

Student Participation in the Calcutta Tram Fare Movement

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Abstract: *The Calcutta Tramways Company was a British-owned concern registered in London. Even, after the transfer of power in 1947, British ownership sustained. After Partition of India in August 1947, the tram company was more held with the idea of raising the fare. But this time people from all corners of life threatened not to pay the enhanced fares and to boycott trams. On June 25, 1953 the company announced its decision to increase second class fares from the July 1, 1953. The decision was supported by the then Government of West Bengal. For this fare raising steps taken by CTC, people from all walks came on the road in protest of such decision of the CTC. The students in general also joined this movement. They not only expressed their compliance with this public sentiment, the entire student community took a leading role to bring forward this public agitation against the CTC as well as the Government. The demonstration against fare rise started in full force from the very first day of the fare hike, i.e. July 1, 1953. Thousands of people, mainly young men, in their respective areas, appealed the people to refuse to pay the increased fare. This movement played a leading role in generating mass movement in Calcutta.*

In the present paper an attempt has been made to highlight the role of the students in the Calcutta Tram Fare Movement in the tumultuous year of 1953. After Partition of India West Bengal has to face a series of problems as a newly born state political instability, economic problem, problems of immigration and migration created an untoward situation throughout West Bengal. After independence, till the 60s, student movement did not come anywhere in India so comprehensively as was apprehended. But in 1953 the embryo of the students' disaffection matured into a decisive shape. The main reasons were the internal political and social ferment and very shocking economic crisis

In the early part of the decade of 1950, the students came forward in support of the Calcutta Tramways workers, when the workers initiated strikes and agitation. But, an important point had been marked that such agitation of Tram workers could not reflect any impression or, created any influence upon any District as it was related only with the people of the then Calcutta jurisdiction; though at that time BPSF made a common target to transform all movements into an agitation against the then Congress Government.

The main reason of Tram Workers' movement was against the enhancement of Tram Fare. The Calcutta Tramways Company was a British-owned concern registered in London. Even after the transfer of power in 1947, British ownership sustained.¹ Immediately after the transfer of power in August 1947, the tram company was once more held with the idea of raising the fare. But this time people from all corners of life threatened not to pay the enhanced fares and to boycott trams.² On June 25, 1953 the company announced its decision to increase second class fares from the July 1, 1953. The Calcutta Tram Company raised its fare 1 paise by which this foreign company could earn a profit of Rs. 30 lacs, in addition to its earning of Rs. 2.5 crore per annum. The decision was supported by the then Government of West Bengal. For this fare raising steps taken by CTC, people from all walks came on the road in protest of such decision of the CTC. The students in general also joined this movement. They not only expressed their compliance with this public sentiment, the entire student community took a leading role to bring forward this public agitation against the CTC as well as the Government.³

On June 27, a joint statement made by the leaders of the opposition parties, including the Communist Party of India (CPI), Praja Socialist Party (PSP), Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP), Socialist Unity Centre of India (SUCI), Forward Bloc (FB), etc, opposed the government move to increase the fare. The same evening witnessed the formation of the *Tram and Bus Fare Enhancement Resistance Committee* comprising leaders of these political parties. Veteran Forward Bloc leader Hemanta Basu was its president, while Jyoti Basu (CPI), Subodh Banerjee (SUCI), Suresh Banerjee (PSP) and Satya Priya Banerjee (Marxist Forward Bloc) were the members. Eventually this committee came to be known popularly as *Resistance Committee or Pratirodh Committee*.⁴

The demonstration against fare rise started in full force from the very first day of the fare hike, i.e. July 1, 1953. Hundreds of Resistance Committee volunteers, mainly young men, in their respective areas, called upon the people to refuse to pay the increased fare. They themselves boarded the trams and offered old fares.⁵

On the evening of July 2, Dr. B. C. Roy, the then Chief Minister of West Bengal, defended the increase of fare in indisputable terms. In a press message, he claimed that the fare structure for second class travellers, after the proposed increase, was perhaps the lowest in the world. In defence of the increase, the press note stated that the expenses of running the tram cars had "mounted tremendously" in the recent past and the government was compelled to support the proposed fare rise according to the provisions of the Calcutta Tramways Act of 1951. In his statement, the Chief Minister gave a clear hint of government "offensive to-combat violence", when he categorically commented that any case of default to pay the fare was punishable under law, and the government could not "sit idle in the face of such lawlessness on the part of the picketers".⁶

On 4th July, 1953, the general strike was observed through the West Bengal in protest of this issue. But, gradually the speed of this movement became sloth when the students started continuous strike in schools and colleges, thousands of students showed their rally and detention programme just before the Head Office of CTC located at Mission Row, Calcutta. Again, one student rally consisting of a large number of students followed the path of Writers' Building, the then Head Quarter of West Bengal and reaching at Writers' Building, they started shouting by delivering slogans--"*Either revised the enhanced Tram fare or, leave the power*". During that student rally before the writers' Building, police started action by tremendous lathi charge and discharging tear shells. As a result, a large number of students were seriously injured and the police arrested numerous numbers of students from that spot. Even the girl- students could not get relief from the police action which proved that the police authority never took care to save the prestige and honour of the holy educational institutions in totality. For an example, the police tortured on Sri Parimal Mukherjee, the then prominent leader of Students' Association affiliated to Praja Socialist Party within the premises of Ashutosh College. Even the Principal of the College could not get relief from the hands of the police. In spite of such police action and tortures, the student community created a remarkable history keeping themselves attached with this public movement against the Tram fare hike decision sponsored by the then Government.⁷

This added fuel to the fire and students throughout the city erected barricades over tram tracks, improvised with dustbins and bullock-carts. As the police set itself to the task of removing the barricades, it faced stiff resistance from the demonstrators, resulting in severe disturbances in Hazra, Kalighat, Chitpore and Bowbazar.⁸

Under the new circumstances, the ruling party also could no longer remain inactive. On July 21, the West Bengal Provincial Congress Committee met at Congress Bhavan and decided to make all-out effort to "resist goondaism being committed in the name of Fare Increase Resistance Committee".⁹ The mass meeting or the successive procession organised by the Congress failed to make any impact.

In different areas, barricades were set up by local youth to block the mobility of the forces of law and order, "spontaneously turning the *paras* into fortresses". Another new technique was adopted by the local youth, in face of severe repression by the military and police forces. They would demolish the bulbs of the street lamps or cut the electric wires and thereby plunge the whole area into darkness, making it difficult for the police and army to move about.¹⁰ The Police and army atrocities throughout Calcutta were condemned everywhere. Manik Bandyopadhyay, the famous Bengali writer, disturbed at the police and army actions in the city on July 15 and 16, wrote his famous *Chhara* which was published in *Swadhinata* on July 17, 1953.¹¹

The whole press, excepting the British-owned *Statesman* and the Congress organ *Janasevak*, harshly criticised the government activities. The *Jugantar* and the *Ananda Bazar Patrika* editorially supported the peoples' reaction against fare rise. But the *Statesman* in its editorial took a different stand. It was professedly sympathetic to those who were "genuinely upset by the increase in second class fare" and, at the same time, was convinced that the "people have a right to expect a fall and not a rise in the cost of living."¹²

Mystified at the increasing intensity of the agitation and tramway men's decision of launching an indefinite strike on the one hand and reeling before the attack of the press on the other, the government sought the advice of the Press Advisory Council for a way out to neutralize the crisis. The Press Advisory Council, consisting of the editors of important newspapers, made three recommendations: (1) referring the question of fare to a tribunal, (2) withdrawal of Section 144 of Indian Penal Code from the city, and (3) release of all prisoners arrested in connection with fare increase resistance movement. Similar advice was given by a committee of prominent citizens, headed by Radha Binode Pal, the noted jurist.¹³

As the situation in Calcutta grew worse Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy, the then Chief Minister of West Bengal, had to cut short his European tour and return home rather hastily. On July 31, Dr. B. C. Roy assured the leaders of the Resistance Committee that all their demands would be accepted. The Committee then decided to withdraw its demonstration. The Joint Strike Committee of the tram workers also called off the strike "in deference to the wishes of the travelling public" of Calcutta on the same day.¹⁴

This Tram fare movement widened the way of joint action of the united student movement.¹⁵ In fact, if we go to the social picture of Calcutta in 1953, it may be found that due to the innumerable number of homeless or refugee people, the streets, the slams were filled in by refugees. At the same time many new colonies were forcibly established, where the large number of refugees including their sons and daughter took shelter. These refugee students have strongly protested and participated against the tram fare hike. They were not in a position to bear 1 paise fare hike. If anyone meticulously study the profile of the students, he or she will find that a lion segment of the students have come from the newly established colonies, slams etc. It means the refugee student participation was very much significant. In order to justify my contention, I can give example for students' agitation of the 1960 onwards. It appears from the profile of leadership of the agitation that most of the student leader either East Bengalis or refugees.

Another peculiar characteristics of the student participation of the tram fare hike was that the students of mofussil area either reluctant or non-interested. The contemporary Newspapers and Periodicals do not provide us any information of the mofussil students on tram fare hike movement. What I write to say, 1953 West Bengal mofussil students was not prepared to expedite their solidarity on the issue of the Calcutta students.

Finally, the foreign owner of CTC was compelled to withdraw the decision of fare hike, side by side, the police authority also was bound to release all the students, labourers and workers who were arrested during this movement. Moreover, section 144 which was promulgated upon the city of Calcutta was also withdrawn to normalize the daily public life allowing all meetings, union activities etc. like earlier.¹⁶

Thus, the Calcutta trams played a leading role in generating a mass movement in Calcutta. In fact, small economic issue of fare rise was made the basis of a large-scale challenge to the forces of law and order. The fight against fare rise was basically a struggle against British capital. But the entire wave of mass resentment finally went also against the Congress regime of West Bengal.¹⁷

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