



Looking Back

Post-Naxalite Days In Presidency College

ANUP K. SINHA

The early nineteen seventies marked a contribution of the troubled times that begun in earlier decades. Student violence continued, politics was linked to the local toughs, and the general environment was that of suspicion and hatred that clouded the relations between students and teachers, and between students and students. By 1972, the majority of Naxalite activists had been imprisoned or were underground. Compared to 1970-71, the movement in West Bengal had been restricted by the State machinery of counterviolence. As a result, the “activists” who remained in the college were qualitatively different from their comrades of the late 1960s. They were low key in their approach, but were able to exploit subtly the lingering atmosphere of fear. Instead of meetings and putting-up of posters, they concentrated on individual level political discussions and if necessary, individual level threats and violence. The police (uniformed as well as plain-clothed) continued to be present in the college.

In 1972, Presidency College had a battlescarred look. In the previous three or four years, political violence had been acute, not only in the college premises but also in a wide adjoining area of College Street, Bhabani Dutta Lane, Hindu Hostel, Calcutta University, the Coffee House and Surya Sen Street. The police had repeatedly entered the College, the CRP had set up a camp, police pickets were posted round the clock and one could suddenly find oneself staring at the muzzle of a .303 rifle. Students were arrested, classes disrupted all too often, and bombs and bullets emerged as features of everyday existence. Students had destroyed college property, since laboratories and libraries were the prime targets. Uncertainty hung heavy on the life of the college.

As is often the case in such circumstances, there were individuals from student body, some senior boys of Hindu

and Hare Schools, and some outsiders who took to fishing in troubled waters. Their entire purpose was to bully and impose their will on the life of the College. Though they often talked about revolution, rarely did they profess themselves to be Maoists or members of the CPI(ML). Curiously, the police never touched them. One reason perhaps was the fact that they were not overtly violent, and hence had a clean record. Another reason, believed to be true by many students, was the possibility of such individuals being on the payrolls of the police as informers.

This undercurrent of terror, without any explicit political activity, marked the brand of ‘late-Naxalism’ prevailing in Presidency College in the beginning of 1972. Most students by then had begun to perceive that (whatever their own evaluation of radical student politics) this atmosphere was unpleasant, often repulsive, and certainly not in their long-term interests. Yet the large majority of students had been frightened into inactive silence. Two factors contributed almost equally to this. On one hand was the crude nature of State violence; on the other hand was the overt and covert terror unleashed by the urban guerrillas. This was the new status prevailing then.

Dislike cannot be kept hidden for long, particularly in a college where intelligence and awareness are high. The manifestation of this dislike could come about through open confrontation or a hardened cynicism. There was one strategic problem regarding confrontation. Any such challenge to the status quo would require support from outside the college. Given the prevailing atmosphere, this would be true even if a significantly large proportion of students put in an organized effort. In other words, without affiliation to a major political party, confrontation could well be ruled out.

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It was in January 1972 that a small group of about six or seven students started a unit of the Chhatra Parishad, the students' wing of the Congress party. These students, led by Mr. Neptune Srimal (an outgoing postgraduate student of geology) had previously established contacts with local party offices in the Central Calcutta neighbourhood. This was the first time in post-independence Presidency College that Congress politics managed a toehold. Not many students, however, welcomed the Chhatra Parishad (henceforth referred to as CP) unit. In a college where the tradition of student-politics had been by and large dominated by radicalism, this was seen as an aberration. This response was common despite the fact that it was the time when Mrs. Gandhi had leaned most to the left in her entire career and the strong emotional support that Bengalees had for her contribution to the liberation struggle of Bangladesh. Another type of response greeted the emergence of the Presidency College Chhatra Parishad (PCCP) which was one of irritation. This stemmed from the perception that yet another political presence with outside connections would bring about 'lumpen' rule of a different variety. Finally, the third type of response was that of a guarded approval in the belief that two groups opposed to one another (even though no one was openly propagating Maoism then) would bring about a political equilibrium of sorts. The non-committed students would be the major beneficiaries of the local cold war. The dominant response was of the second variety reflected in a cynical we-have-seen-it-all attitude.

The opening of the PCCP passed off quite peacefully, belying the fears of some students involved in the process. This reflected either a marked change in attitude of the Naxalites, or a significant reduction in their organizational strength and fire power. Indeed, in a matter of a few weeks, the PCCP members realized that where use of brutal force was concerned, it was they who held the whip.

The trend of violence in the campus had begun to reverse from late 1971 even though police pickets continued. Outside, the State machinery had brutally reduced the strength of the ultra-left movement, and Congress was perceptibly on the rise. The declining trend of violence and the presence of the PCCP permitted a greater degree of normalcy in college life. Classes were held more regularly and students got back to their usual activities of studies, thinking about careers, more relaxed 'adda' sessions, extracurricular activities, and college romances, without the fear of being caught in a violent clash or being dubbed a petit-bourgeois degenerate escapist. This was also the time when students began to reflect on the Naxalite movement as a thing of the past. The fact that many bright and sensitive students had ended in jail with its associated horrors or had given up their potentially promising careers, the hunting down of a few of them by other political parties and the plain frustration and disillusionment of many of them- all blended into emerging images of the Naxalite of the late sixties. The images varied from that of a tragic hero to that of a confused and immature idealist. One perception, however, was shared by all: social revolution had receded into a dim and distant zone of future uncertainties.

1972 also marked a return to parliamentary democracy in the college with the holding of elections to the Students' Union Council. 1969 was the last time when elections had been held and there had been allegations about the use of force by the Naxalites. Starningly, similar allegations were heard of in 1972. Only the tables had turned this time with the Naxalites being at the receiving end.

When elections had been announced, the PCCP realized that some students who were known to be Maoists were filing nomination papers. When asked about their sudden rediscovered faith in the ballot box, they denied any current political affiliation. The PCCP demanded that they address a public meeting in the college portico to announce their belief in representative forms of the government and denounce their past activities. It was also made clear that if they did not comply, they would not be 'permitted' to their nomination papers. This led to a series of heated but non violent meetings in the college canteen where after a long time two different groups of students seriously debated politics. The discussions were extremely informed and the debating points well-argued. Neither of the sides resorted to physical violence or abusive language, though passionate and emotional speeches were common. There was also a concrete outcome of these meetings. It was decided that a portico-meeting would be jointly held by both the groups with three speakers from each group.

The agreement was that each group would make public three points of consensus. First, the college union would be used for college affairs only and not for the propagation of party politics. Any ideological campaigning would be strictly at the informal level through individual persuasion. Secondly, all cultural and extracurricular activities would be promoted without being a priori shunned as 'red' or 'bourgeois'. Finally, no outsider would be brought in by any party to meddle in college affairs. Any future conflict would be resolved by discussion as far as possible.

The meeting was announced and it drew a large number of students. This was one of the largest meetings that the author attended in the college. The proceedings began smoothly, but somewhere in the middle Mr. Somnath Mukherjee (Physics) began criticizing the PCCP loudly and a bit hysterically. He also proclaimed that his speech would result in his being killed by a police bullet or by a Congress gangster's knife. This led to confusion and chaos with some students trying to control Somnath while others chanting to let him continue. Many from Somnath's own side left the portico in disgust as they thought it was a breach of contract. Fist fights broke out and some members of the CP went out to get local reinforcements. Within minutes the college was swarming with outsiders. Police jeeps also began to arrive. Major trouble was avoided, but Mr. Sanmoy Mukherjee and Mr. Gautam Mukherjee of the Physics and Statistics departments respectively were seriously beaten up by members of the PCCP. What followed in the next few days was the forcible withdrawal of nominations of almost all non-CP students. Only a tiny number was allowed to contest as they were believed to be genuine independents. The elections took place with a low turnout and the result, by then, was a foregone conclusion. Thus, by a strange turn of events, 'democracy' was restored, but with the help of muscle-men and their strong-arm tactics.

During 1972, there was a gradual return to non-academic activity. The Athletic Council became active. Cultural activities such as debates, dance dramas and socials were frequently organized. Participation began to grow. There was also a tendency to show that one could be non-westernized without being revolutionary and that there could be a cultural space, independent of 'Yankee decadence' and 'revolutionary propaganda'. The College magazine was published after a lapse of three years. The previous issue was almost a pamphlet of the CPI(ML). Previous restrictions on bourgeois dress were no longer binding. Women students who came dressed in anything other than a sari used to be reprimanded. Similarly, men

students who came out in clothes of the latest fashion were threatened or ridiculed. There was one instance which the author remembers. A student arrived in a bright multi-coloured sweater. He was asked (not forced) by a revolutionary comrade to spin around so that others could see if the colours blend into white like Newton's Disc. With the removal of these restrictions (unofficial), there was a noticeable change in the patterns of dress. They became more fashionable and certainly more colourful.

Leftists of various hues began to slowly organize against the CP. Their campaign plan was : (i) opposition to the ideology of the Congress, (ii) no political party-based activity should be permitted within the college, and (iii) since the PCCP had direct contact with local Congress workers, threat of outside interference remained. The first point was underplayed while the last two were stressed.

Without any strong and effective opposition, the PCCP became more-and-more arrogant. The wheel was turning a full circle; being a member of the CP gave one a protection to do almost anything. Drinking liquor and smoking marijuana started in the college canteen. Not many participated and the majority was repulsed by the trend. However, it continued because two or three well-known PCCP leaders were involved.

There was an attempt that year to set up student-teacher committees in every department. Members of the Students' Union took the initiative to try and convince the Teachers' Council about the need for such committees. The proposal was to have a five member committee in each department comprising three students and two faculty members. The purpose was to take care of department specific problems, such as, demands of students pertaining to academic affairs, organization of seminars, availability of library books, and so on.. Students felt that the relationship with their teachers had become estranged after prolonged disruption of classes, violence, verbal and physical attacks on teachers, and postponement of examinations. There was a perceived need to rebuild a relationship on trust and mutual respect. One or two meetings were held involving the union, the Principal and the Heads of departments. The committees did not eventually materialize, not because of any opposition from faculty members, but due to the fact that the general atmosphere became stable, and the students' interests grew lukewarm.

The popularity of the PCCP did not rise significantly, though the climate of the college changed to one of political tolerance and openness. Mr. Neepesh Das (Botany), the General Secretary of the College Union was

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instructed to keep a low profile as far as party politics was concerned. As a result, the 1973 elections were held in a free and fair atmosphere (except for one or two instances of alleged threats to potential candidates from both sides to withdraw their nomination papers). The PCCP won the election by the minimum margin of one seat. Mr. Aniruddha Sen (Economics) was elected the General Secretary. The candidates opposed to the PCCP were students with strong left leanings and Mr. Sanmoy Mukherjee (Physics) had emerged as their visible leader. This group began to be referred to as the Presidency College Students Association (PCSA).

Throughout 1973, the trends of 1972 continued. This time no one could allege that the PCCP had rigged the elections. However, the PCSA continued its political campaigning against the PCCP. They underplayed the fairness of the elections, claiming that their own strength and popularity made the PCCP think twice about rigging. Their main criticism, however, was focused on the identification of the PCCP with the trend of Congress politics in West Bengal and the regular reports of CP units forcibly winning elections in other colleges. The PCCP was often ridiculed, citing cases of in-fighting and factionalism that had begun to emerge in the ranks of the West Bengal Chhatra Parishad. The PCCP, in a sense, was on the defensive to the extent that they could not publicly condemn such trends. The union continued to mobilize support within the college for things like improvements in the canteen facilities and the Athletic Council.

In 1974, the PCSA made a desperate bid to win the elections. There was a real threat that PCCP, if necessary, could mobilize a large number of local Congress workers very quickly. However, this threat was being reduced by the spread of local factionalism in the Congress Party, since the loyalties of the local Congress workers and their

muscle-men had been split. The WBCP witnessed the emergence of a dissident group called the Sikhsha Bachao Committee (Save Education Committee) to which many locals pledged loyalty. The PCCP retained its allegiance to the official CP, referred to as CP (Mahajati Sadan).

Within a day or two of the announcement of the Students' Union Council elections, the PCCP was served a twentyfour hours' ultimatum by the Save Education Committee. Some local members communicated that either the entire PCCP unit switch its loyalty, or face the prospects of a new Save Education Committee in the College. It was made clear by the local workers that Mr. Sanmoy Mukherjee had pledged support to any unit in Presidency College owing allegiance to the Save Education Committee.

The PCCP unit met late till the evening to consider the ultimatum. The members were upset at the politicking of Sanmoy Mukherjee, but no one really wanted a 'war' on this issue particularly with the elections ahead. Some members panicked while others were weighing the implications of a compromise in an effort to buy time. However, Mr. Somak Roy (Physics) unilaterally decided to take the battle to the opposition's court. He went alone next morning to a notorious local tough whose boys' had served the ultimatum. He told the leader that the entire PCCP unit would be converted on one condition, viz., Sanmoy would have to hoist the Congress flag openly in the college premises and raise slogan of 'Bande Mataram'. If this was not acceptable, a Save Education Committee unit could be opened, but over the dead bodies of the existing PCCP members.

The dead line for the ultimatum came and went. Nothing happened, suggesting that Sanmoy's ploy had failed. The elections passed off peacefully though on election day there was an extremely tense atmosphere inside the college. Each side was almost certain that the opposition had outsiders waiting on College Street. The PCCP won, this time by a margin of 4 seats after re-elections were held in tied constituencies. Mr. Supriyo Haldar (English) was elected the General Secretary.

The 1975 election saw the PCCP make a clean sweep of the seats. This was, according to Mr. Arunava Ghosh, the then President of the PCCP unit, a reflection of the "fascist" trend that had set in. The PCCP had begun to get divided along two lines. One group believed in leaving nothing to chance in case the opposition won. So, they preferred to bulldoze over the will of the students. The other group maintained that openness and democracy were the

essential ingredients for long-term political survival in the college. The composition of the PCSA was also changing from a left-wing umbrella to a more broadbased forum against the Congress. Some of the newer members of the PCSA had not seen the violence and disruption of the Naxalite days. The only violence and high-handedness they saw were perpetrated by the PCCP. Thus, the base of PCSA was expanding in direct proportion to the rising anti-Congressism in the State. The 1975 elections were a victory of the hard-liners and Mr. Amal Roy (Geology) was elected General Secretary.

In the second half of 1975, the PCCP's reaction to the imposition of Emergency in the country was a mixed one. A relatively small group was opposed to the rise of Sanjay Gandhi and the implications for democracy. Another group remained silent- the so-called 'intellectual group'. They were believed to make their position known in public. Finally, there was a group that supported the Emergency and was opposed to the anti-Sanjay Gandhi activities like wall-writing, postering, distribution of leaflets and the organizing of seminars. In one such seminar, Mr. Priya Ranjan Das Munshi was invited to speak after he was unceremoniously removed from the presidency of the All India Youth Congress. In the seminar, Mr. Somak Roy gave a fiery speech against the evils of Emergency. It is claimed that during those days the police entered the college at night to erase the anti-Sanjay Gandhi wall-writings and pull down posters. The PCSA was in a dilemma, not knowing whether to support this group in the PCCP or not.

From time to time, the PCCP had raised the demand for autonomy of the college from Calcutta University, and the ultimate creation of a Presidency University. Students of a leftist persuasion were opposed to this notion, they claimed that this would add to the elitism of the college which was already a bourgeois factory for the production of bureaucrats and managers. The demand for autonomy, supported by quite a few members of the faculty, had stemmed from the perception that the anarchy in higher education and an overburdened university were ominous signs that forebode a decline in the quality of education in the college. In a sense this demand, which many people are willing to raise even now, can be termed elitist to the extent that it seeks to isolate the college from the disturbing trends in the college from the mainstream of higher education. On the other hand, it is not clear how the creation of such a university would go against the interests of working class as was often claimed as a reason against the demand.

It was this opposition to the demand for autonomy that led to Mr. Sanjib Mukherjee (Political Science) being beaten up physically allegedly by members of the PCCP in late 1975. This incident resulted in a protest demonstration outside the principal's office led by Mr. Santanu Mitra of the PCCP, a member of the Students. A serious altercation followed. It was during this altercation that a female student of the Political Science department was allegedly slapped. This led to wide-spread protests and the PCCP was under severe public pressure to unconditionally apologize for the instances of physical violence demanding that the elected members of the Student's Council must resign. They did not agree to apologize, but believed that the act of resignation would be interpreted as if the PCCP was bearing full moral responsibility for the lapses. The anti-Emergency group thought that they could add another reason for the resignation - protest against the growing trends of authoritarianism in national and political environments. The main advantage that this group sought to extract was to take attention away from college issues to more national ones.

However, Mr. Amal Roy and six others refused to resign. It was not clear to the college authorities whether this amounted to a dissolution of the Council with only seven members continuing in a house of over thirty. This led to a constitutional crisis of sorts with the PCCP officially claiming that they were no longer holding office. Indeed they denied the existence of any Student Union in the college. However, authorities decided that the Council existed, and the members who wanted to continue would be allowed to complete their terms of office. Strangely, no disciplinary action was taken against those who failed to abide by the unit's decision to resign.

This brought into the open the internal tension in the PCCP that had been building up for a long time. Mr. Arup Banerjee (Chemistry) emerged as the leader of the pro-Sanjay Gandhi group and was supposed to have a lot of connections with Congressmen in South Calcutta. However, the unit did not officially split. Another group continued to campaign against the Emergency but was dwindling in size, many quitting out of fear rather than out of conviction. Some individuals of this group were supposed to have participated in a black-flag demonstration against Sanjay Gandhi when he visited College Street and Calcutta University in February 1976. Mr. Arunava Ghosh (Physiology) who was president of the PCCP unit at that time was not permitted to leave his residence on that day.

The PCCP used to publish a broadsheet called 'The

Presidencian where a lot of serious issues were analyzed and one issue collected a lot of interviews of leading politicians of West Bengal including Mr. Prafulla Ch. Sen. Mr. Arup Banerjee's group also started to distribute leaflets – all of this is cited by Mr. David Selbourne in his book *An Eye To India*. This referred leaflet made it clear that all opposition would be wiped out.

In-fighting in the PCCP was now an observable fact. In February 1976, during a meeting in the Principal's room to decide on the election schedule, the General Secretary was assaulted either in the heat of the moment or to demonstrate strategic muscle-power. It was believed that not all pro-Emergency members were placed under that threat of violence.

This incident ultimately led to the arrival of the police into the principal's office, led by the Deputy Commissioners. There was also a group of PCSA students led by Mr. Palash Bose (Geology) who were shouting anti-Emergency slogans. Failing to stop this and to clear the principal's office, the police first decided to arrest Mr. Arunava Ghosh. Finally, Mr. Somak Roy and Mr. Supriyo Halder were also arrested. They were released the next day without charges being pressed against them.

After the announcement of the 1976 election, there were allegations that Mr. Arunava Ghosh's group had run away with the nomination papers. According to Mr. Ghosh however, there were some technical flaws in the electoral process that he had pointed out. Elections were cancelled and an ad hoc body was established, with Mr. Amal Roy as the Students' Union Council. Later, as part of the Emergency measures, all college elections were banned.

In early 1976 some students, who were not identified with any political group, led by Mr. Dilip Cheria and Mr. Kunal Banerjee (both Economics) decided to organize an inter-college festival along the lines of the popular IIT Spring Fest. They were sure of a support base amongst the students and hence were convinced that their move would not be opposed by any political group. While they ensured the support of the PCCP, they insisted on maintaining their autonomy from the official 'Student' Union. The college authorities had some reservations about extending infrastructural support to any group other than the official union. A compromise was reached with the General Secretary being made an ex-officio member of the College Festival Committee. The contribution of the Union was a paltry Rs. 200 in a festival budget that finally exceeded Rs.13000. Apart from the GS, all other members of the

Festival Committee were non-political students. The festival, christened 'Melee', was a four-day event held in March 1976. A large number of local colleges participated and the Festival was a success. The involvement of Presidency College students was significant with many grabbing the chance to compete in a variety of events. The large scale of operations implied that the required finances would far exceed the union's budget. This was the first time that the students organized fund-raising drives. They exploited their contacts and explored new avenues by digging into alumni rolls. This was new to the college and was organized the following year, renamed as 'Sambodh'. Now it has come to stay as an annual event called Milieu.

It is doubtful whether any political group could have organized such a wide spectrum of activities without feeling the constraints of ideology. Moreover, the fear of being identified with a particular political group would have reduced the degree of participation among students in general. According to a write-up in the brochure published on the occasion of Melee :

"The purpose of Melee is threefold : to provide the occasion for a cultural get-together, to provide entertainment, and to provide an excuse to bring out into the open the hidden talents of the college"

The author goes on to justify the organization of a cultural festival in the "present times", referring perhaps to the troubled days of the Emergency :

"One might ask whether Melee was absolutely essential in the present context. Our answer is self-evident; if we had not thought that Melee would contribute something to the academic life of the college, we would never have thought of organizing it. Admittedly, that 'something' is a rather nebulous concept. Still the enthusiastic response that greeted our proposal to organize the Festival, indicated that the student body was conscious of a cultural vacuum in Presidency College.....Seminars have been arranged in various departments, but there has been no participation by the entire student community in such ventures."*

Ventures that listed items from Western pop to Bengali Jatra, would have been dubbed as imperialistic hegemony of Yankee culture, even five years ago. Yes it was not to the credit of the PCCP that this was possible. It was the fragmented nature of college politics that permitted such a festival to succeed.

March 1977 saw the withdrawal of the Emergency and the electoral defeat of Mrs. Gandhi's Congress. On April 7,

PCCP members beat up some students on the allegation that they were distributing ultra-left leaflets. There was a massive protest against the PCCP violence on the campus. This included members of a number of left-wing students' organizations such as AISE, SFI, DSO and included a large number of general students.

The principal formed a committee to investigate the incident of the severe beating up of some students. The committee came out with a report, named the culprits and the college authorities decided to take action against the offenders. This was the first time in the decade of the seventies that the college authorities had shown courage to officially respond (without the help of the police) to complaints of disturbance in the premises and to take disciplinary action.

According to the members of the PCCP, there were, however, some legal hitches as to the way this came about. Some of the accused had not been called to depose before the committee though the committee claimed that they failed to appear. The PCCP also questioned the power of a committee to recommend punishment when it was set up essentially to ascertain the facts of the incident and submit a report. The PCCP organized a hunger strike in protest against the injustice of the decisions. On the sixth day of the hunger strike, the punishments were withdrawn by the college authorities.

In November 1977, election for the Students' Union Council was announced. After a discrepancy was found in one constituency, the Principal decided to cancel the elections. The next elections were held in January 1978. The PCCP lost by one seat. By then the Congress was on the defensive in the state as well as the National level.

The period 1972-77 marked the rise and decline of Chhatra Parishad in the college. It followed the cycle of politics in West Bengal and had all the features of Congress politics of the times from deep-rooted factionalism to the arrogant and high-handed style of functioning. It did succeed in restoring a degree of normalcy in college life, particularly in the regularity of classes and examinations. This certainly was in contrast to the closing years of the previous decade.

Extracurricular activities flourished in a fairly open atmosphere. An inevitable outcome of this was the rising trend of 'Westernization' in clothes and cultural tastes. The PCCP faced a dilemma regarding this Openness necessarily implies the acceptance of plurality and diversity. Yet, the

PCCP, on many occasions, debated the intrinsic value of aping and the cost of confronting such tendencies. It was implicitly accepted as an influence that was overwhelming the middle class from which the likelihood of his or her voting for the PCCP without becoming an active member. This concern for the vote bank forced the PCCP to be a little less concerned with nationalism and socialism.

Opening up culturally in a group of young adults had inevitable consequences in other respects too. There was a marked decline in the quality of language with English slang becoming more and more interspersed with Bengali. The use of obscenities in every day language became not only acceptable but was considered the height of fashion. Liquor was considered to be the hallmark of a heroism.

Just as the previous decade, not more than ten to fifteen percent of the students were actively into politics. Their search for bases of support comprised a mixture of personal friendships, college issues and the appeal to a broad ideology that was in tune with the concerns for the Indian society.

Finally, I would like to dwell on an aspect of the attitude towards politics and studies that marked this period. The students who were engaged in revolutionary politics had been severely critical of the 'studies' (curricula) that the universities demanded. They were dismissed as part of bourgeois culture and hence had to be shunned. Thus, not attending classes or avoiding examinations was part of the revolt. Interestingly, revolutionary activity had its own knowledge demands, such as an alternative set of texts such as Das Capital and the Red Book. Even a cursory reading was compulsory for the sake of showing off intellectual prowess. This changed during 1972-77. Politically active students continued to ridicule formal studies, but there were no alternative texts. Yet they never ridiculed good students, particularly the well-read type. This period marked the beginning of the polarization between the 'canteen set' and the 'library set'. Politics, by and large, became the preserve of the former. The very few who could hold their own in both the sets, were the ones believed to have charisma.

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