

Students and Politics

Saugata Roy*

When I entered the grand portals of Presidency College in 1964, and joined the first year classes in Physics (Hons.) at Baker Laboratory, politics was nowhere in the air and far from my mind. The atmosphere was totally apolitical. The Students' Union was controlled by the Presidency College Students Organisation (PCSO) which was a non-political organisation dominated by smart students from English Medium Schools. They used to organise mainly non-political events like debates, musical functions and college socials. A play was staged by 'Nundikar' that year at the Star Theatre for the college social. The leadership of the PCSO seemed to be somewhat anti-communist and pro-American, as was evident in their efforts to organise lectures by visiting American dignitaries. I remember one such lecture by a Mr. Josef Green from the American embassy, where I had scandalised everybody present by asking a question on dollar imperialism. There was also a Students' Federation (SF) in the college, but it had little link with the All Bengal Organisation outside and their leadership was ineffectual. Though I was an anti-communist due to my Catholic School background, I did not feel inclined to join either of the two organisations during my first year in the college, nor was there any serious effort by anybody to recruit me. The Union was so docile that when the General Secretary of the Students' Union was given a T. C. for failing in the class examination, there was not even a whimper of protest.

Social life in the College was very pleasant. For most of the boys, it was their first contact with girls of their age. Further chances of intermixing were there at the debates and sports events, and in the long corridors and the open green spaces. I saw Aparna Sen for

the first time speaking at the Freshers' Debate. Debates and cricket matches were special occasions in the college and the real heroes of the college were debaters (like Sundar and Narendu) and the cricketers.

But this also gave rise to hidden tensions which later took shape in students' militancy, because it was the smarter boys from the English Medium Schools who dominated these events and cornered the attention of the more attractive girls whereas the brighter boys from Mofussil towns, who mostly lived in Eden Hindu Hostel, felt somewhat ignored. A pleasant memory of that first year was the sight of brightly attired girls sitting all around the cricket field in winter, knitting sweaters or reading books while watching a cricket match.

The other reason that could be attributed for the rise of students' militancy was the Victorian attitude of the teachers who kept themselves totally aloof from the students. They were to be listened to and not talked to. The word of the Principal, the lovable Dr. Sanal Basu, was law. I remember having been fined Rs. 10/- by the Principal for having called a Professor of English by his familiar name. The notice of my punishment was put up on the notice board and everybody asked me whether I had smoked or kissed.

All this changed in my second year in the college. The SF leadership was taken over by a new batch of boys. Their leader was Ashim Chatterjee. Ashim came from a Congress background and lived in a hostel, meant for the sons of Mofussil Congressmen. He had studied Chemistry Honours for 3 years without getting a degree and again entered the 1st year Economics class. He was indoctrinated into Marxism by one Arka Prabha Deb, now an IAS officer. Ashim was single-handedly responsible for building up links with the SF

* Alumnus 1964-69 (Physics)

organisation outside and for recruiting the maximum number of boys from the freshers. It was his personality which later drove him towards the extreme violent path of Naxalism and to induce a number of brilliant students on this futile path.

I was somewhat alarmed by this rise in Leftist militancy. My natural tendency was to react against this. So, when Sudipta and Amit who had now taken over the leadership of PCSO approached me for helping them, I readily agreed. But it was a hopeless fight. The freshers were totally with the SF and so were the postgraduates. And after many years, the SF won the College Union elections that year convincingly. On the day of their victory, the SF members with their outside friends stood on both sides of the college gate and booed the PCSO leadership and Professors alike. This caused a lot of consternation. I remember the scene when Kajaldi's car was passing through the gate and had to stop in front of the jubilant SF supporters. That the Collegians resented this sort of hooliganism was demonstrated at a function organised by the Rabindra Parishad whose secretary Prashanta was a PCSO supporter. Purba Dam (then Singha) was standing, when an SF supporter from another college passed a rude comment. She got up and left the hall in disgust. Students' pressure was so much that the SF boys had to go and apologise to her to persuade her to come back. She was so disgusted that she did not oblige.

By now, the Communist Party had split into the CPI and the CPI(M) and the boys from our college joined the then pro-Chinese CPM side and became active cadres of the Party. Apart from Ashim, their other leaders were Sudarshan Roy Choudhury, now a CPI(M) M.P., Saradindu Roy and Amal Sanyal. For the first time, a unit of the Students' Federation was opened in the College at the end of 1965. Attempts were made by some of my SF friends to persuade me to join the unit since they felt that with my ordinary looks and humble background, I could not have anything in

common with the 'guys' in the PCSO. I shied away for I could not explain to them that my being a non-communist had nothing to do with my looks.

The mood was turning anti-Congress in the State and in March 1966, there was a violent Bangla BUndh which lasted for several days. Presidency College students took an active part in the movement, which included burning of buses and fighting with the police. This was also a big departure from the past when students of the college had remained cocooned in their academic shells.

But the tide in the college turned totally with the New Year's entrants in 1966. The PCSO got a batch of really bright and enthusiastic boys and girls among them. Neptune Srimal, Partha Sengupta and Subir Ray were the best recruits. The leadership of the PCSO had in the meantime passed into the hands of Amit Mitra and myself, now both 3rd year students, after a brief struggle with the old guard. Since there was no formal membership, no structure and no elected office bearers in the organisation, those who were active automatically assumed leadership. Amit's house became a hub of activity and we had a new recruit in Adinath Sarkar, a 6th year student, who played an important role in the coming year and called himself the President of the PCSO. The PCSO members, rather sympathisers, had differing political views, some like me were pro-Congress, some like Amit were anti-Congress, some were even pro-communist; but we all seemed to believe in common that politics should be kept out of the College. It is a view that I changed later.

The first sign of the PCSO's growing strength was demonstrated in the first strike break. The Students' Union had called a strike against the American intervention in Vietnam. Though it was an All Bengal call, they had given no previous notice to the students. A large number of boys and girls gathered in front of the College gate, which was locked by the picketing SF supporters. The general

students started protesting and the lead was taken by boys like us. Soon slogans were raised and the protest grew so strident that we were unable to control the students. It became a PCSO vs SF confrontation with the SF members calling us "snobs". Over two hundred boys and girls scaled the railings and symbolically broke the strike though classes could not be held as there was no teacher. The scene of girls in their sarees climbing over the railings before the eyes of the startled SF supporters, remains etched in my mind even today.

But the day after the strike, we felt the pinch. Those who had broken the strike were scared that the SF would bring boys from outside to beat up the non-strikers, which they did. We asked Aditi to contact some of his strong arm friends. Both sides gathered at the Coffee House and there was a palpable tension all around. Ultimately, a patchwork compromise was reached and announced from the stairs in front of the main porch, but not before the PCSO lost some face. From that day, I had started feeling that it was difficult to fight the SF without any help from outside.

So far the activity of the SF members did not impinge on the academic life of the College. But now they felt threatened by the rise of the PCSO. And Ashim's response was to start a typical movement to swing the students' sympathy. It started from the Eden Hindu Hostel.

The boarders of the hostel had some genuine grievances caused by a bureaucratic system and a disinterested staff. The food was bad. The rooms were in a state of disrepair. There was discontent against the warden for having expelled three students (none of them SF supporters) from the hostel the previous year on the charges of ragging. The mofussil boys in the hostel suffered from a sense of alienation. Ashim was able to capitalise on all these and by spending long hours trying to convert the boys, was able to build up a strong base for the SF in the hostel. Those who did

not toe the line of the SF were coerced or terrorised into capitulation. Hindu Hostel became an armed fortress of the Naxalites in later days, a place where any non-sympathiser was scared to enter.

The movement in the hostel was against the warden and it later spread to the College which could hold no class for two days. For the first time, Presidency College students came into the news for reasons other than academic. For the first time, teachers were openly abused and fellow students openly threatened. The communists were actually breaking down the system. The warden had to resign. This gave the College notoriety; but I doubt if the SF had gained among the students, and if the condition of the hostel had improved after that.

At this stage, the results of the B.A. examination had come out and Ashim and two other leaders of the SF had scraped through. They applied for admission to the M.A. classes in the College. (This was technical since the classes were all held at the University). The College authorities (possibly with the support from the Government now alarmed at the rise of leftism in the citadel of establishment) foolishly decided to withhold forms from Ashim and two others.

The SF naturally reacted in a typical way. One afternoon, the SF members led by Ashim gheraoed the Principal. The gherao continued till late in the evening. Then the police came, broke up the gherao and rescued the Principal. From the very next day the Union went on strike. I must confess here that some of the SF leaders had approached me to have a joint movement with the PCSO. I had nodded my head though I had no intention of doing anything along with them.

The story of the four month old strike, its spread to the Calcutta University, and the sympathetic echo it had in the students' movement in Bengal need not be repeated. News about the movement appeared every day in the then newspapers. How the strike led

to further expulsions, how the movement escalated leading to the ransacking of the Chemistry laboratory, and how it was ultimately called off at the instance of the State CPI(M) leadership without any of the strikers' demands being conceded, is widely known. The plight of the Principal, who used to come along with some teachers to the College gate every day to stand under a tree and to be subjected to taunts and abuses, evoked considerable sympathy at that time. In hindsight, I must say that the leadership of the movement was very professional; they knew that the Congress Government was waiting to break up the movement with the help of the police, but they did not give the Government a single excuse inspite of provocations while the movement continued till almost the very end.

I must chronicle here what the PCSO did while the movement lasted. In the initial stages, a feeble attempt by some guardians to mediate in the dispute flopped when SF activists broke up a meeting called for the purpose. At this time, Aditi suggested that we do something. He had already contacted some local Congress leaders and toughs. They had assured him that if we could organise a demonstration on the footpath opposite the College gate, their very presence would ensure that the College gates would open and the picketers would disperse. So we organised about a hundred boys and girls, and started shouting slogans, saying "We want to attend classes". We even advanced towards the gate in the hope that something would happen. Nothing happened and we had to retreat; but our efforts received notice in the Press. Our demonstrations continued for a few days and there were some attempts by the SF boys to threaten us. Then, it was decided that we should take a procession to the Writers' Building. Before the procession, I spoke to the gathering and said that we were not against the agitators but just wanted to pursue our studies. I was not experienced and my voice broke. Still I found that even the SF boys were listening intently; some of them later told me

that I had spoken well. The procession went upto Lal Bazar where it was stopped; the boys and girls, for all of whom this was the first procession in life, squatted on the road. Five of us went to the Writers' Building to meet the CM. Apparently, an appointment had been fixed beforehand, for we could meet the CM straightway and there were even photographers present. The CM showed a lot of sympathy for our plight and promised all help.

While the photographs of our meeting with the CM appeared in the newspapers, this was also the climax of our resistance movement. We decided to withdraw from the footpaths after this. None of our supporters had the stomach for a long movement; besides the threat of being beaten up by SF supporters was always there. So, as a next phase, we decided to organise classes outside the College. A Building on Lee Road, belonging to the Civil Defence Department, was made available and many teachers agreed to take classes. The classes were well-attended and I found some SF supporters attending them. There was an apprehension that SF would come to demonstrate at Lee Road; but they were prudent enough not to do such a thing.

The General Elections, due in March 1967, were approaching and the movement as well as the College closure had gone on for four months. The CPI(M) leadership decided that enough was enough. They needed their student cadres to work for their elections. So, instructions were issued to withdraw the strike, much against the wishes of the college leadership. So, the movement which had started with a bang ended in a whimper with all the expelled students remaining out. Had Pramode Dasgupta known that the Congress would lose in the elections, he would have probably decided otherwise. But therein lay the seed of formation of the Naxalite students' group in the near future.

When the College re-opened, it was all quiet for a while. But things warmed up again when the college union elections were

announced. There was hectic campaigning, but fortunately no violence. The campaign was person to person since class lecturing, posterizing, etc., were not in vogue in the College. During the campaign, I discovered that the views of the students were polarised and the strike had not changed them. The PCSO got tremendous response among undergraduates; but we had few contacts with postgraduates and they had no contact with the College. We lost narrowly. SF got 22 seats and we got 20. In the undergraduate section, we won 18 out of 32 seats, but we got only two out the ten seats in the PG section. It was a great disappointment for us.

But in the process of the Union formation, more alarming things happened. Since we were two short of the SF's number, winning over one of their elected representative would make our numbers equal. There was this boy called Santanu Mukherjee, who hailed from Aditi's and my school. He had won from the second year Arts class as an independent supported by SF. We decided to approach him and Aditi was given the task. Aditi might have used some words with him which might have sounded like a veiled threat without meaning any harm. Santanu must have complained to the SF leadership, for when we went to the College to elect the Union office bearers, there was a lot of tension. A large number of sinister-looking outsiders could be noticed and the word was around that Aditi would be beaten up. When we came out after the office bearers' election, we learnt that Aditi was missing. I could not do anything at that stage since the College was in a state of siege. I went out and tried to gather together some of Aditi's friends and local Congress boys. We went in after two hours to rescue Aditi. We found the SF supporters with a lot of outsiders seated on the field; there were crates of sodawater bottles strewn around. This was a precursor to the coming Naxal days, when the fields and the buildings around them would become the arsenals and testing places for dangerous bombs and other weapons and a haven for

assorted lumpens. There was a local tough who seemed to be leading the assault troop. There was a verbal confrontation between the two groups, but Aditi's whereabouts could not be ascertained. Later we learnt that he was being beaten up, when he was rescued by Prof. Goon of the Statistics department; he was then hidden in the Physics laboratory from where he escaped. But the fight spilled over to the next day and became one between Presidency SF supporters and the 'para' Congress boys. The local tough was picked up from the Coffee House by a local boy and taken to the College Square; I happened to be present there at that time. SF supporters came to rescue him; but they were beaten back. Thus was Aditi's beating avenged.

Before graduating from the College, we had another swipe at the SF, an effort which was spoilt by my own folly. With the passing out of the 6th year Post-Graduates, the Union led by SF had become a minority. So, our members met the Principal and a date for moving the no-confidence motion was fixed. In our eagerness and my foolishness, we had not asked him to fix the process of electing new office-bearers on the same day. Three days before the motion was to be discussed, we found that one of our elected members Gautam Bhattacharya had gone away to Hardwar with his parents. One of the first year boys, Vidyarthi volunteered to go and fetch him, which he did in time. PCSO won the no-confidence motion easily and there was jubilation which was shortlived. Because by the time the election of office-bearers took place, Gautam had left for Hardwar again and the SF was able to get the support of the Girls' Common Room Secretary. So, we lost the chance of proving to the world that the SF was not that strong in Presidency College.

The naxalite revolt had meanwhile taken place in mid-1967 and Presidency College students, under Ashim, had become the vanguard of the naxalite students' front. The college became the safe haven for the 'armed revolutionaries' and the centre of all

'underground activities'. It was from here that students went out to create the 'liberated areas' in rural Debra and Gopiballavpur. For the next three years (1968-1970), the politics and life of the College was dominated by the 'politics of Naxalbari' and all laughter and songs went out of its life. In spite of the all-pervasive fear, Neptune and his successors kept the PCSO flag flying and elections to the Union were always close affairs. I joined Post-Graduate classes in early 1968 through Presidency College. But as I enrolled in the Chhatra Parishad and became involved in its politics and the students' politics of Calcutta University, my links with the College grew

tenuous. My relationship with the Students' Union politics finally snapped when I lost the elections to the college union from the 1st year PG class by the margin of one vote. It was a moment of shame. While I do not have detailed recollections of college politics in that crucial period (1968-69), one memory lingers clearly – everyday I went to attend Practical classes in the Baker laboratory, I was in fear for the safety of my life and limbs. I knew that bombs were being made in those dilapidated buildings and I was a likely target. If I was spotted, things would go very wrong for me. But fortunately, I have lived to tell this story today, all in one piece.