

An Unprecedented Strike in the College

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Students of various colleges gathered in a large number in the Calcutta University campus. The day was 18 September 1949. I do not remember what the issue was, but my college had no part in it. The students were shouting slogans against the University authority— so it must have been a student's issue and demanding redressal of their grievances. With a view to ventilating their grievances in public, they organised a big procession, according to a plan, and wanted to force their way out on the College Street. The police obstructed the procession and the inevitable followed. There were scuffles and hand-to-hand fighting.

In order to disperse the crowd that gathered around the agitating students, the police resorted to a lathi charge and tear gas. The crowd retaliated with heavy brick-battings from inside the university campus. The police opened fire and there were a few casualties and if I am right, there were at least three or four deaths, including a student who was no part of the agitation. In panic students, teachers, pedestrians ran for their life. Trams and buses stopped plying on the street, shops and establishments drew down their shutters. The entire area wore a deserted look.

At the fall of dusk, vandalism was let loose. Street lights were all broken and the whole area was enveloped in pitch-darkness. In apprehension of more serious repercussions, 144 Cr. P. C. was clamped down in the areas covering College Square, Mirzapur Street, College Street, Colootola Street and Peary Sarkar Street. Heavy police pickets were posted at every street corner. A reign of terror and panic hovered. I was a looker-on, considering the steps of the Senate Hall a safe zone, till a sergeant ran towards me threatening to beat me with his baton. I slithered towards Peary Sarkar Street and crept into my den, Eden Hindu Hostel.

But some boarders considered it their sacred duty to see for themselves what was happening outside, no matter if the Cr. P.C. was clamped. They hoodwinked the prohibitory orders promulgated under section 144(2)C of the Cr. P.C. and went out. I do not recollect all the names of those fellow boarders but Milon Kumar Gupta, Ranajeet Dasgupta, Santanu Mazumdar, Haradhan Banerjee, Amitava Gupta and Sailajaprasad Bhattacharya (the latter two are now no more) were certainly among them.

They behaved as if they were on their usual evening stroll in a non-chalant fashion when the patrolling police challenged them and jumped upon them with a very rough interception.

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Without any warning, they started beating them in the first round and dragged them to the nearby police jeep. The Deputy Commissioner, Headquarters, was at the jeep. Amitava happened to be the son of the then D.I.G of Police, Hiren Gupta, I.P. In the hope of a better turn of events, he identified himself as the son of the D.I.G. The D.C. however, got infuriated and ordered his police to give Amitava a special beating for making, what he thought, a false statement. Everyone was thrashed in the second round. They were arrested, taken in police custody and detained in the Jorasanko Police station for the night.

Not all of them, though. Santanu managed to slip away during the melee, hide himself behind a dustbin and escaped from the harrowing treatment. When the coast became a bit clear, he ran back to the hostel and related the whole incident to his fellow boarders, and the hostel superintendent. The news spread like a fire. Frequent ringing of the alarm bell indicated an emergency. In no time, the boarders assembled in the Common Room. The incident was discussed in the meeting and it was unanimously decided for action. An action committee of five members– Anindya Datta, Bangedu Ganguli, this writer and two others whose names I have forgotten. The committee was entrusted with the urgent task of deciding the next course of action under the dire circumstances.

The committee asked the hostel super to arrange for release of the detained boarders from the police station on that very night itself. But his efforts proved abortive. The action committee decided to involve the generality of students of the college, to get their sympathy and enlist their support for a greater movement.

The following day a general meeting of the students of the college was convened at the Physics Lecture Theatre. An unprecedented assemblage of students heard that day the last night's uncalled– for high-handedness of the police, particularly the D.C. The students listened to the tales of the beatings with rapt attention. The response was beyond expectation. The students' emotion and sympathy for the Hindu Hostel boarders was deep and they identified themselves with the boarders and assured the action committee of their unequivocal support and unflinching solidarity, they were prepared to launch any kind of movement, including an indefinite strike in the college. They demanded that the D.C. must come and tender unconditional apology. The action committee declared an indefinite strike till the students' demand was met.

That was an event, first of its kind, in the annals of the college. The news made headline story in all the newspapers of the city. The students decided to take out a procession and walk up to The Statesman House on Chowringhee to apprise the newspaper of the genesis of the strike, the barbarity of the police, the irresponsibility of the DC. Girl students also joined the procession. As the procession was about to leave the college, Prof Gaurinath Sastri ran to the gate, asked the girls not to disgrace themselves by walking on the road. He reminded them of the Sanatan Nari and gave an emotional lecture and asked the girls to stay back in the college. The girls listened respectfully to the venerable professor with bowed heads and as the professor finished, walked out of the gate and joined the boys to march along towards the

Chowringhee. Among the girls were Sipra Sarkar, Neera Sen, Chitra Saha, Chitra Bose, Bharati Ray, Tapati Dam and others.

The strike was on. At the instance of the Education Department, Government of West Bengal, negotiations were initiated at various levels of Administration. Prof. Snehamay Datta the then DPI, came to the college to persuade the students to call off the strike, but in vain. D M Sen, the then Education Secretary, also tried but without any result. Prof Jyotirmoy Ghosh, FNI (Fellow of National Institute), the then Principal of the College, addressed letters to the guardians of the wards requesting them to very kindly prevail upon their wards to call off the strike and to fall in line with the tradition and very high standard of the premier institution of the country (content of the letter is given below, thanks to Milon Gupta, who retrieved the letter sent to his father as well as the letter given by his father in reply).

The Government did not relax. To meet the obduracy of the Government, forty to fifty students, on rotation, started a hunger strike on the staircase of the college. The Education Minister, Pannalal Bose, of the Bhowal Sannyasi case fame, sought the intervention of the Chief Minister, Dr. Bidhan Chandra Ray. We were told that Amitava's mother, a spirited lady and the wife of a DIG to boot, took Amitava to Dr Ray's chamber and showed the CM the scars on Amitava's back caused by the ruthless police. The CM called student leaders to his chamber at the Writers' Buildings. But he gave no chance to the students. Instead he rebuked the students with stern words. He himself was once a student, he told them, and he knew how the students should behave. How dared the students throw stones at the policemen on duty, he asked. The students, given no chance to defend themselves or to explain the circumstances how their fellow students were treated by his police, walked out of his chamber with only one observation : is this all you have to say?

The first meeting was infructuous. The next day students were again summoned by the CM. He was this time in a mellow mood, talked with the students softly. He reminded the students of the glory of the college they belonged to, that they themselves would be in future the commissioners of police and secretaries of departments. He said that the DC had come to him and tendered his apology for the incident. How would the students react if they were the commissioners and secretaries? Was it possible that the DC would have to go to the college and ask apology? He requested the students to call off the strike and bring the college to normal. The student leaders were softened by the kind words of the CM and came back to the college and reported what the CM said.

Meanwhile, on the 10th day of the strike, the college authorities declared the Puja holidays prematurely, and closure of the hostel. The spirit of the movement died its natural death, leaving fragments of memories in the strikers, who are still among us.

Appendix A

Government of West Bengal
Office of the Principal, Presidency College, Calcutta.
No. 5715(1223)

From the Principal, Presidency College, College Street, Calcutta-12

To the Guardians of Students of the Presidency College, Calcutta.

Calcutta, the 24th September 1949.

Dear Sir/Madam,

You are probably aware that in spite of fairly adequate educational facilities in Calcutta, Government thought it desirable to maintain the Presidency College at a heavy subsidy from Public funds because they thought that it would work as a model with its long established tradition as an institution where a high standard of instruction and discipline is maintained. The Presidency College has really lived up to the tradition and the expectations of Government have been amply realised. Recently certain events have occurred resulting in serious dislocation of normal academic work. The students of the Presidency College went on strike in spite of assurance from the Government that the alleged maltreatment by the police of a few boarders of the Eden Hindu Hostel would be carefully investigated. A notice was, however, issued asking the students to inform the Principal either personally or by letter if they were willing to join their classes. Very few students responded to the Principal's letter. It was, therefore considered that no useful purpose would be served by keeping the College open. If the College cannot be maintained in its traditional way as an ideal institution for disciplined study, there can hardly be any justification for the State to maintain such a costly institution where the education of every student is heavily subsidised by the State, and it cannot therefore be in the public interest to allow students who are not serious about their academic obligations to continue in this College. You are therefore requested to let me know by return of post as to whether you really want the College to be reopened and if you are prepared to give an assurance that your ward will observe the specified rules as laid down in the Bengal Education Code, of which an extract is given below, and not indulge in strikes and such other activities as are highly detrimental to his own interests as also to the interests of education in general. You are further requested to co-operate with the College authorities so as to make a concerted attempt to the academic atmosphere of the College to normalcy and allow it to continue to serve as a model institution for the whole of West Bengal.

Yours faithfully,
J. Ghosh (Principal)
Presidency College, Calcutta

Extract from the Bengal Education Code

“Disciplinary action should be taken against the ringleaders as well as those who take an active part in picketing.

Students who remain absent from school or Colleges and whose continued absence, after due warning, is, in the opinion of the Head of the institution, unjustifiable, should have their names struck off the rolls, or be dealt with in such other way as the Head of the institution thinks fit.”

Appendix B

Reply by a Guardian

To
The Principal,
Presidency College,
College Street,
Calcutta-12

Dear Sir,

I beg to acknowledge thankfully receipt of your letter no. 5118(1223) dated 24.9.49 that reached me on 17.10.49

I am gratified to find that the allegation of maltreatment of a few boarders of the Eden Hindu Hostel by the police would be investigated.

As requested I beg to inform you that I want that the college should be reopened after the Puja vacation.

As regards giving of assurance as to whether my son would observe the Rules of the college I beg to inform you that he will be the last person to disregard Rules as I found my boy always law abiding in the true sense of the term.

I shall be obliged if you kindly let me know the date the college and Hostel will reopen so that I may send my son to Calcutta in time.

Thanking you for an early reply.

Yours faithfully,
(J.N. Gupta)
Joint Manager, Comilla
Banking Corpn. Ltd.