

One day in the life of Eden Hindu Hostel

SUBHAS RANJAN CHAKRABORTY

In the Fifth Quinquennial Review of the Progress of Education in Bengal (1912-13 to 1916-17), W W Hornell, writing about Presidency College, noted that discipline was generally good until 1913, when there were 'signs of the want of the best kind of loyalty', and one or two serious lapses into indiscipline. 'In 1914 the general discipline appeared to show a marked improvement on 1913, and the outbreak of war evoked much that was good in the college. By contrast, indiscipline then took on a definitely political form; there were arrests and hostel searches, not always submitted to in the proper spirit. In 1915 there was a difficult state of affairs, culminating early in 1916 in open defiance of authority which led to the temporary closing of the college and the Eden Hindu Hostel. The following session the general conduct of the college was more satisfactory, but a large number of students were arrested at different times for political reasons, and the Eden Hindu Hostel was subjected to one extensive search and several on a small scale.'

The Students' Consultative Committee which was instituted in 1913 to bring the Principal into

closer touch with the opinions and wants of the general body of students 'played an unworthy part in the troubles of 1916 and has been discontinued; its early promise of usefulness was not fulfilled. It is regrettable that the first attempt at a students' constitution has failed'.

The year 1916 opened with the troubles that Hornell mentioned. On 10th January the annual prize distribution ceremony for the meritorious students of Hindu and Hare Schools was organised on the Hare School grounds, attended, among others, by the Governor Lord Carmichael, H R James, the principal, Presidency College, Rai Rasamoy Mitra Bahadur, the Head Master of Hindu School and Rai Ishan Chandra Ghosh Saheb, the Head Master of Hare School. Several third year students of the Presidency College (who were also former students of the Hindu and Hare Schools) attended the function on invitation from their respective schools. As a result they were a little late for the class in Presidency College, to be taken by Professor Rabindra Narayan Ghose. When they passed through the corridor towards their class room, Professor E F Oaten, who was taking his class, felt

disturbed and came out to scold the students and even held one of them by hand and asked them to go away. Different versions of the story came out in the press later and it is difficult to say what exactly transpired. According to the students' version, they decided to meet the Principal and seek redress, but the Principal asked them to settle the matter with Professor Oaten. In the meantime, other students of the class also came out in the corridor as Professor Ghose did not turn up for his class. Professor Oaten came out of his class once more and threatened them to slap a fine of Rupees five if they left the class room before the bell indicated that the time of the class had come to an end. Professor Ghose arrived late and after a while formally dismissed the class. The students, coming out into the corridor, once more confronted Professor Oaten who was extremely annoyed and asked them to return to the class room and allegedly pushed some of the boys.

The students met the Principal once more but he again advised them to patch up the matter with Professor Oaten. The students, disappointed, decided to go on strike. A couple of days later, some of the professors mediated a settlement. The students admitted that 'some of them were technically wrong in remaining on the corridor', while Professor Oaten on his part admitted that he 'used some degree of force in insisting on the students to go to their class room' and expressed 'his sincere regret for having done so'.

The matter, however, did not come to rest. The next day Mr.

Oaten behaved in a quite different way. After entering the Third and Fourth Year (combined) History Honours Class he wanted those who were absent on the previous day to go away from the class. They left the class and represented the matter to Principal James, who, to their great surprise, declared himself quite helpless in the matter. To add injury to insult, the Principal fined the whole body of the students of the College Rupees Five each for not attending their classes for two days.

On the 15th of January a long editorial appeared on the subject in the Amrita Bazar Patrika which noted :

'And lastly the Presidency College will not elevate itself, but lower itself in the estimation of the public, if taking advantage of this deplorable incident, in which a Professor is more to blame than the students, a sum of Rs. 5,000 is raised from them by one stroke of the pen. We trust Mr. James will reconsider the matter... A sum of Rs 5000 is no doubt very tempting, but Mr. James must be above such petty temptation'.

Such sympathetic comments in Amrita Bazar Patrika inspired the students and that particular edition of the newspaper appeared to be in great demand with a copy being sold for as much as four annas instead of the regular price of one anna. The letters to the editor columns were full of responses from the students and the general public. The newspaper continued with the stories, recalling earlier occasions of such conflict between European

teachers and the students involving Professor Holme and Professor Harrison. The Patrika recalled these incidents and commented: 'It is a remarkable fact that there had never been any serious quarrel between the Indian Professors and the students in the Presidency College.'

The situation in the College continued to be tense. The celebration of the Founders' Day on 20 January was cancelled. Soon the more serious incident involving Professor Oaten followed. The incident resulted in the expulsion of Subhas Chandra Bose and Ananga Mohan Dam from the

and other property; for the removal of these properties every reasonable help is to be given to him. If money is required Principal will supply it. He is advised to start for home (Sylhet) this evening.

(Sd.) H. R. James.

The Hostel was always suspected by the authorities to be a centre for secret political activities with some or perhaps many students keeping liaison with the revolutionary groups. The war gave a boost to the revolutionary movement in Bengal and the hostels and students' messes were always

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College. In addition Ananga, was unceremoniously expelled from the Eden Hindu Hostel. The following copy of a letter written to the Superintendent of the Eden Hindu Hostel by Mr. H. R. James was displayed on the Notice Board of the Hostel :

Babu Ananga Mohan Dam who has been expelled from the College by the Governing Body is expressly forbidden to re-enter the gates of the Eden Hindu Hostel. Boarders are forbidden to hold any communication or to speak with him except what is necessary (with the permission of the Superintendent) for forwarding his books, clothes

under scrutiny. The quinquennial report clearly indicated this. It is in this context that we look at the search in the rooms of nine students in the Eden Hindu Hostel on 27 July, 1916. Earlier in June, Basanta Das, Surendra Kar and some other students were arrested. This is recorded by the weekly police report which does not give further details.

The search was made under warrant in connection with the murder of Basanta Kumar Chatterjee, Deputy Superintendent of Police. The search party was led by C H Shillong. The students whose rooms were searched were: Suresh Chakraborty, Jogesh

Bhattacharya, Surendra Acharjee, Bhabesh Nandy, Surendra Roy, Basanta Acharjee, Monindra Majumdar, Nripendra Majumdar and Suresh Das. These men, though searched, were not detained under the DPA or any other Act. Enquiries were made from the local police of their home villages/ districts and it was found that none was known to have any political connection. Some papers including notebooks, letters and other articles were seized from them. But the police is never less than fair and F W Kidd, the Deputy Commissioner of Police, ultimately ordered the articles to be returned, but his order was signed in November 1919! The articles were received by those who still continued to be students in the same month.

The notebooks or papers/letters seized from the students reveal some interesting insights into the lives of the students. From Suresh Chakraborty's room three 'khata books', were found. They were really lecture notes handed down by seniors. For example, on the first page of one such 'khata' was written 'handed down from Bhupati Dhar, B.A. to Bejoy Roy in 1910'. Clearly, the tradition of handing down notes is one well established in the history of the institution. In the case of Surendra Acharjee Chaudhuri no objectionable material was found, but curiously the investigating officer was asked to destroy two photographs (there is no mention of what the photographs were). The papers of Bhabesh Nandy were also found largely unobjectionable, but one paper had a reference to prisoner no. 5673 of Alipore Central Jail. The

Investigating Officer suggested the destruction of this paper. The police probably also made enquiries about the prisoner and possible connections. What, however, may interest us is a menu which listed curry of cabbages, curry of potatoes, fish curry, *kumra* for all, egg *mamlet*, chops, curry of *chhana* for Christians. It also listed that there were 11 Christians and 12 Hindus. Possibly they were celebrating a feast, but the menu apparently was specific to one's religion. From Surendra Roy's papers the IO wanted to retain a letter written by a friend who, on being appointed a special constable, was anxious to procure a medical certificate, even by offering a bribe! In Basanta Acharjee Chaudhuri's room the police found a couple of 'love songs' in Bengali. Luckily for him, Police did not find that objectionable.

A Sur's Diary found in the room of Monindra Narayan Majumdar provides the only evidence, in the students' own words, of the trouble in Presidency College. The entry on 11 January (in red ink) notes: 'strike in the college on account of Mr. Oaten's misbehavior to some students'; 13 January: 'Mr. Oaten compelled some fourth year students to leave his class. How shameful creature he is!' In the margin the D C of Police commented, 'a delightful side light on the mental outlook of the Bengali student'. 17 January: 'Mr. P C Ghose advised us to join the Founders' Day.' 19 January: 'Founders' Day celebration is postponed this year. The Statesman criticises the strikes that recently occurred in three different colleges and also the

university [against the proposals] to pass laws to make further strikes unprofitable.' 20 January: 'No founders' Day celebration this year. This is exactly as it should be'. 16 February: 'A very regrettable incident occurred in the college. Mr. Oaten has been bitten(sic!-this is from the police transcript) by vicious students. Principal and others came and called the rolls (presumably in the hostel). Am feverish. Took bread.' 19 February: 'the Governing Body of the College met. Ananga suspected. He is pressed for confession.' 21 February: Ananga expelled from the hostel (we have reproduced the expulsion order of the Principal). The Principal came in a battalion. We are forbidden to talk with him. He is not allowed to enter into the hostel. Sad indeed.' 2 March: 'Principal with Gilchrist came to serve order of the government that all students except the 2nd and 4th year students (examinees) should leave hostel at once. Poor students find no room to hide their head like homeless cat, driven from hearth to hearth. Thanks to the authority'. 5 March: 'The governmental autocracy knows no bounds. The authority has outrageously misunderstood the students. It wants to punish all students for the offence of the unknown few'. 9 April: 'Frequent depression, Worried about examination result.' 14 April: 'had a walk in the Eden Gardens with a friend.' 8 July: 'Took admission in the college and hostel too'. 11 July: 'Our sworn pilgrimage done alone by me'. The meaning of this entry is unclear as can be seen in the Deputy Commissioner's seeking an explanation.

Monindra's papers seem to have attracted the most attention. In

a piece of paper were written the following entries: Phosphoric acid 30, Phosphorous-200, Lycopodium-30, Conaon 30 (presumably names of homoeopathic medicines). The DC wrote in red ink in the margin, 'Ask inspectors of explosions if this means anything'. Clearly, the paranoia of the police reached absurd proportions.

Another diary was found in the possession of Suresh Chandra Das, but it merely recorded his personal engagements and meetings with his friends and relatives. The DC was merely curious about the initials by which all his contacts were referred. He wanted to know more. There is one entry, however, that is intriguing: I P -12 March, H P - 7 March, 6 April, N P -5, 6 and 28 March. The DC commented with his tongue in the cheek,

'Deals with his various methods of self-abuse, I suppose!'

All the students whose rooms were searched also gave detailed statements. The IB file is full of reports which were solicited from and sent by the SPs of the different districts from which the students came like Mymensingh, Comilla, Dacca, Tippera etc. In the case of Surendra Acharjee Chaudhuri the Police were contacted at Deoghar as well, as his father had settled there.

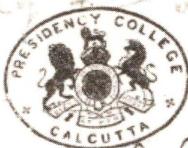
The officers were concerned, as can be seen from their notes and correspondences, about the various messes in which students generally lived if they did not get into a hostel. The statement of Suresh Chakraborty mentioned two such messes at 48 Harrison Road (where generally the students of the University Law

College, Ripon College, Ripon Law College, City College, Sanskrit College, Bangabasi College and Metropolitan College stayed). Another mess was at 123/2 Amherst Street where a cousin of Suresh and some of his friends stayed. There was detailed interrogation about these. His statement mentions a few significant names of people involved in the nationalist movement, though he claimed, on being asked by the police, not to know them personally. These names included Atindra Nath Bose, Jadu Gopal Mukherjee, Rashbehari Bose, Arun Chandra Guha, Jibantara Haldar, Surendra Mohan Ghosh.

We may also note that the Principal and his office were rather keen to oblige the police by offering all the information they required quickly.

The Principal, W C Wordsworth, wrote on 25 July 1916 to Mr. Clerk:

D.O.
No.



The 25 July 1916.

Dear Mr. Clerk, I enclose the list for which Mr. Hornell asked me last evening.

If you require further particulars re places of residence etc I shall make them out. Time did not permit today.

Yours sincerely,
W C Wordsworth

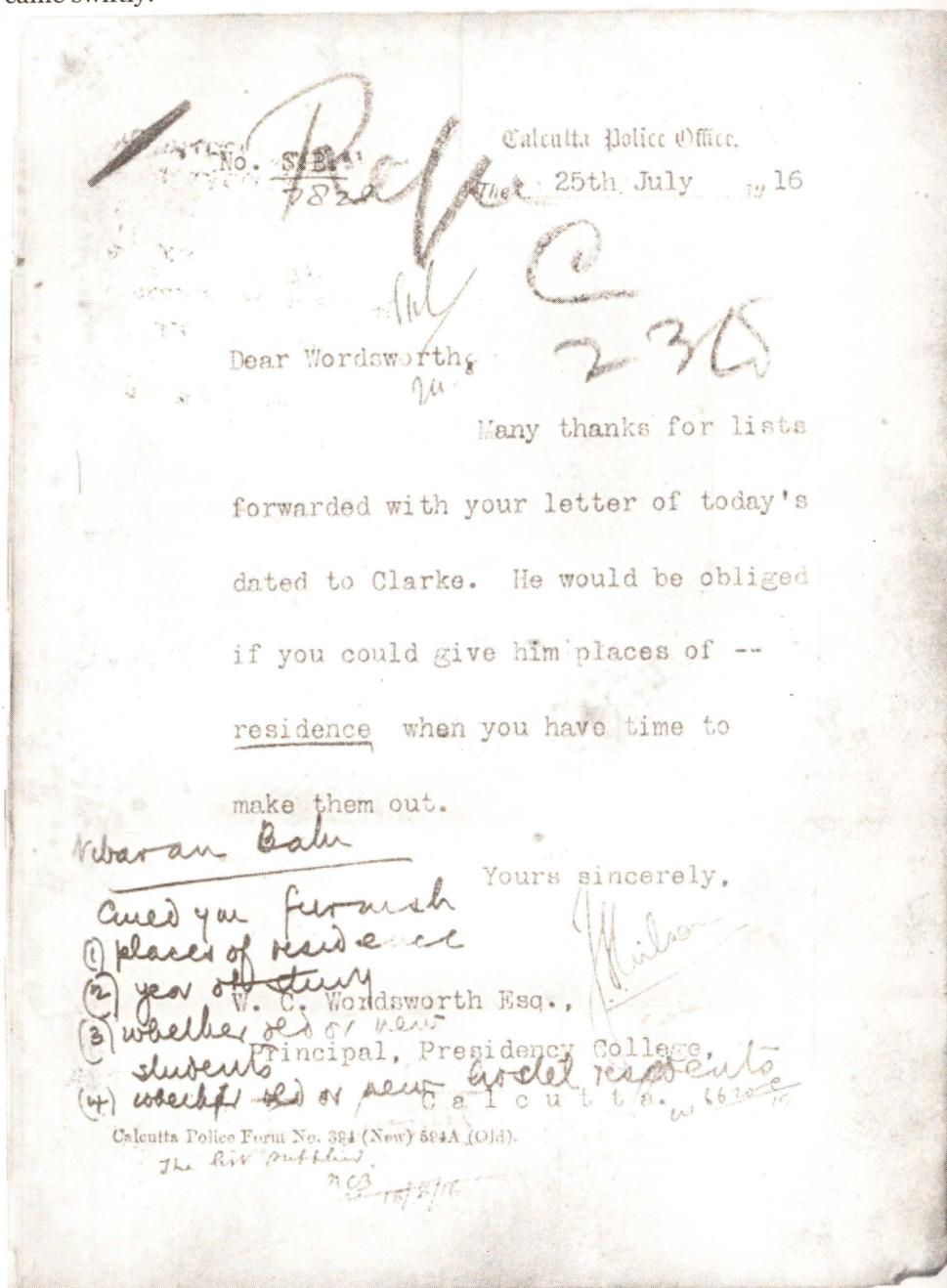
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Yours sincerely,

(Sd.) W C Wordsworth

The reply came swiftly:



Dear Wordsworth,

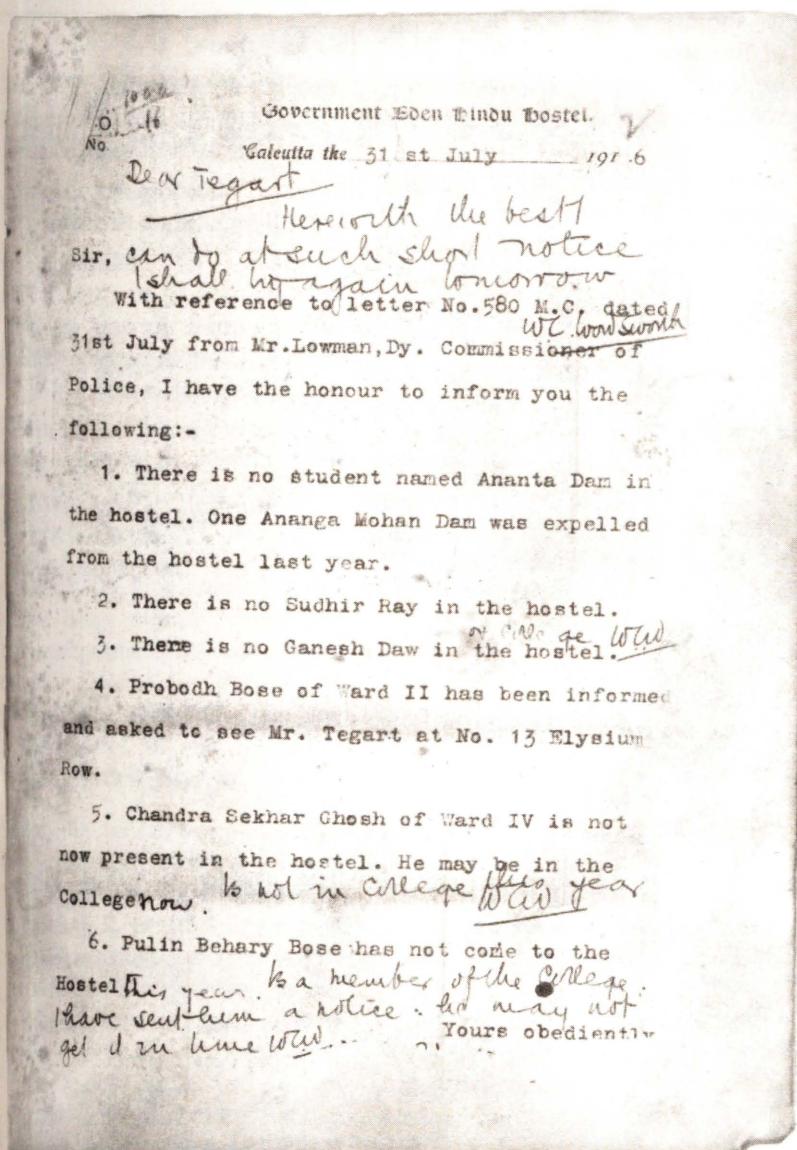
Many thanks for the lists forwarded with your letter of today's date to Clerk. He would be obliged if you could give him places of residence when you have time to make them out.

Yours sincerely,

Sd./ illegible.

Wordsworth wrote on the letter a note for the Superintendent, Eden Hindu Hostel, 'Nibaranbabu, could you provide 1) the list of residence, 2) year of study, 3) whether old or new students, 4) whether old or new hostel resident'. Nibaranbabu noted, 'The list supplied' – NCB

On 31 July the Superintendent of the Hostel wrote to the Principal, (the Principal added his comments in red ink parenthetically)



Sir,

With reference to letter no. 580, M.L. dated 31 July from Mr. Lowman, Dy. Com. of Police, I have the honour to inform you the following:

There is no student named Ananta Dam in the hostel. One Ananga Mohan Dam was expelled last year.

There is no Sudhir Roy in the hostel.

There is no Ganesh Das in the hostel. (or in the college – in red ink)

Probodh Bose of Ward II has been informed and asked to see Mr. Tegart at No. 13 Elysium Row.

Chandra Sekhar Gupta of Ward IV is not now present in the hostel. He may be in the college now. (is not in College this year. WCW – in red ink)

Pulin Behary Bose has not come to the hostel this year. (is a member of the college. I have sent him a notice. He may not get it in time. WCW – in red ink)

This short communication does not pretend to write a partial history of the institutions, but hopes to record some moments in 1916 when both the institutions appeared to be going through a phase of crisis. The crisis revolved round some incidents in the College, but the larger context of the anti-colonial struggle is probably not to be missed. The relationship between the students and the teachers (or, at least, the European teachers, if we accept the editorial comments of *Amrita Bazar Patrika*) had become rather unhappy and this article briefly enumerates some of the episodes. The strikes, the expulsions, the closures, the arrests and the searches together mark the larger crisis. One sad casualty of the period was the abolition of the students' consultative committee. Ironically, this happened under

H R James, the best Principal of the college in the opinion of some commentators, who had been instrumental in setting up the committee in the first place.

The evidence provided by the Intelligence Branch files gives us some glimpse into the minds of the students at the time. It is important to record what little we can access as there is absence of much recorded evidence. Curiously, only one student appeared to have kept a record of his responses. But the silences may also be eloquent. It is worth noting that Majumdar talks of the expulsion of Ananga, but does not mention Subhas even when he records the Oaten incident in February. May be he mentions only Ananga as he was a resident of the Hostel. Finally, the media attention that any crisis relating to these institutions attracts is

not the product of the events of the last four or five decades. It started pretty early in the century. The same could be said of political involvement of the students as well as the surveillance and intervention of the police.

References

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Weekly Police Reports, 1914, 1916, West Bengal State Archives

Progress of Education in Bengal, 1912-13 to 1916-17. Fifth Quinquennial Review by W.W. Hornell (Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, Calcutta, 1918)

Old files of *Amrita Bazar Patrika*

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