

# From Studious Days to The Streetfighting Years

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I had walked into the college on a bright summer day of 1964. I was thrown out almost exactly two years later in September 1966. Two months and two years of intense college days - a very brief chapter; yet those times still continue to call me back, ensnare me and refuse to allow me to cut the Gordian Knot - how and why, I shall soon explain.

As everyone interested in the history of student movement in post-independence India as well as anyone associated with this college knows, those brief but intense years were marked by the famous Presidency College Student movement against expulsions.

The appearance of such an outburst was most unexpected those days. None could spot any cloud of unrest and disturbance on the college horizon. Hence the shock, the hurt astonishment, the euphoria in those days. It is thus interesting to know the feelings of an average Presidency boy before such disturbances appeared - in short, the mentality before the rebellion.

If any single internal factor dominated the genesis of the revolt in the college, it was the class factor. The students would be clearly drawn into two separate groups with very little linkages between the two : one comprised the boys and girls from the families of moneybags, bureaucrats, executives or famed professors - almost all with a Senior Cambridge background; the other consisted of students who had joined this institution solely on merit, despite their clerical background, with ability to converse in English only haltingly or to follow lectures in English by stretching their attention to the utmost, not entering or trespassing into the Magnolia Club (the supposed 'cheap

canteen' of those days), and having little pocket money to spare anywhere except occasionally in the Coffee House or in the League games in the Maidan. Debates used to be organised in English on themes of suitable aristocratic taste and frequently flippant moods of the possessed and the confident like 'love is a myth' or 'mad men create history'. Of course, the audience of the circus would be mostly those plebeians, humbled, huddled often in corners, never asking questions to teachers, spending hours in the libraries. But if they were present in those debates, and speeches were necessary, it was mostly as a side show, for the main speeches were really pieces of exhibitionism, where the duel between British Council and the ex-students of the college or between ex-students and present students would be enjoyed by that august club. One can visualise the pen-sketch a little further : one group converses in English often, showing off, shrugging now and then, walking confidently to Magnolia, going effortlessly through the big books again in inscrutable and unfathomable *Angrezi*; the other converses in Bengali, often timid, too scared to ask for any elucidation from the brilliant, torrentially speaking, suited and booted, the *master*. Sartorial differences, speech differences, mood differences - all marked them apart. The whole situation would again and again be identified as the continuing insult of the Bengali *bhadralok* by the colonialists. And when the Students' Union started organizing annual events in the language of the middle class radical Bengali milieu by inviting either Shambhu Bhattacharya to perform the *runner* dance or Ajit Pande and Nirmalendu Choudhury to sing popular progressive songs, the release of the tense

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community of young *desi* boys and girls was one of ecstasy. The identification with radical politics was not so much out of politics *per se*, but from a sense of alienation towards the high culture of the Presidency world. Not surprisingly, students like Kaka (Ashim Chatterjee) or Amalda and others, leading the process of release of mass tension, came from either low middle class families or from the suburban and mofussil towns - strangers to the smart culture.

Yet many other features in those days of prelude can be discerned. Tension would often result in suicide – once a year. Our *bangali* students would be mostly in science subjects – where communication in English would be less important, academic profligacy less, reward for hard labour more satisfying. Ironically, while the humanities stream, apart from Bengali and Philosophy, would be marked by the participation of youth to whom a degree would be an easy passport to bureaucracy or a boxwallah's life, it is there where the frustration of the middle class boys and girls would be most, the reasons being obvious. Not surprisingly, when disturbance broke out, the structure of student participation would be characterised by the juxtaposition of two features – the mass of agitating students coming from science subjects, the bulk of leadership coming from humanities. There would be one more immediate factor : the sense of community solidarity emanating from the life in the Hindu Hostel. Life in the hostel was marked by the absence of many basic facilities : no fan; no breakfast arrangement apart from the ramshackle canteens at every ward, where in any case the majority of boarders would suffer trepidation in ordering full breakfast and afternoon tiffin for fear of running high canteen bills; almost no primary health care arrangement; a room full of cobwebs; a few steel cots; no attendant; no medicine; no doctors; finally, very bad food. It was a time when Bengal had first started reeling under

severe food crisis – mess charges rose and *tilapiya* fish was thrust for the first time into the mouth of boarders, mostly from green districts and mofussil towns of Bengal with the habit of a meal with tasty rice and excellent freshwater fish. The hostel administration was insensitive. Naturally, the hostel unrest of 1966 was the final rehearsal for the street-fighting days ahead and the hostel bond was at the core of solidarity and student centrality that sustained the disturbances for an unusually long period, spilling over almost to the next decade. It seems that the college administration treated the hostel as a disturbing annexe, not realising that hostel life was central to so many boys, relatively very simple, coming from district towns and villages as well as from cities of Assam, Bihar and Orissa, and totally alien to the dominant *ferangi* culture of the group strutting the college scene. This insensitivity extended to a careless attitude towards sports – the mass sports in particular and finally the imposed compulsory NCC training. If Lenin had remarked that compulsory military training introduced in the wake of Czarist Russia should be availed of by the youth to increase its own preparation against Czarist rule, here the refusal to undergo such training was going to add to our political arsenal. We had to go to the Maidan near Victoria Memorial Hall twice a week with those idiotic big – size boots and disproportionate half-pants on, return to be hostel in crowded buses at the peak office hours (suffering curses of the passengers as invariably our boots would trample upon their chappal-clad exposed feet), and spend from our own pocket the bus fare, refreshment charges and the cleaning and ironing expenses for the uniform, for the reimbursements would come only at the end of the year. And soon the resolve spread like wild fire that we have to boycott the farce. No one really cared for the 'national preparedness' sought to be inculcated among the populace by a Government running the regime with aid of MISA, DIR, PD act, and shooting down protesters in cities and villages. No one cared

much for the 'patriotic' upswing sought to be artificially created in the wake of India-China war of 1962. Thus, when the City College boys first revolted against compulsory NCC training, stoned and beat the demonstrators deputed from military and paramilitary forces, burnt buses and created a rumpus on College Street, it was a sense of ovation with which the college boys greeted the comrades of City College. After the hunger strike in the hostel and with the start of the disturbances, the NCC training suffered an unceremonious death. None remembered when it was silently discontinued. In short, the internal situation of the college was markedly different from other colleges like Bangabasi, Surendranath or City – while the homogeneity of student composition in these colleges, so long the vanguard of leftist student struggle in Bengal, could not provide an impetus to reach a higher level in the movement, the very inner contradiction in Presidency College characterised the dynamics of the process of radicalisation. Presidency College became the Presidency of the sixties by reaching out to the greater world of ordinary middle class culture, of student radicalism, in short by becoming non-Presidency. In Presidency in those days, politics became the highest embodiment of moral values, of progressive culture, the expression of sincerity and innocence of hundreds of boys and girls who refused to accept the common dictum of those days that 'politics was the best resort of scoundrels'.

You can visualise the days still now. A Diptendu from Scottish Church, a Nirmal Brahmachari from Vidyasagar, a Biplab Halim from City, a Koushik from Surendranath, a Kamal from Moulana Azad or an Achintya from Bangabasi would walk effortlessly into the college and to us, the soldiers of counter-culture; they would be our real soul-mates rather than those chosen ones with whom we could never identify; they became our own Soledad Brothers. Presidency College, the split personality in the sixties, would be equally

at home with the offsprings of the bosses and celebrities as with the Soledad Brothers of the fighting sixties. I have asked some of my friends even now as to what could be the reason for the sway which the college held over Bengal student movement. One answer has been the halo of the college : which way would the plebeians of the student movement behave, other than accepting with gratitude and ecstasy the entry of the patricians in the movement ? Another answer seems to be in terms of organisation. The argument runs that the sheer organisational capacity of the college organisers contributed to the sway. Yet again one can often hear from almost anybody, knowledgeable on the college history of those days, that it was the sheer personality of Kaka, in unique position, that resulted in the inexplicable sway. And above all, the easy explanation remains that it was the spirit of left radicalism of those days, of the birth and growth of CPI(M) and subsequently a still more revolutionary radicalism (unsatisfactorily described as Naxalism) that resulted in the arrival of Presidency as the determining influence in the entire student movement of Bengal in those days.

But all these explanations, though partially true, are not totally satisfactory. Questions would bounce back : why did the students of the mass colleges wait for such an emergence? How and why could the novel organisational methods and the almost iconoclastic style succeed ? How could such a charismatic personality arise and indeed, what was the secret of that charisma ? Finally, granting that left radicalism was pervasive in those days, why again did such an unlikely institution come to the forefront of youth radicalism and why not any other institution ? Would it not be more appropriate to demand an explanation as to how the college could spearhead such radicalism ? Again, we must remember that Presidency College was as much a creator as a product of student and youth radicalism and non-conformism of the sixties.

Once again we must turn to the specific nature of the unrest and disturbance of the sixties. In the unrest of the sixties you have the watershed where the nationalist liberal type of struggles end and a clear post-independence genre emerges with no hangover of nationalist liberalism. Anti-colonialism, anti-ferangi culture and conviction marked by sheer idealism, a certain amount of naivete, a radical outburst spearheaded by students and youth, an anger at the failure of the leaders of the nation – all those and many more signs carried the legacy of anti-colonial struggles. Even taken in its broader contours, this character of being the watershed can be discerned. After that spurt of disturbances, peasant struggles too changed much in orientation. An uprising in sheer demand for land, a trade union militancy for what Charu Mazumdar would describe as *izzat*, a disdain for traditional patterns of politics, an endeavour to create new forms of organization by discarding the old ineffective official forms, an effort to find identity with struggles elsewhere like Vietnam, France, Germany, Congo or Lebanon – such features were born of the watershed character. The pangs of resistance, of submission, of survival by the petty bourgeoisie throughout the country in an epoch when semi-feudalism and semi-colonialism were fast being replaced by capitalism of a retarded nature, formed the soul of the unrest of the sixties.

In the Presidency College movement one could notice this union of radicalism and idealism, this tendency towards iconoclasm, the arrogance and belief that our college, one college, could lead the assault, and finally an uncompromising attitude, millenarianism that this world, this order is at its end and must be destroyed in order to make it anew. A ragtag army of youth, so long led in the movement by the mass colleges, had despair but little hope, had capacity to struggle but less self-belief, had the routine habit of coming out on streets but little capacity to innovate, had more heart but less brain. The millenarian idealism was provided by Presidency. This union was the

specific product of the sixties and without this specificity none of the explanations cited above can explain the phenomenon fully. This specific nature can be better illustrated through three examples : the neutralisation of reactionary elements in the vicinity of the college and the radicalisation of lumpens, vagabonds and unemployed youth of the area; the gradual involvement of girl students of the college in the mass movement, again drawn by sheer millenarianism; and the eclipse of the University, particularly its College Street campus, as the centre and focus of the movement.

Throughout the fifties and early sixties, Left student movement in the mass colleges would often be terrorised by the *dadas* of the adjoining localities. This was specially true at the beginning of the sixties when in the wake of Indo-China war chauvinism and anti-communism had been whipped high, Left leaders and cadres had been arrested, and mass imprisonment under the Defence of India Rule had been resorted to, and the student organisers in these colleges would often act as the second rank leadership of the party in organising the essential infra-structural tasks of the movement. They would thus face the brunt – lathis, kicks and beatings, not to speak of abuses from the local toughs, often mobilised in the service of anti-Leftism. The strategic position of Presidency was no better than other colleges in this regard. Bhabani Dutta Lane, Eden Hospital Road, Kalabagan (near Marcus Square), Amherst Street and Kolutollah were the areas from which attackers could any moment pounce upon insurgent leftism in Presidency. It happened more than once; but while in other 'mass' colleges, no effort had been made to establish a bond between the college and its vicinity, the urge of student centrality and student activism led the organisers of Presidency College to make strong efforts towards neutralising the vicinity and radicalising the *para* youth. *Kaka* in particular, but others like Amalda along with him, was once again in the forefront of

organisational innovation. Not that this could be achieved by always 'fair' means; but basically idealism was the forte. Many young comrades came forward, Presidency became their 'own' college. You need not study in the college to lay special claim upon it – and it was again iconoclasm. And today, there stands in front of Bhabani Dutta Lane a plaque commemorating the martyrdom of seven comrades who would walk any day into Presidency without caring for the hallowed scholarship associated with its name. Without their cooperation and the cooperation of the college non-teaching staff, a sustained movement like the anti-expulsion strike would have been impossible. I am still not sure, how the nebulous feeling of student centrality plus some of organised Party support and backed by an overall left milieu could become the chemistry for insurgence. But it did become so.

There is no doubt, that this proclivity to build up the college as the base of radicalism had its springwell in the twin phenomena of student activism and student centrality. Once again, without Party support, the organisational base of CPI(M) of those tomes, this building up of a college as red base was inconceivable. But why not any other college, why not any other time ? I have, henceforth, been repeatedly urging upon the discerning observers the 'newness' of the Presidency phenomenon, the unconventionality and iconoclastic nature of the movement and organisation, the tendency to go beyond the settled frontiers of student and youth movement – in other words, the 'new politics' upto the extent it could be conceptualised in that era. Otherwise could you imagine a situation, Sabyasachi (Chiki) stroking his french beard and talking animatedly with workers of small presses of Central Calcutta, Amalda, Pratul and Asoke Sengupta (Gora) organising the booksellers existing just beyond the iron railings of the college, or the three musketeers of the Political Science

Department, Subrata, Arun and Biswabandhu being sent on errands, aimed at broadening the territorial base ? Or, imagine the big seven of the college organisation, Saradindu, Sudarshan, Dilip, Amal, Gora and Chiki led by Kaka, continually pursuing almost a one point agenda of achieving territorial supremacy so as to secure the movement in the college. This stood us in great stead. When hoodlums attacked the picket before the college gate during the anti-expulsion strike, the tram workers saved the day for us. The youth of Bhabani Dutta Lane protected us in a way beyond words of gratitude. The workers of Guest Keen Williams assembled before the college gate to show solidarity and to display poster exhibition. The press workers of The Statesman fed us for long. The Caltex employees, the insurance employees agitating against automation, striking school teachers in 1966 – all knew they had an army of foot soldiers at their service. All this resulted in the gradual eclipse of Calcutta University as a mobilising Centre of movement, and the emergence of Presidency as the new icon. Whether in resisting Sikh-Bengali riot in Burrabazar in 1967, or in collecting relief from urban people during the North Bengal floods in 1968, or in breaking up the anti-China campaign, Presidency became the catalyst as well as the centre. Out of such a role grew Presidency college consolidation – the centre of radical student and youth mobilisation in Calcutta and beyond. Though the Naxalite movement gave a spurt to such a constellation, just as during the anti-expulsion movement CPI(M) provided the organisational base, yet this can at best be a general explanation. For once again without student activism and student centrality, the building up of consolidation would have been inconceivable. Why would youth of Beadon Street, Taltola, Rashbehary or Tala, and the students of Krishnanagar, Itachuna, Uttarpara or Bally come to Presidency, consult us and leave with despatches of solidarity and advice? It was most voluntary. The All Units meetings of

the Consolidation, which later on grew into P.G.S.F. (Post-Graduate Students Federation central body), were perfect democratism in exercise. It was not for nothing that Presidency Consolidation faced bitter resistance against the bureaucracy of the incipient Naxalite movement, in form of local leadership of AICCCR (All India Coordination Committee of Communist Revolutionaries) and prior to that the Naxalbari Krishak Sangram Sahayak Committee. The emergence of Presidency saw a break in the party-oriented student movement. Leadership of movement being imposed from above the party managers was also a tradition that was summarily disposed off – if that infuriated the various *dadas* in the Students Federation movement, the *dadas* of the Naxalite student movement were also equally angered.

Finally, the gradual involvement of girl students also was a consequence of student activism and centrality. Our leadership was absolutely a male leadership at the beginning. Apart from the smart boys, the common students were not adept at talking and mixing freely with girls. This cultural division ran through the girls too. The initial reaction when student activism flared up was one of incredulity - were these un-Presidency-like boys rogues.? Soon the initial fear passed, but not the awe. Admiration grew, not a little amount of hero-worshipping. Girls formed the bulk of Students Federation votes in many departments. It was the democratic cultural activity, whether in organising a new type of 'social' or Bengali debates, or in rendering the *ganasangeet* in an assemblage, in conducting students' movement demanding a cheap canteen, that marked the departure from the earlier surrogate anglicized culture in the college. The PCSO (Presidency College Students Organisation), the haven of the senior Cambridge boys, anti-communists and sons of the bureaucrats, would often try to use the girl students as the ram rod against student activism. They succeeded, but only once, while breaking a strike. The picket had to be

withdrawn in face of angry girl students disconsolate at disturbances in study. But by the large the girl students remained a firm support base of student activism.

The relationship with teachers remained ambivalent, often negative. They identified themselves with the Principal, the pillar of educational bureaucracy in Presidency College in those days. The Principal would be backed by the academic staff. They resisted any settlement during the anti-expulsion movement. They would often be beholden to the D.P.I. as well as other pillars of educational bureaucracy in the Writers' Buildings during the Congress days. Exceptions certainly were there. I distinctly recall teachers who would either bless us or shake their heads in dismay and grief that studious boys were turning to street-fighting. But by and large, they could never understand us. So, when during one gherao of the Principal, the students had taunted the teachers, who had remained in the Principal's room as a show of solidarity with him, with the comment why were they there in that room and why not at Esplanade East where hundreds of teachers had assembled for demonstration against Government policies, their reaction was one of disbelief at such insolence and arrogance. Next day, expulsion notices were served. Open confrontation then ensued.

A revolt against degradation of education was inevitable. The dry lectures, particularly in the arts faculty, the ferangi culture, the box wallah's domination, the cultural divide, the mad race to reach the top—a cult which Presidency symbolised more than any thing else, educational bureaucracy, the tradition of not allowing the nuisance of students' unionism, the close rapport with the writers' Buildings – all these epitomised the degradation of education. Student activism and student centrality were born against that degradation. It was, above all a cultural revolt. The radical times of that era, the strength of BPSF (Left), the organisational base of Left (CPI today's CPI(M)) contributed immensely to

the phenomenon of student activism and student centrality. But to view it as simply one more instance of strength of Left organisation would be an error. It was quintessentially 'new politics'; it went beyond the confines of traditional organization and left institutionalism. It anticipated in many ways the 'post-modern' politics in India that went beyond the rules of the game in the liberal polity. It was a cultural revolt; thus it was severely political.

The anti-expulsion movement in Presidency College in 1966-67 is the most talked about episode in the entire annals of student movement in post partition Bengal. But first a brief date-line story. A party unit was formed in 1966 in the college, the original members being Ashim, Asok Sengupta, Amalda, Chiki, Ranjan, and Pranabesh Nath. Earlier an unsuccessful attempt had been made by Kaka, Prodyotda and Sankar Sengupta to form a unit. The B.P.S.F. (left) unit of the college now became active in mobilising the students. The union election was contested. The S.F. won. Amal Sanyal became the General Secretary, easily one of the most popular leaders in the college. As ex-boarder he had intimate connections with the boarders of the Eden Hindu Hostel and became the chief organiser of the students there. On 30 August 1966, the hostel boarders begin an indefinite hunger strike demanding resignation of the Superintendent who had earlier promised improvement of hostel facilities like food, sick ward, installation of fan, etc., in face of a similar movement a year ago, but had done nothing. On 1 and 2 September, students of the Presidency College went on strike in support of the boarders on hunger strike. Bimanda was present at the hunger strike site to help the movement. On 3 September, the strike spread to Maulana Azad and Goenka Colleges, as students of these colleges were also boarders of the hostel. On 3 September, the superintendent resigned. On 13 September, again there was a strike in the college in

support of the strike by non-teaching college employees throughout Bengal. On 23 September, some students were arrested by the police of Muchipara Thana when trying to stop traffic during the 48 hour Bangla Bandh declared by the Left parties in demand for food, kerosene, revocation of DIR, etc. On 30 September, the Principal was confronted by the students agitating for the long-standing demands for cheap canteen, more union funds, etc. The students declare an indefinite gherao. The basic demand was the revocation of the order to bar Kaka, Gora and Sudarshanda from gaining admission to post-graduate studies in Presidency College. The police rescued the Principal after a mild lathi charge. On 4 October, expulsion notices were served on seven leading organisers of the students' movement. They were expelled forthwith from the hostel also. Three had already been barred from entering Presidency for post graduate studies. On 5 October, the Puja vacation was declared, the authorities bringing it one week forward. The college however did reopen on 10 November as scheduled, for a strike began demanding revocation of expulsion notices. The students by and large supported the movement. Repeated all Bengal students strikes were organised. The movement became the focal point for reorganisation and growth of BPSF (left), new-born after the party split. The left student organisations, BPSF (left), AISF, PSU, DSO - all came forward. From 10 October to 7 December, the University was paralysed, post-graduate students demanded intervention of University authorities to settle the dispute in the college. Dilip Chakraborty, Gautam Chattopadhyay, Boudhayan Chattopadhyay and other leaders of WBCUTA (West Bengal College and University Teachers Association) came forward. Principals of some colleges also volunteered. A guardians' meeting was held in the Students' Hall on 13 November. It proved infructuous as the bureaucrats, executives, and high officials came in hordes and objected to a proposal for an impartial investigative body

to look into the charges of misdemeanour against the expelled students. Meanwhile the boys and girls organised under PCSO protested that communists were behind the hoodlums. Some suggested that the strike be withdrawn and matters be sorted out in Court. The Students Federation activists in the College stuck to the position that negotiations should be opened, expulsion orders should be withdrawn, and the strike would also be withdrawn concurrently. But the academic staff, educational bureaucracy, Congress leadership and the Principal remained unmoved. Thus settlement was thwarted. On 8 December, the movement gained momentum with the start of indefinite gherao of the Principal by students led by B.P.S.F. (left). Police rescued Dr. Bose after 11 p.m. resorting to lathi charge and tear gas shelling. Electricity connection was cut off around that area and the whole area was sealed. Large scale arrests followed. On 8 December, the University was closed indefinitely and on 9 December, the college was closed sine die. From 9th itself, the picket at the college gate was replaced by regular student assemblies. On 10 December, the college chemistry laboratory was partially destroyed. On 19 December, the university reopened. The central leadership of BPSF (left) was now at wits' end about what further programme and tactics to be followed to force the withdrawal of expulsions. It agreed to the reopening of university. The Registrar Dr. Gopal Roy Chaudhury agreed to mediate. On 8 February, 1967, Presidency College reopened with the Unit Secretary, Kaka, explaining to the huge assembly of students and curious onlookers, why the college was now allowed to reopen. In fact, he asserted that the S.F. had now agreed to the reopening. Meanwhile, an anti-V.F. Government was seated in the Writers' Buildings. The strike was withdrawn. The students tendered apology for their 'misdemeanour'. Expulsion orders were withdrawn and transfer orders were issued instead. Some gained admission indifferent

colleges; some discontinued study; some of those who were refused P.G. admission in Presidency got university admission. The movement ended, but a hardcore political leadership emerged out of the movement. The College now became the centre and symbol of Bengal urban radicalism for the next few years. The college became too "hot" a stuff to handle, even for BPSR (left) and CPI (left). Bengal elites sigh of relief at the conclusion of the movement proved very momentary. Sunanda Dutt Roy's two part serial *Revolt in the College Street* in *The Statesman* (29 & 30 November 1966) came closest to understanding this new phenomenon of student and youth radicalism.

The expulsions were obviously arbitrary, without giving a chance to explain. That added moral strength to student viewpoint and helped the students win sympathy from various quarters. Utpal Dutt, Maitrayee Devi, Gopal Roy Chowdhury, Asok Mitra, Paresh Chattopadhyay, Sumanta Banerjee, Bhavani Roy Chowdhury - all at one time or other came forward to help the students. Yet, the rigidity of the authorities was astounding. Needless to say, the Presidency College movement added legitimacy to the Left's cause in Bengal. If such bright boys could come out on the streets, surely something was wrong in the system! How would the students on picket spend the day for the three months of the picket? We would gather at ten and toughen our minds at any possibility - a bomb thrown at the picket from the roof of the Coffee House Building, or the tantrums created by PCSO from the other side of College Street. We had little money and no canopy overhead. At noon an amount of Re1/- was handed over to each picketer for lunch. There was food for spiritual strength also - invariably in *Now*, we must read what Monitor has said in the weekly column; sometimes *Nandan* and *Deshhitaishi* a must. Students from other colleges would come regularly; the BPSF (left) leadership, in the form of someone from Dinesh Mazumder,



Bimanda, Subinoyda, Shyamalda, Subhashda, was also regularly present. No doubt, our baptism and the passage through ordeal was helped by the veterans of students and youth politics of Bengal in those days.

The radicalisation of Presidency and a whole generation of Bengal students and youth happened through street-fighting. We met Utpal Dutt often those days, *Kallol* was running a packed house at that time. He had led the procession of artists and performers to the college gate after dusk on the fateful day of 8 December, 1966; with us waiting for the police assault to begin. Utpal Dutt later staged *Teer*, contributed the earnings of some shows to our fund and staged street dramas. Streetfighting took place often, sometimes days in succession. This had a cleansing value. Post-war student movement in Bengal had grown through street-fighting. And it reached its peak in the sixties. The historian of the sixties will have to be a chronicler of street-fightings.

But the biggest silence in a formal date line story of the Presidency College movement is over the enigmatic role of Party. As I recall with eternal gratitude the role of the student leaders of BPSF (left), the personal care that party leaders like Promod Dasgupta, Samar Mukherjee and Kesto Ghosh took for the movement, the constant participation and leadership of student leaders like Dineshda, Bimanda, Subinoyda, Shyamalda, Proloyda and others in those days of high activism, the consistent planning and execution of steps, the mobilisation of the entire student wing, sections of workers, cultural activists and party units and finally the political campaign of the Party that incorporated the Presidency College issue as an issue of democracy in the broad corpus of left and democratic agenda I feel the Presidency College anti-expulsion movement stands as an ideal example of how a party should lead the mass movement from behind, how there can be an ideal blend of political leadership and student autonomy and centrality in the movement. But there the

politically intriguing question arises : how and why did the Party recoil so suddenly after December 1966 ? Why was student centrality violated during later stages of the movement repeatedly ? And, why did the student leadership of Presidency College turn anti-party almost en masse with the exception of Sudharshan Roy Choudhury in the wake of Naxalbari ?

It is true that Presidency College student leadership, with Kaka as the unit secretary, was an exceptionally able bunch of activists. Given the banality of existing leadership in student movement, this bunch was sooner or later going to raise the banner of student centrality in student movement. In other words, the cardinal issue would become the relative autonomy of mass movements, and organisations. One aspect of the rise of C.P.I. (M) has been the flexibility and catholicity with which the Party approached the mass issues, spontaneous movements and organisations. In the period from 1964 to 1969, Constitutionalism devoured the vitality of the Party, its flexibility and readiness of response to issues. But another reflection would be on the organisational aspect also. The party structure admits of the contradiction, almost a perennial conflict between *organisation* and the *movement*. The Presidency College movement experience shows that it calls for a new type of party, a new way to handle the relationships between organisation and the movement, party and the mass organisations. The early history of Bengal CPI(M) shows the seeds of such 'new' politics, sadly aborted by the imperatives of constitutionalism, organisational culture of the 'old' type, political rigidity and ossification - in short 'old' politics. The Presidency College leadership represented a revolt against this tradition.

When student militancy started appearing in Presidency, the Party came forward to provide an organisational base for the movement. Yet from the beginning, there was continuous dialogue between party leadership and college student leadership - a continuous

tension while determining approaches at various stages. The tenacity that college leadership would be displaying throughout the movement would often baffle the Party. Samar Mukherjee, then the Party leader in charge of student movement, would be arguing his head out to make us see reason, that victory may elude us, that any further continuation of the movement may be difficult, that we have to settle for compromise. After all we should not become ultras. Promod Dasgupta and Jyoti Basu representing P.C. (Provincial Committee) would try to reason that elections are approaching, that Party cannot help us any more in the old way, that a compromise has to be arrived at. From December 1966, the Party's attitude started cooling off towards the movement. And with the party mandate, the movement had to be withdrawn and curtains pulled down. The installation of U.F. ministry also did not help matters. The Party leadership was just eager to get us off their backs. Hence it went back upon the promise given at the time of the mandate that if it came to power, we would be taken back to the college. We were already becoming *ultras*, and the institutionalism of the Party and exigencies of governmental power dictated and decided that 'trouble' could not be courted any more. We were shown our places. The revolt of the college political unit was now only a matter of time. Naxalbari movement broke out. The first poster in Calcutta in support of peasants of Terai was drawn by college students as graffiti on the facade of the Hindu School. *Deshhitaishi* was taken over by the Party after a fierce scuffle with radical activists among whom the college students were prominent. In front of the Haryana Bhawan, another round again – this time we raided the S.F. conference from which we were barred. Meanwhile, throughout 1966-67, the college leadership developed strong connections with new student leaderships of the mass colleges inside and outside Calcutta. Presidency Consolidation was born.

Student centrality demands that students

be the actual leaders of student movement, that thirty five, forty years old 'students' enrolled in Law department of University be shunted aside and new cadre promoted. Thus, true to belief, the leadership of college organisation was handed over to new students as soon as Kaka and others went out of college. Political continuity was maintained. Moreover, by now, the foot soldiers of Revolution had decided that they themselves would become the generals. Thus, All Units Meetings and Presidency College Consolidation became a half – way house – neither a student body, nor a fully party body, but a combination of both. From now on, the fate of the college radicalism in the sixties became inextricably linked with the fate of Naxalism in Bengal. The closing part of the sixties was thus intense, shorter, the most political of the time, daring and tragic.

I remember then Subrata, Dhurjati, Tapan, Sujash and others leading batches of college students to Guest Keen Williams in Howrah where workers' movement had assumed momentum. The students would be joining processions, pickets and demonstrations there. They would on other days be despatched to help movements in Allenbury, in Jadavpur University, in Bally Jute Mills and other sites of struggles. The total number of regular activists reached almost fifty. PCSO was totally decimated. The hold of the Left over college was now unchallenged. Union elections were won with resounding victories. Bengali debates and seminars started to be conducted by the union. A cheap canteen was opened. Class lectures started. And in any joint demonstration of students organised by All Units, the Presidency contingent would be among the most numerous ones. Students would be led to rural trips near Calcutta to acquaint themselves with villages, brigades led by Kaka, Dipanjanda, and others. Students heard that an anti- China film was being shown. A team of fifty reached there, the film was stopped and the hall ransacked. It was the first instance of numerous such attacks on films in

the city. Tenciled images of Mao were splashed on the walls of the Principal's room - again a popular form taken up in other colleges soon. An anti-China meeting was convened by Jan Sangh in Students Hall and Balraj Madhok was to speak. The meeting was stopped as college Red Guards reached the venue. In all these acts, students from some other colleges, and young activists of some localities also participated regularly.

Life in College campus extended beyond dusk and merged into the night. The college lawn became the venue for contacts and meetings with students of different colleges and activists from distant places. It gave the All Units and Consolidation a separate personality which earlier the B.P.S.F. (left) leadership and party leadership had become suspicious of and now the Naxalite leadership also in form AICCCR became suspicious. To them, we became suspected followers of 'Che', Castro, Marcuse and others. We were accused of urban radicalism. We got defensive, not realising how crucial this radicalism has been in the life of Bengal's revolutionary ethos. Life on the lawn became colourful. Two foreign students from France came and joined. Cultural performers also joined the band. Street fighters, now almost professionals, remained there as night fell, and tried to learn radical politics. Political classes were held. After the college hours, the college became the gracious host to tired comrades from outside, comrades come for consultation. We got quickly familiar with lanes and by lanes of Central Calcutta, the cheap and "saw dust restaurants with oyster shells". Seasons changed and our makeshift beds too changed. The starry sky of summer gave way to the dark ceiling of the portico as we huddled there in rain and approaching winter. Our mattress was paper and sometimes tarpaulin, lent by the booksellers of the old curiosity shops. As the time for anti-Macnamara demonstration approached, we got apprehensive of sudden police raids at night. We slept fitfully, often listened intently to

footsteps on the lawns, in the corridors and portico; sometimes we shifted to the hostel. Then, one or two were arrested while writing graffiti at mid-night and the police raided and inspected the college building at night.

The anti-MacNamara demonstration was planned in the hostel. On 20 August 1968, the whole college came out to join the procession. The portico and the majestic steps to the first floor became the meeting ground for announcing the decision to stop him at any cost from entering Calcutta. Thousands of students and youth from colleges and localities assembled at the University campus. The Presidency contingent merged into the mainstream of protest. Many student activists left study, bade adieu to college politics and left for villages or working class areas. But Presidency remained the strong link between the activists sent to villages and the urban militants. Some of course come back to take up their studies. The general fate of Naxalism took a heavy toll of the cadres. But radicalism in Presidency, though shorn of the brilliance of the sixties, was now secure and has remained so, as I hear, for the whole decade thereafter. The particularity of the Presidency College history in the sixties emanates from a unique experience. It was a college ferment, yet it transcended far beyond the borders; it was a student revolt, yet it became the epitome of the general revolt of the country and times; it was undoubtedly a petty bourgeois awakening, yet to dismiss it simply at that would be utterly wrong, for it bore the imprint of that ideology of popular revolt where the aspirations of different sections of society merged into one another and formed the chiaroscuro of popular protest; finally, it was a movement led by an organisation, yet it continuously assumed the form of a broad stream, crossing over the organisational boundaries, refusing to be put into any strait-jacket. No wonder, the student activists of Presidency in those days became full-fledged political activists of later times of various hues and persuasions. But political commitment to a

radical order remained.

Presidency ferment surpasses JNU activism in many ways; its exceptionality surpasses even the political record of leadership of radical sixties in some other lands. The broad commitment, alignment with

people's movement, nonconformity, insolence towards trappings of the celebrity order, daring to break the citadel from within, and the ethos of counter culture are all the permanent legacy of Presidency College history to Bengal radicalism in the post-independence times.

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**Author's Note :** I am indebted to Ashim Chatterjee for his comments. The views, needless to say, remain mine.