



THE FIRST TOKEN STRIKE OF THE WEST BENGAL COLLEGE TEACHERS (1949)

Prof. Nimai Chand Dan

Department of History , Prabhu Jagatbandhu College, Howrah,W.B.

ABSTRACT:

In 1926, All Bengal College and University Teachers Association (ABCUTA) came as a representative body of the College And University teachers. After independence in place of ABCUTA, West Bengal College And University Teachers' Association (WBCUTA) played a vital role in the College Teachers movement. After independence the influence of the leftists particularly the Communist increased in the teacher's movement. Gradually the form of protest also became more militant. The Token Strike of 1949 was the first step to militant character of the college teachers' movement. Majority voted against strike but pro-communist elements insisted to holding a two-day token strike.

For the first time in the history of college teachers' movement Picketing in front of educational institutions took place. Two teachers were arrested while picketing before the gates of a girls' school in North Calcutta. They were released on bail.

As a result of that strike called by a section of West Bengal college teachers, a large number of schools and colleges were affected. Many institutions chose to declare for the strike days- as holidays.

KEYWORDS: Dimension, Pioneering, leftist, Militant, Paramount.

INTRODUCTION:

From the very beginning (1926-1947) All Bengal College and University Teachers Association played a very vital role in the college and university teachers movement in Bengal. After Independence in place of All Bengal College And University Teachers Association came West Bengal College and University Teachers Association. After the independence and partition of the country, the College Teachers' movement had moved in different ways and the characteristics of the movement had undergone many changes. Before the partition, the College Teachers' movement was limited with submission of petitions, deputation and making prayers etc. But after the partition of the country, the movement took a militant character and the methods of protests took the forms of demonstration, strike and picketing etc.



POLITICAL BACKGROUND: The Communist party of India (CPI) started facing certain serious questions in Bengal as well as all over country just after Independence, The primary question was the formation of i) party's political and ideological policy towards the Government ,ii) nature and stage of the Indian revolution and iii) path of struggle. These emerging questions gave birth to the intense debates within the CPI during the last half of the decade of 1940s and it influenced the history of Bengal particularly in between 1948 and 1951.¹ There was sharp inner-party struggle between two political lines- one was the line of

¹ Basu, Chandan – Radical Ideology and 'Controlled' Politics: CPI and the History of West Bengal 1947-1964, Alphabet Books-2015,p-97-98.

collaboration with the congress advocated by P.C.Joshi and second one was the line confrontation with the congress and National Government which was advocated by B.T.Ranadive.² In the central committee the majority of the members supported this political line proposed by B.T.Ranadive.³ During this period there were three distinct but interrelated process influencing the party structure and party policy. There were i) The Ultra- Leftist political philosophy of Ranadive; ii) the theoretical effort to counter the Ranadive line of argument and iii) attempt to reorganize the party from the political organizational view point.⁴ AT this stage, it made whole hearted effort to appropriate the militant insurgent consciousness of the masses of West Bengal in accomplishing its objective within the disciplined structure of the party.⁵ The activities of different mass organizations like the BPSF (Bengal Provincial Student Federation), UCRC, MARS, ABTA(All Bengal Teachers' Association), WBPKS(West Bengal Provincial Krishak Sabha) , AITUC(All India Trade Union Congress) etc. opened up political space for the CPI among the masses covertly. The College Teachers movement affected by this political philosophy and adopted the militant strategy by the pro – leftist the groups of communist supporters and leaders within the WBCUTA.

A section of college teachers in 1949 decided to organize token strike as a protest against the Government's persistent refusal to increase to an acceptable level the paltry sum granted as dearness allowance to teachers. The College and University Teacher's Association, after its repeated failure to persuade the Government to raise the rate of the allowance, adopted a resolution to accept it at the existing rate; but this silent protest has not been able to make the Government change their attitude. It must be said to the credit of the teachers that even after this their organization has not considered it proper to resort to any militant measure and they have not gone beyond placing their demand before the authorities in the form of resolutions. But finally a section of them, in spite of the decision of their recognized organization not to go on strike on this issue took the desperate step of organizing a symbolic strike.

I

Strike Referendum: West Bengal College and University Teachers' Association gave Notice to All Non-Government College Teachers that the Association at its conference in April authorised the Executive Committee to take a referendum of all members of the Association and of all teachers of non-Government Colleges in West Bengal by the end of August,1949,on the question of going on a token strike "for the attitude of callous indifference on the part of the Government, the educational authorities and the public towards the moderate demands of the Association on the question of dearness allowance and betterment of pay and prospects of college teachers'." The two questions asked in the referendum are :1)Whether or not members are prepared to launch a token strike and 2)Whether or not members are prepared to follow it up, if necessary, by a general strike.⁶ The Voting in the referendum resulted as follows:1) A) Token Strike in the issue of refusal of the Govt. to increase the D.A., for 165 against 238. B) Prolonged strike on the same issue, for 97 against 292. 2) A) Token Strike on the broader issue namely "The callousness of the Govt. to improve the conditions of college teachers in general" for 157 against 223. B) Prolonged Strike on the same issue for 101 against 267.⁷

Convention of College Teachers on Sept. 18, 1949 : Fifty-four Professors of different colleges in West Bengal issued an appeal calling a convention of college teachers of West Bengal on Sept.18 "Friends, the college teachers of West Bengal have for long been agitating for better pay and prospects and for through reconstruction of the system of education in the province. As the first step they demanded Government D.A at Rs. 50/-p.m. The Government have turned down this demand unceremoniously and have all along

² Ibid, p.99

³ Ibid, p.100

⁴ Ibid, p.115

⁵ Ibid, p.148

⁶ Amrita Bazar Patrika, August-25, 1949 (Adhyapak Samitir Itihaser Upadan-Vol:1, Paschimbanga College O Viswavidyalaya Sikshak Samiti, Jun-2002) Page-202.

⁷ Amrita Bazar Patrika, 9th Sept. 1949

maintained an indifferent and insulting attitude towards the Professors even after strong and unanimous protest recorded through refusal of Government D.A. at Rs.10/p.m.

But since then there has been a deadlock in the movement. The W.B.C.U.T.A has failed to show any way out. But a way out must be found, for the situation is serious. With the price level rising higher and higher, without any relief from any quarter whatsoever, with increasing hours of work and workload per hour, the Professors are facing a critical situation. The Government and the educational authorities are following a thoroughly reactionary policy in education- cutting down education budget, raising the tuition fees, examination fees, hostel seat rent. Every day hundreds and thousands of students are being elbowed out of the domain of education. The situation is really grave. If the policy is allowed to continue for long, the whole province will soon be steeped in darkness and ignorance. That must be prevented at any cost and the Professors must come forward for determined action.

We therefore, call upon all college teachers of West Bengal to meet in a convention on September 18, 1949, in Calcutta to decide upon the measures we would adopt to fight governmental apathy and to rouse the sympathy of the public for our cause.”⁸ However the Honorary Secretary, West Bengal College and University Teachers’ Association, informed that his Association had nothing to do with the Proposed Convention of College Teachers on Sept.18 next.⁹

II

A convention of West Bengal Professors, held on September 18, 1949 at Mahabodhi Society Hall, called upon all the University and college teachers in the province to go on a two-day token strike on November 15 & 16 if all their demands, as put forth in a resolution, were not met by that time. Their demands are : Scale of salary to be fixed on the basis of the principle of “freedom from want”; immediate increase in dearness allowance from Rs. 10 to 50; at least half the strength of the Governing Body in every college must be elected representatives of the professors; and reduction in tuition fees of students.¹⁰

A resolution calling upon college Teachers of West Bengal to stage a token Strike on Nov 15 & 16 on certain demands was passed at a requisitioned general meeting of Provincial College and University Teachers’ Association in Mahabodhi Society Hall, Calcutta, 6th Nov, 1949, Professor Amarendra Prasad Mitra Presided. The meeting was convened by Professor D.N.Ghosh on behalf of a section of the Association. A notice issued in his name said that the authorities had failed to call a meeting as demanded, under the rules, by certain members on October, 2. The resolution, which was moved by Prof. R.N.Bhattacharjee and seconded by Prof. Kalyan Dutta added that if the Govt. failed to fulfill the teachers’ demands even after the token Strike, they “will have to have an all-out general strike”. About 70 professors attended the meeting. There were 57 votes in favour of the resolution and none against.¹¹

On Prof. Lokranjan Das Gupta raising a point of order as to the validity of the meeting, Prof. Amarendra Prasad Maitra on behalf of the President. Prof. Niren Roy said that all the requirements provided in the constitution of their Association had been fulfilled and such the meeting was thoroughly constitutional. Prof. Rabindranath Bhattacharya, Prof. Kalyan Dutta, Prof. Nagendranath Sen and Mrs. Bani Bhattacharya also spoke.¹²

To support the proposed two-day token strike by West Bengal Teachers and Professors on Nov 15 and 16, a meeting under the Joint auspices of West Bengal Teachers’ Association and Professors’ Council of Action was held at Wellington Square. Speeches there made condemning “the reactionary education policy of the Government” and urging the teachers, professors and students to “fight unitedly for a democratic educational system.” A statement issued by more than 100 professors including Professors Niren Roy, S.K.Maitra, D.N.Ghosh, Moni Chakraborty, Nirmalya Bagchi, Amarendra Prasad Maitra, Robi Bhattacharya,

⁸ Hindustan Standard, 9th Sept, 1949

⁹ Ananda Bazar Patrika, 14th Sept, 1949

¹⁰ The Nation, 18th Sept, 1949

¹¹ Statesman, Nov, 7, 1949

¹² Hindustan Standard, Nov. 7, 1949

Satin Chakraborty and Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya, urged upon Professors in the province to go on strike. A statement, issued by the general secretary of All Bengal Students' Congress (18 Mirzapore Street) that was controlled by pro-left, specially Revolutionary Socialist Party, called upon all school-students to go on strike on Nov.15 to 16 to support the demands of the Teachers. The proposed token strike by professors and school-teachers was supported in yet another student issued of All Bengal Students' Federation.¹³ Actually school teachers and college teachers of communist groups join hands for this strike outside the formal banner of the WBCUTA and ABTA (All Bengal Teachers' Association).

III

Nov,8th,1949, Prof.Sushil Mukharjee and Prof. D.L.Bhadury, Joint Secretaries of the West Bengal College and University Teachers' Association in a statement mentioned that they have seen a press Report about a meeting convened by some college teachers' in the name of WBCUTA, where they have decided by 57 Votes(out of a total 1200 teachers') to have a strike of college teachers on Nov.15&16.They have mentioned that as the authority of the Executive Council the meeting was unconstitutional and ultra viers, they also mentioned that the referendum on the same question held eight week backs where majority had declared against strike, and that decision stands unless abrogated in a constitutional manner. They have called a general meeting at 4pm on Nov, 27th 1949, to consider the subject matter of a requisition, namely, the present crisis in education and the fighting line to be accepted for realization of teachers' demands, specially the demand for Rs.50 as a Govt. D.A.¹⁴

Nov, 14th, 1949, Prof. D.N. Mukharjee, Hony.Secretary, West Bengal College and University Teachers' Association, mentioned that The Executive Committee regrets that there has been an inadequate appreciation of the realities of the situation by the Govt. on the question of enhancement of D.A. for College Teachers'. At the same time the Executive Committee reiterates its previous stand against strike and also decided not to use the students, for a general strike on Nov, 15th and 16th, 1949 that purpose completely dissociating itself from the call for a general strike on the 15th&16th Nov. The Executive Committee requested the members not to be misled by the unauthorized circulars that had been sent out by a section of college teachers' in the name and under the spurious seal of the WBCUTA.¹⁵

IV

Professor's On Token Strike:

Professors' Token Strike started on 15th Nov 1949.To avoid strike colleges and schools were declared closed beforehand on observance of extraordinary holidays. It was first day of the two-day token strike which about 4,000 city teachers' observed to press home their demand for salary increases, among others. Several thousands of teachers were similarly strike-bound in the suburbs and mofussil areas, the high high feature being that college professors, High School Teachers, College students and school students-all have joined hands to make it a success, ignoring the veiled threat of the Government.

Most of the teachers stayed away though in certain instance, an insignificant number had been able to smuggle themselves inside. But in all the schools and colleges, the students, in sympathy with the striking teachers, stayed away from classes. All these factors taken together, all city school and colleges were practically strike bound.

PICKETING: For the first time in the history of the provinces professional profession, college teachers were found lying prostrate blocking the entrance of Asutosh College in South Calcutta, where professors' pickets were strengthened by college students too. One of the picketing professors Dr. Karunamoy Mukharjee, got the sleeves of his 'punjabi' torn. Due to alleged trampling, Prof. Santimoy RoyChoudhury's feet had to be bandaged.

¹³ Nation,, Nov-6, 1949,

¹⁴ Statesman,Nov,8,1949, Anandabazar Patrika, Yugantar

¹⁵ Statesman,Nov,5,1949

With most of the teachers outside and the students unattending classes, college remained open only “officially”. During the evening commerce classes in the same college, the gate was strongly picketed. It drew quite a large number of sightseers also.

Following what is said “mild picketing”, students of Scottish Church college came out of their classes. In Victoria Institution, of which premier Dr. B.C.Roy is the president of Governing Body, only one professor could sneak inside through the back door. All students and the rest of the teachers stayed away. Only a token picketing had to be restored to in front of Surendranath Banerjee College where the teachers and students observed the strike. The University was kept open, but without the Alumni. The strike was successful in the colleges of Basirhat, Amta, Diamond Harbour and Serampur. There are more than 3000 teachers in the city’s High Schools joined their hands with the college teachers’ movement. The teachers’ strike too passed off without any incident but at Binapani Purdah High School where four of the picketers’ were arrested by the police called by the School authority. The arrested persons were Mr. Adhir Kumar Das, Assistant Secretary of the W.B.T.A, and Kalipada Kundu W.B.TA Executive member, and two students. The strike however did not interfere with the scheduled upper primary Examination held in half a dozen schools of the city.

A meeting of striking professors, teachers and students was held in the afternoon at the Maidan Mr. Sailen Banerjee, president of W.B.T.A presided. Speeches were made, and resolutions were passed condemning the educational policy of the Government. The meeting in a resolution, demanded that the minimum pay of a primary teachers should be fixed as follows. For Primary teachers Rs. 70 as minimum pay and Rs. 20 D.A.. For secondary teachers Rs. 100 as minimum pay and Rs.30 D.A. For college teachers Rs.200 as minimum pay and Rs. 50 D.A.

The resolution contented educational grants should have “priority of demand” on the exchequer of a free state, and condemned the recent student of the West Bengal Government denying their “responsibility” in the matter of adequately financing the educational institutions of the province. Dr. Karuna Mukherjee criticized the policy of the Government to increase police expenditure.¹⁶

CONCLUSION:

Direct action threat by pro-communist professors of two-day token strike a new direction professors and teachers went “starved” in the history of teachers movement. Even this simple Movement was not unrestricted, many teachers were victimized, the leaders of the two-days strike had to go underground, and a regular witch hunt for arresting them was carried out in Calcutta for quite some time. The fury of the resistance is undoubtedly connected with the fact that at that time (1948-49) the Communist Party of India was illegal. Yet this desperate step is an Ideological struggle which must be taken to impress upon the Government and educational authorities to fulfill the demand of the teachers.

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Prof. Nimai Chand Dan

Department of History , Prabhu Jagatbandhu College, Howrah,W.B.