college and the technical colleges of Rajshahi and Comillah. One Labanya Mohan Roy, a technical student of Bhagalpur, who was reported to have degree from foreign college, also had alleged terror links.⁸¹ The question is why this matter is different as revolutionary groups recruited youths from all kind of institutions? But what

⁸⁰ Berwick, chapter 1, p. 86

⁸¹ WBSA Serial No. 78/1924, file no. 264/(1)24; also see WBSA Serial No. 79/1916, file no. 655/16

is important in this case is that terrorism needed some elementary knowledge of technical education which was best provided by the technical students.

However, at times the students of technical colleges left their college and joined some other colleges of liberal arts which provided non-technical educations. Actually, this move was directed from the Party itself and the technical students were instructed to spread the Revolutionary network in other colleges of Bengal. One such student was Mrinmoy Dasgupta who was acquitted in Howrah Arms Act was a former student of Shibpur but later took admission at City College.⁸² Shibpur was rampant with student activism and frequent strikes took place at their. One such was a general strike in July 1916.

However, the biggest contribution in the activism of technical colleges came from Bengal Technical College, Jadavpur. John Berwick mentions nothing on the activism in BTI and overlooked the activism in the technical colleges. But BTI being under Nationalist control, was pronouncedly anti-imperialist. Quite a few students from Jadavpur have been named as terror suspects in the Intelligence reports.⁸³ In a letter sent to the Educational Secretary, the DPI wrote that BTI was the “only institution that commands the confidence of the public”⁸⁴

Only those students who were political sufferers or had convinced anti-British sentiments were given admission to the institution. The general attitude of the BTI authority was hostile towards the government. The Students’ Association of BTI set up in 1913 was one of the most dreaded anti-British branches of the Association in Bengal. Even Ganesh Ghosh and Ananta Singh, the future deputies of Surya Sen in Chittagong Uprising, were students of BTI. It should be kept in mind Surya Sen greatly relied on the technical expertise of these two revolutionaries and were entrusted with the artillery command of the Indian Republican Army.⁸⁵

⁸² WBSA Serial no. 79/1916, file no. 655/16

⁸³ WBSA Serial No. 83/1925, file no. 83-25

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid; Ajay Sen, “bidhubhusan Sen”

Thus it shows that the activism in the technical colleges were much more radical. Though very few instances could be seen of the campus politics in the technical colleges, nevertheless, this variety was also a part of the student activism in Bengal.

II

Women were not lagging far behind in the activism scenario. 20th century witnessed the acceptance of western education among the student community and for the first time women were coming out of their homesteads.⁸⁶ The western education made them progressive and the women took mass movement as a weapon to create an identity of their own. Their lot was led by younger generations of women in the 1910s 1920s. Thus they had a dual task so far as the question of creating an identity was concerned. Firstly, they have to carve out a social space as a woman and secondly, they have to carve out a political space as a student activist. So it appears that the scene of student activism was a gendered space in some extent.

The girl students were a part of the wider network of revolutionary activity. On 25th April, 1916, the Chief Secretary J.H. Kerr wrote to DPI that the school girls were recruited as members of sympathizers of the secret societies.⁸⁷ However, their real participation to terrorism began only in the 1920s. Intelligence reports of 1924 mentions the names of Anupama Sen and Pritilata Waddedar, two students of class ten, as important members of terrorist groups.⁸⁸ These girls raised concern in the intelligence circle of Dacca.

However, some school teachers of Dacca like Parul Mukherjee, her sister Maina, Anita Purakayastha and others recruited girls for secret societies. A certain school called the Nivedita School, a girl school of Comillah served as an important recruiting base. Even a girl of class VI handed over the revolver of her father to a member of Anushilan Samiti.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ For detailed analysis of arriving of women folk in the scenario of western education, see Geraldine Forbes' works.

⁸⁷ WBSA Serial no. 79/1916, file no. 655/16

⁸⁸ WBSA serial no. 78/1924, file no. 264/(1)24

⁸⁹ Ibid.

Many of the girl student activists played a dual role of participating both in secret societies and as volunteers of the congress. Many girls were part of the Volunteer Corps and were given drilling trainings by Parul Mukherjee and other leaders.

From the 1920s the college girls of Calcutta started acting as vanguards of Congress movements. It came as a tremendous shock for the British authority to see Bengali women, who were very home-bound and considered as shy and timid, came down on the streets and courted arrest freely. If C. R Das was the ideologue of the male students, then it was his wife Basanti Devi emerged as an icon for girl students. However, the biggest moment came for the women student activism on 3rd February 1928 during the *hartal* which was observed to mark the protest against the Simon Commission and the girls of Bethune College, under the leadership of Bina Das organized a strike and came down up to the gates of Presidency College where the boys of ABSA were organizing a strike. It was a remarkable scene and for the first time, perhaps, in the history of student activism in India, that such a unique solidarity was forged.

This incident led to great disturbances in Bethune College and severe tensions arose between the authority and the students which led to the resignation of the principal G.M. Arkwright. The strings of events in this regard, suggested a sort of women empowerment. This early spark later produced important women activists like Bina Das or Ela Sen and definitely marked a paradigm shift in the history activism in Bengal.⁹⁰

However, there was always an attempt to incorporate women in the male framework of activism. But the girls were quite successful in holding their own which would later become the basis of Feminist movements in Bengal in later days. Nevertheless women remained the crucial section of student community staying within the *Chhatrasamaj* itself and no attempt were made, at least in this period, to develop a *Chharaasamaj* or a community of the girl students.⁹¹

⁹⁰ Uttara chakraborty, "Gertrude Mariam Wright", in "In the Footsteps of Chandramukhi:125 years of Bethune College", Bethune College Publication, 2004.

⁹¹ For the idea of *chhatraasamaj* I am indebted to my supervisor Professor Prabhat Kumar who suggested this idea to me in an important note.

Chapter 6

The Hotbed of Seditious: A Case Study of Presidency College and Eden Hindu Hostel

The Beginning

On 20th January 1817, the Hindu College was formally established. The foundation of Hindu College was an Anglicist initiative and its aim was to modernize Hindu Bengali elites with western education. So the idea of “progress” made its presence felt from the very beginning of the formation of the institution. The committee that played a pivotal role in its establishment was an amalgamation of Europeans and Hindu elites who interested to infuse the Indian society with western education. Though Ram Mohan Roy kept himself out of the initiative but welcomed the foundation of a new centre of elite Hindu education. The Presidency College Centenary Volume writes that on the opening day, there just 20 people on the role which increased to 69 within three months.⁹²

⁹² Centenary Volume, p. 5



[This photograph remains one of the oldest taken pictures of Hindu College. During this time classes of the Hindu College were held at the two flanked portions of the Sanskrit College and were only a guest in the host building of the Sanskrit College.]

[Source: Presidency College Centenary Volume, plate given at the end of the book]

Throughout the century the institution remained a premier college of Bengal and the Government extended its patronage to this elitist centre of learning. The desire of Hindu elites to provide western education to their children became evident from the growing number of students every year. The table given below, however, shows that how the college grew in fame with passage of years and more and more students started joining the institution.

Table 4⁹³

<u>YEAR</u>	<u>NUMBER OF STUDENTS</u>
1872-73	385
1870-71	401
1888	500+
1891	415
1917	953

However, the Hindu College was born with a desire to change the society and within eleven years of its establishment, the first sparks of student radicalism began to be felt. In 1828, Henry Louis Vivian Derozio joined the Hindu College as the Master of English and History. Derozio was a student of David Drummond in Dharmatollah Academy and as John Berwick has shown, Drummond combined Romanticism with Skepticism of the philosophical tradition of the 18th century. Both Drummond and Derozio drew references to the idea of ‘common sense’ propagated by philosophers like Thomas Reid and Dugald Stewart.⁹⁴ The idea of ‘common sense’ gave rise to the concept of ‘free enquiry’ which was championed by Derozio and which, in turn, gave rise to a new intellectual space through the Young Bengal Movement. The propagation of anti-dogmatism, belief in Baconian principles and promotion of radical and rational outlook was the first strike of the student community on the conservatism of the Bengali society. The symptoms of progress, and more importantly, the symptoms of combined students’ activity could be seen right from the late 1820s. Derozio and the members of Young Bengal published journals like ‘Parthenon’ and ‘Gnananneshan’ and later in 1838, established the “Society for the Acquisition of General Knowledge” to propagate Free Thought. This was practically a debating society that set an example for the debating bodies to emerge in the later decades. However, their activism, though radical indeed, was aimed only against the

⁹³ Information are taken from the Presidency College Register published in 1927.

⁹⁴ Berwick, pp. 31-33.

orthodox Hindu Society. The Young Bengal Movement lacked political dimension and, in no way, was anti-British. In fact, many Derozians later joined governmental services and even embraced Christianity or Brahmoism shedding their early atheism. The apolitical attitude of the Young Bengal Movement is one of the reasons that we will not consider it as the starting point of student activism in Bengal. Moreover, the movement was restricted only to certain parts of Calcutta and within a particular section of society. It lacked a pan-Bengal appeal. Nevertheless, the Young Bengal Movement was the first stepping stone in the way of the creating of a new socio-political space among the students. Years later, it would serve as an iconic reference point in the formation of public opinion among the students of Presidency College.

In 1855 the Hindu College was transformed into a government institution and was renamed as Presidency College. The ‘pre-political’⁹⁵ phase of student activism was already over long ago and only the shadow of the Young Bengal Movement was remaining. However, there was always a generous patronization from the government towards Presidency College. It was an aspiration of the government to develop the College in the Oxbridge model and provide the best possible education to the students.⁹⁶ Being closely aligned with the governmental policies and due to the presence of a much greater number of the European professors in Presidency College than in any other institutions of Calcutta, made it different and segregated the college from other colleges, founded by the Bengali intellectuals, which had greater inclination towards indigenous and nationalist ideologies. This segregation, though not isolation, would make its impression even in the political activism of its student: for the students of Presidency always learnt to think differently. Always perceived as an elite institution, Presidency College always kept its ‘intellectual elitism’⁹⁷ alive throughout its history and excelled in almost every sector of social and political life of Bengal as well as of India.

⁹⁵ Though Antonio Gramsci used this term in his *Prison Notebook* in a completely different context and has no connection with the area of my research, nevertheless I used this term as it is most relevant in this context.

⁹⁶ Centenary Volume, pp. 20-26; Berwick, chapter 2 passim.

⁹⁷ However, there is no parameter to define intellectual elitism. But Presidency’s excellence in academics and its fame as centre of western learning per excellence set it in a different plane from other institutions of Bengal.

As a matter of fact, the earliest endeavors towards the politicization and growth of social and cultural awareness often came from the College authority. It is an irony, however, for the students of a college that would be vigorously anti-authority in its later days, was actually politicized, socialized and modernized by the authority itself. From very beginning the college authority took various initiatives that were aimed at an all around development of the students. The steps taken enhanced the bonding among the students and contributed, to a great extent, to the formation of a community life or a *Gesselschaft*. Moreover, these initiatives led to the growth of a public opinion within the *Chhatrasamaj* and systematized communication between the students.

The first of such steps was the formation of societies in various departments of the college. These societies were unique in terms of Indian colleges and acted as a platform to discuss academics. Several academic societies came up during the tenure of the two Principals P.K. Ray and H.R. James. The earliest one was the Philosophy Society that came in 1887. Many other societies came up in the first and second decades of the 20th century when the political consciousness was gradually forming. However, these societies had an irregular life and their activities are not properly documented each society had an elected secretary and here, for the first time the students had a foretaste of departmental elections. But the departmental secretaries had no power apart from monitoring the activities of the societies. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that the Societies enriched the departments academically.⁹⁸

Another important step in the development of the students was the initiative to bring in a physical culture in the college campus. Though the efforts in this direction began much earlier—from the late 19th century. In 1879, a well equipped Gymnasium was set up to give thorough physical training to the students. In those days very few educational institutions had a Gymnasium. Further in 1892, physical training was made compulsory for 1st year students, excepting those who were medically unfit or came from far away. Besides, a plot in the '*Maidan*' was also reserved for the sports-loving students of Presidency College. In 1894, an athletic club came up with the government and students

Besides, it should not be forget that Presidency College was always a hub of Bengali Bhadrlok community and hence the student community that developed here was a heir to that Bhadrlok class consciousness.

⁹⁸ For a detailed discussion on the Departmental Societies, see Centenary Volume, pp. 167-173.

equally sharing its expenses. (However, students always had their stakes involved in the College which made them more passionate about the institution). The college excelled in the first decade of 20th century and even won the Elliot Shield, the premier championship for inter-college football, quite a few times.⁹⁹

Presidency College also supplied two units to the University Corps which performed well in the early years. But encouragement among Presidencians to participate in the Corps waned down in the later years, probably due to their growing dislike for the British state. Even one student complained of racial discrimination in the Corps as Indian students were not given rifles during the drilling and marching sessions.¹⁰⁰ However, there was a state initiative to teach military techniques to the student community and an attempt was made to produce a loyal servile section in the society. But if we put it in the other way, the British State, unconsciously, was infusing elements of disciplined life which became vital for the development of politicized group of students. At times, even the revolutionary students joined the Corps to learn the war techniques.

However, the most important steps taken by the authority in the direction of growth of awareness of the students was making them involving in debates. The last decades of the 19th century were crucial in the formation of public opinion and hence debates and public lectures served an important purpose. The apparently apolitical, and hence harmless, debates were important catalyst in politicizing the student mind. As a matter of fact, the first debating union was set up in the period between 1889 to 1891 Chittaranjan Das has been mentioned as a key debater in his student days.¹⁰¹ His debating skills and argumentative power later turned him into a successful pleader in Court and later into a brilliant orator in the field of politics. In 1913-14, a 1st Year Debating Union was established where Subhas Chandra Bose was one of the leaders. The same batch ran a 2nd Year Debating Union in the next year (1914-15).¹⁰² Even the five wards of Hindu Hostel had their own debating clubs. When the students' union was established in 1926, Debate came under its wing. Here we find the name of one more successful political leader of

⁹⁹ Ibid, pp. 193-195.

¹⁰⁰ Mentioned in the article on "Presidency College" in "*Knowledge, Power and Politics*"

¹⁰¹ Centenary volume p. 186

¹⁰² Ibid.

later days—Hirendranath Mukherjee—who was the Union Secretary in 1926-27 and looked after the meetings of the debate society. In 1927, he won a Gold medal at Benares All India Inter-College Competition.¹⁰³ However, debates expressed the social and political awareness of the students and in a way their participation in debates reflected their belief in republican traditions. Thus the debating activities can be seen as a crucial starting point in the making of the political awareness of the students in general and producing activists in later period.

However, the most important moment in the political life of Presidency College came with the establishment of Presidency College Student Union. Though the official documents are silent about union activity in the 19th century, but an article of Uma Prasad Mukhopadhyay gives us a different story. In an interesting essay published in the Autumn Annual, the yearly journal of the Alumni Association, he writes that the genesis of the Student Union was in late 1870s. Ashutosh Mukhopadhyay, the famous educationist of the later days, was actively involved in this union and the author who was his younger son discovered some documents related to the union from Ashutosh's private papers.¹⁰⁴ These documents were the reports of the college union in the period from 1877 to 1887 and Ashutosh Mukhopadhyay was the secretary of the union from 1882 to 1885. The report says that the 'Presidency College Union' was started on 8th September 1877 by professor of English, J.V.S. Pope. The aim of this student union was "to root out the feeling of dis-union prevalent among the students and to unite them as fellow workers in the cause of self-improvement."¹⁰⁵ So the message suggests that the attempt was to unite the students and hence forge a community consciousness among the students. Thus if we extend our analysis then here also an idea of the growth of *Gesselschaft* comes into play. However, as the reports says, only three meetings were held in the first (annual) session. But when professor Pope was transferred in February 1878, students of the 4th and 5th year began to reorganize the union. As a result, in this session, 8 meetings were held under the president ship of distinguished pandit Shivnath Shastri. But in 1879, with the

¹⁰³ Ibid. p. 187. Other students also excelled in several other debate competitions. Amartya Sen was also a key debater of the later days and won a few prizes in 1952.

¹⁰⁴ Autumn Annual, Volume xviii, pp. 25-30, Calcutta: Presidency College Alumni Association, 1989-90.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

passing out of the incumbent students of 4th and 5th year, Union activities decreased considerably. Its activities saw a sharp decline in 1880 and 1881. However, the students' union was reorganized in 1882 by students of 1st year and 3rd year. The report provides a list of the names of the members of this annual session where Ashutosh Mukhopadhyay has been mentioned as a member of 3rd year. All the students in the list have been designated as *babu* which suggests that the Union was an activity centre of Bengali Bhadrals and was shrouded with elitism. The report informs us of the regular occurrences of meetings, both annual and half-yearly, from 1882 to 1887. Professor H.M. Percival, an Anglo-Indian teacher was a long time president of the Union and several other Indian and European professors were involved in the union. This shows that the Union was a joint venture of the college authority and the student body. In the annual sessions students delivered lectures on various social and political issues of national and international importance. In 1884, Ashutosh Mukhopadhyay delivered a lecture on 'Emerson'. In the same year, the Union condoled the death of Dr. H.W. McCann, a professor of Mathematics who was quite popular among the students, and raised funds in his memory. The Union activity suffered in 1885-86 probably because of a clash between the students and a professor though nothing is mentioned about the 'suffering' of the Union. However, it was revived again in 1887-88 under the patronage of Alexander Peddler. The article on Presidency College in the Mushirul Hasan considers this Union as a mere debating body modeled on the 'Society of General Acquisition' of the Young Bengal.¹⁰⁶ However, this analysis cannot be undermined. Nevertheless, its activity led to an earliest growth a community consciousness among the student body. Moreover, it is nowhere mentioned that this Union was an elected body and the report reflects more on the nexus of the students and authority and less on the politicking of the students. Thus, in a way, this union stands somewhere in between the authority- sponsored initiatives mentioned earlier and the student movements that will come into play in later days.

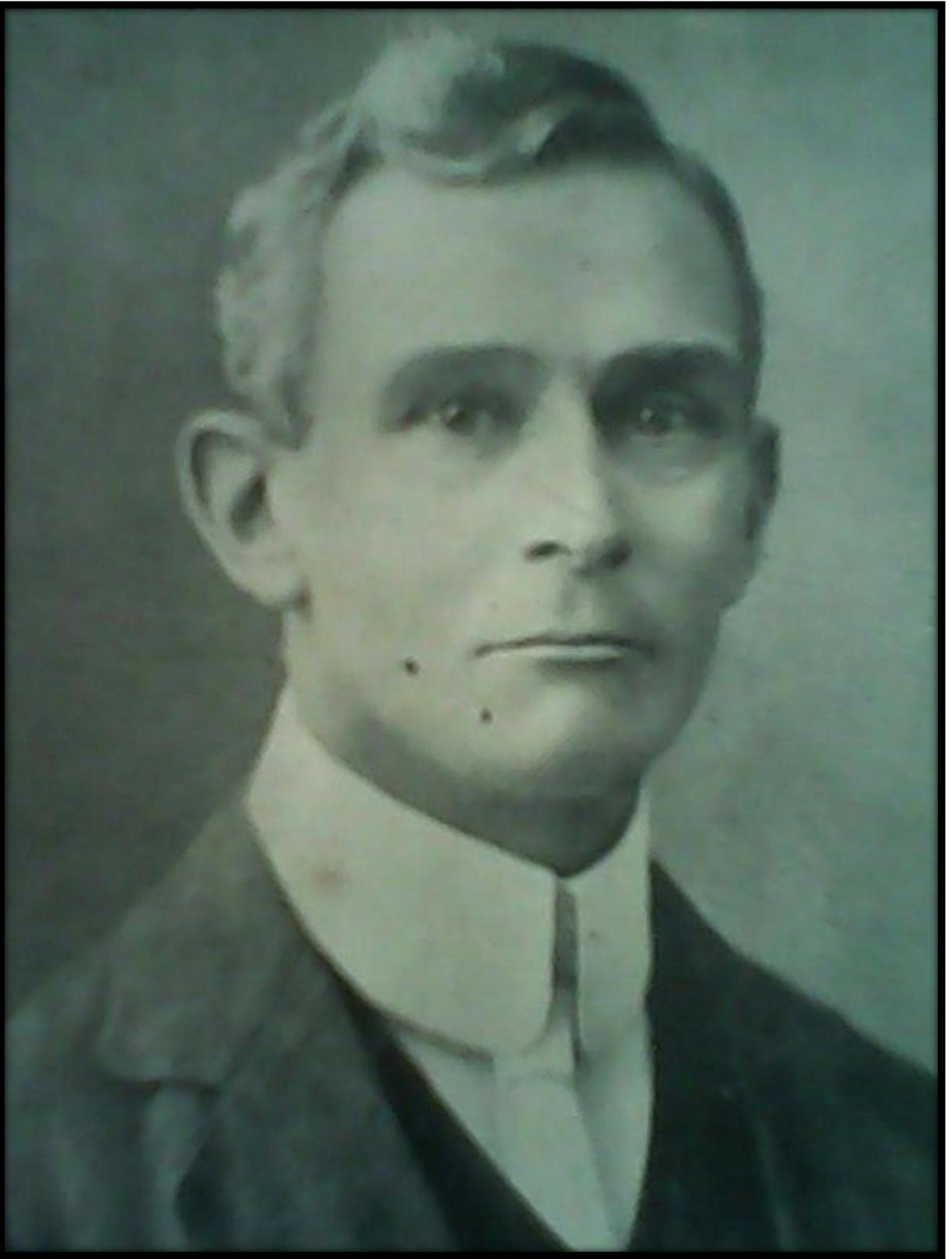
However, no records of the Union activity can be found for the period from 1889 to 1904. In 1905, Union was revived by the first Indian Principal of Presidency College, P.K. Ray. He designed a set of rules the Union and Rajendra Prasad, the first President of Indian

¹⁰⁶ Hasan, "Knowledge, Power and Politics", Delhi, 1998

Republic, was elected as its first secretary. He would later say that the political stage of Presidency College prepared many political actors of future and even in his times students of Presidency College played a prominent role in political activism.¹⁰⁷ This statement, however, contradicts the information provided in the official documents of the College. However, this Union was not successful and was closed down soon.

However, in 1914, Principal H.R. James set up the 'Consultative Committee of Student Representatives' Henry Rosher James had a great contribution in student activities in Presidency College. Even Subhas Bose wrote in his memoir that James saved the students on many occasions from the police. Of the 3rd year students, however, the first secretary of this committee was Pramathanath Bandopadhyay who also played a key role in founding the Presidency College Magazine in printed format. For this magazine he demanded editorial freedom which was severely opposed by E.F. Oaten and this led to some student agitations against Oaten. However, the Union which was smoothly functioning and was slowly establishing itself as a prominent platform of student activity in Presidency College was suspended after the (in)famous 'Oaten Incident' that saw the expulsion of Subhas Bose, resignation of H.R. James and a temporary suspension of the Hostel and the College.

¹⁰⁷ Nostalgia, Calcutta: 1992, p. 57



[The picture given on the previous page is of Principal H.R. James. He introduced many changes in Presidency College and was often considered as one of the best principals the college ever had]

[Source: Plate given in Presidency College Centenary Volume]



[The man standing in the second row, second from right is E.F. Oaten. He became infamous when his name associated with the expulsion of Subhas Chandra Bose from Presidency College. However, several other incidents show that he was not quite popular among the student activists and in one occasion even had heated exchange of words with the girls of Bethune College.]

[Source: plate given in Presidency College Centenary Volume]

Nevertheless, in a meeting held on 11th December 1917, the Union was once again constituted on the motion of professor S.C. Mahalanobis. The members of this Union were elected from the students and functioned peacefully from 19017 to 1925. In the last year, the Union showed 'great action' and the troubled situations of student politics in mid 1920s led to a

vote of No-Confidence on February 25 1925 and, consequently, the Union committee resigned.¹⁰⁸

Fresh efforts were made in 1916 and a new Union was formed with the Constitution adopted in 1921.¹⁰⁹ The new patron of this Union was Principal H.E. Stapleton. The first secretary of this Union was Hiren Mukherjee (1926-27), while the second term's secretary was Pramodanath Ghoshal. But the expulsion of Pramod Ghoshal due to his anti-imperialist activities led to his expulsion and the suspension of the Union.

Though the students' union was revived in 1931 by Principal B.M. Sen, but it operated on a strictly nominated basis thus remaining a puppet in the hands of the authority without having a voice of its own. The Union only became an elected Council again in 1944 during the Principal-ship of A.K. Chanda.

The Union was only a vehicle and only legitimized the political activities of the student community of the College. However, the growth of the Students' Union coincided with severe political activism in Bengal, both with and outside the campus. At the same time the students were encouraged to take part in several relief programmes all across Bengal. For this Students' Relief Fund were established in 1914 and Students' Aid Fund came in 1923 with active contribution from the Union and individual students.

These initiatives and peaceful non-agitating activities of the students got mingled with the activism of the students in the field of politics. Though according to the official history, the college remained 'peaceful' during the Swadeshi¹¹⁰, but there was always an undercurrent of revolutionary terrorism ever since the time of Swadeshi. At least two students of this period, Ullaskar Dutta and Indra Nath Nandy, left their studies mid way to join Jugantar and Anushilan Party respectively. Of them Ullaskar was a brilliant student of Chemistry and was entrusted with the responsibility of bomb making in the

¹⁰⁸ Centenary volume p. 179.

¹⁰⁹ Presidency College Register, Calcutta: Government of Bengal Publication, 1927

¹¹⁰ Centenary Volume p. 122

group of Aurobindo. So when he was tried in the Alipore Bomb Case, he got a death sentence though it was later converted to life imprisonment.¹¹¹

The Hindu Hostel was an important hub of terrorist activities. It was seen as a ‘hotbed of sedition’ by the British police and often sheltered members or sympathizers of the secret societies. However, very few people knew about their presence in the College and the Hostel and they frequently came in ideological conflict with the spiritualist and Extreme Nationalist students with whom Subhas Bose sided.¹¹² Meghnad Saha, a younger contemporary of Subhas Bose, also had close contacts with the Jugantar and was an associate of Bagha Jatin.

However, there were occasional police raids in the Hindu Hostel and the intelligence reports suggest that there were repeated seditious activities in the Hostel as well as in the College campus. An important raid was carried out on 27th July 1916 in connection with the murder of DSP Basanta Kumar Chatterjee which actually involved a number of students across several colleges in Calcutta. However, in June, already an important raid was carried out and two students—Basanta Das and Surendra Kar—were already arrested from the Hindu Hostel. This particular raid of Hindu Hostel¹¹³ was a typical example how the British police disturbed the peaceful life of students and harassed a good number of innocents in the name of raids. A lot of items were seized from the rooms of the boarders in the name of raid. Most of these articles were apolitical in nature except a diary of A. Sur found from Manindra Majumdar’s room which provided evidences from the political unrest of 1916. It reports the Oaten /incident in some detail and mentions the name of Ananga Mohan Dam, one of the two boys expelled from the College as the consequence of this incident. But interestingly, the diary does not mention the name of Subhas Bose!¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ Barindra Kumar Ghosh, *“Bandi-Jiban”* .

¹¹² Nostalgia, pp. 42-44

¹¹³ A lot of information on this raid can be found in WBSA File no. 1008/1916, Serial no. 28/1916. Also see, Subhas Ranjan Chakraborty, *“One Day in the Life of Hindu Hostel”* in Autumn Annual, pp.123-130, Calcutta: 2004-05

¹¹⁴ WBSA file op. cit.

The activities of Hindu Hostel were not isolated from the unrest within the college campus itself.

The occasional suspension of the Students' Union as well as the college itself was due to the political agitations in the campus. The Oaten Incident in 1916 was famous for the expulsion of Subhas Chandra Bose. It was reported that Professor E.F. Oaten physically abused a few of the senior students for making noisy passage throughout his period in the corridor of the second floor. His action offended a large number of students of the College they demanded an apology from Oaten. When Oaten refused to do so and the Principal James rebuked the students for their actions, the students organized a strike under the leadership of Subhas Bose, then a 3rd year Philosophy Honours student and a student representative for his batch. The strike continued for two days and Oaten made surrender and the matter was settled amicably. However, this was one of the earliest instances of student demonstration and an organized form of 'campus politics' in Presidency College. But problem resurfaced a month later when oaten once again abused and manhandled a 1st year student. Now the students lost all their hopes in constitutional methods of agitation and took their revenge by physically abusing Oaten. However, it was a concocted story that he was thrown down from the staircase. Thus based on the only eye-witness account of the orderly of the Principal's room, both Subhas Bose and Ananga Mohan Dam were expelled from the college. The Union was banned and Principal James was forced to resign.¹¹⁵ However, this incident, though occurred in a short period of time, was in no way 'short' in importance. It pushed Presidency College a few strides ahead in the direction of student activism. The students, as an organized political group, formed an identity of their own in the field of student activism. More importantly, it made Subhas Chandra Bose famous and gave him a prominent position as a student leader.

¹¹⁵ Mentioned in "*An Indian Pilgrim*" (autobiography of Subhas Chandra Bose), reprinted in *Nostalgia*, pp. 42-44



[Subhas Chandra Bose established iconic image as a student and youth leader which stayed even years after his expansion from Presidency College. This picture was taken at Presidency College sometimes in the 1930s]

[Source: plate given in Presidency College Centenary Volume]

The memory of 1916 haunted Presidency College for years and became a common reference point for student activism.¹¹⁶ On 20th January, 1928 Pramod Ghoshal as the secretary of the students' union gave a speech and hailed Subhas Chandra Bose as an eminent ex-student of Presidency College. He also raised the slogan of *Vande Mataram*. When the Principal asked for a justification, Ghoshal refused to cow down and thus was expelled

¹¹⁶ Much later, it became a norm to point out at the staircase of the Main Building and the freshers were told that it is the same stair from where Oaten was "thrown".

from the College soon after. Bose himself reportedly visited the Hindu Hostel on that night and sat on a meeting with his supporters. However, a massive strike was organized at Presidency College on February 3rd 1928 to boycott the Simon Commission. Pramod Ghoshal, already a prominent leader of ABSA sustained heavy injuries from police but which raised furor in the contemporary press.¹¹⁷ The girl students of Bethune College also joined the boys of Presidency at the college gates. Later these girls, along with Bina Das, faced severe consequences for their actions in their college but this is not the right place discuss about their activism.

Thus the events of 20th century in Presidency College signaled the rise of a new epicenter of student politics. In many aspects, its movements were unique while in many others it simply followed the path shown by other colleges. Nevertheless, Presidency College serves as good example that how activism grew up within the boundaries of a government institution. It was a classic example to show that the effects of western education brought about progress—a progress that awakened an entire community. In the whole narrative, Presidency College developed its own brand of student activism.

¹¹⁷ Article on "*Presidency College*", pp. 148-152.

Postscript

The rise of political consciousness amongst the student community produced a sort of youth sub-cultural trend in the social history of Bengal. As they gradually carved out an intellectual and socio-political space for themselves, they slowly developed as a community. Though the idea of a ‘class’ loosely comes into mind when we here the term *Chhatrasamaj* (John Berwick has used the literal transcription of the word: Student Society, which I do not accept personally), but the concept of class doesn’t fits into this narrative. The student activists of this time mainly belonged to the middle class in general and never came out of that particular class identity of Bourgeoisie.¹¹⁸ In this context, the idea of the growth of a *Gessellschaft* or the associational ties in the student community is self-explanatory. As the students stayed (in messes and hostels) and studied together as a group, their community consciousness was gradually build up. They became conscious of their own self and the self of their mates/comrades. This companionship resulted into a close-knit community for themselves. Thus John Berwick’s idea of *Chhatrasamaj* remains crucial to my understanding of the entire concept of the growth of student politics. It is worth noting that the ‘making’ was an active process and the student community was present in its making. This proposition sounds somewhat similar to E.P.Thompson’s “Making of the English Working Class” but paradoxically, students never developed as a class in itself. It more or less stayed a part of the Bourgeois trope. More importantly, it acted as a collective which stayed a part of the similar world sharing similar drive towards modernity.

Interestingly, the student life acted as a ‘launching pad’ for many future political leaders of South Asia. Be it Subhas Chandra Bose or the early communists and socialists like Soumendranath Tagore or Virendranath Chattopadhyay, many of the activists had the start of their political life very early. Hence, it is through the student activism that many of them formulated their future political ideologies and developed a career in politics. So

¹¹⁸ I have reached this conclusion after a discussion with my supervisor professor Prabhat Kumar. His analysis and pin-pointing of the class-community dichotomy of mine has been helpful for me to zero down on this conclusion.

the political ideologies of the student activists, who were involved with the revolutionary groups of the Swadeshi days was not the same as those of the activists involved with the Chittagong Armory Raid and the activities of Surya Sen's Indian Republican Army. These student activists of Maasterda's gang, while imprisoned in Andaman and various jails of India, read smuggled hand-written pamphlets of Lenin and gradually became Communist converts. As a consequence, many of these revolutionaries later joined the CPI after their release from jails.¹¹⁹ This trend had already begun with Bhagat Singh who before a few months of his hanging had become a Communist ideologue.

But this was not the tendency of the revolutionaries of the Swadeshi Days. In the first decade of 20th century Bengal had no notion of Marxism and example of its wide scale practical application was also absent. Revolutionaries like Barindra kumar Ghosh or Ullaskar Dutta never joined Communist movements even after their release from jail. The classic example was, however, Aurobindo himself. His fondness with Neo-Hinduism in the later life and complete retirement from the political scene do not have too many parallels in the politics of Indian Nationalism. Even the student activists from Deccan such as the Savarkar brothers or Hegdewar, the founder of RSS, became prominent ideologues of Hindutva in their later lives. This ideological shift in student politics and also in adult politics is worth noticing. Bolshevik propaganda gradually made its stronghold among the student community of Bengal in the later days thus replacing the Hindu revivalist ideology of the Swadeshi era.

Nevertheless, radicalism remained a focal point of student politics. It was this fiery radicalism that gave student politics a brand of its own. Berwick has tried to trace the pattern of this student radicalism in his work. The concept of radicalism introduced the progressive element in the political culture of the student community.

However, at the same time there was no dearth of loyalist students at the colleges. At times, a handful amongst these loyalists served as police informers.¹²⁰ But these were exceptions. In general, the mood of the student community grew more and more radical in the 20th

¹¹⁹ Ajay Sen, "*Bidhubhusan Sen*" pp. 140-143

¹²⁰ It was reported that there were a good number of police informers at Bangabashi College. For details on this see, Anil Kumar Choudhuri et al. "*Seventy Years of Bangabashi College 1887-1957*", Calcutta: 1957, p. 5

century. As South Asia¹²¹ approached closer to political liberation, the radicalism of the student community was also growing fast.

The student leaders of the initial phase did not become a part of the political elite and mingled with the student community. Thus leaders and activists like Sachindra Basu or Bhupesh Nag stayed in student messes of Central Calcutta with the other students.

As the general trend indicates a large number of students came from districts of eastern Bengal and they played a crucial role in the campus politics of Calcutta.

However, these trends produced important conjunctures in the larger narrative. The greatest moment of student politics of India came in 1936 when All India Students' Federation (AISF) was established. In the pan-Indian level, student politics got an organizational basis: a platform of its own. However, the political consciousness in Bengal was already forged in the 1920s with the formation of ABSA. But the stages through which this end product was produced remains more crucial in the understanding of the whole argument.

The idea of 'student' and the concept of 'student activism' came gradually with time and with the expansion of political space. It was the journey of a group from a bunch of peaceful learner who was the target group of Anglicist educational policies to a politicized group of radicals for whom Anglophile British loyalists became enemies of mankind. This journey created a new 'pressure group' in politics, that is, the students. As the period of 'making' passed through several ideological trends, so the period which followed it gave rise to a concrete socio-political group strong enough to tread its own path and mend its own business. These student politicians gradually became an integral part of the national politics. The period gave rise to a multi-layered strategically important political community. The future of this community had its own story to tell.

¹²¹ Since my work contains references to present region of Bangladesh, hence I use the term South Asia to refer to the region of my work.

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