

Oh Calcutta! The city that defined the right to protest

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By the time we entered college in the late 1960s, Kolkata was literally a boiling cauldron, with elected left governments being overthrown again and again. Naxalism was at its peak. Rage was out in the streets and, by then, the metropolis lost its sobriquet 'The City of Palaces' (as dilapidation had set it) for a new one: 'The City of Processions'. Not a day passed without multiple processions blocking or choking the main thoroughfares or intersections, as the collective slogans of thousands shattered the very universe.

While much of this was ascribed to the increasing predominance of communists, the fact is that the roots of the phenomenon of public outrage is actually much older. Bengal in the 19th-century was not just the capital of British India, it was a province that was battling Hindu orthodoxy to embrace western education and to partake of new, strange and exciting ideas like liberty, equality and fraternity — that were nowhere to be seen. The proliferation of western ideas was soon accompanied by the mushrooming of printing presses in Kolkata that churned countless books in English, Bengali and other languages, and polemical tracts too.

From 1818, progressive leaders like Rammohan Roy challenged status quo through newspapers, and both English and Bengali, fighting colonists and the powerful Hindu orthodoxy. Christian missionaries condemned all of Hinduism for some of its obscurantist customs and the battle was on. This was also the age of the rapid proliferation of text-book societies and libraries, and the public sphere in Bengal thus developed phenomenally. Several debating societies, literary associations, reform organisations and political associations also sprung up. Educated Bengalis increasingly learned to challenge government policies through petitions, public meetings and journalism.

Protest was in the air throughout the 19th century, but the most important early demonstration of this political culture burst out in 1905, with Viceroy Lord Curzon's declaration of the 'Partition of Bengal'. It shook the Bengali speaking people and enraged educated Hindus of Bengal, who considered participating in processions as a righteous duty. Even Rabindranath Tagore was out in the streets, with his stirring songs.

On the 7 of August 1905, the Swadeshi movement was formally launched from the Calcutta Town Hall and the Indian National Congress gave a

clarion call at its Benaras session to boycott British cloth and manufactured goods. Within weeks, Kolkata resounded with boycott, picketing, public meetings and processions. There were large rallies on 16th of October that was observed as a day of mourning. It was soon clear that Kolkata's rallies were not just anti-British demonstrations, but a newly-crafted technique for weaving a social unity that combined so many varied elements — politics, culture, literature, music, education, commerce and street mobilisation. This combination became characteristic of Bengali political life and agitations.

In fact, once we delve deeper into history, we find that the first anti-establishment protest in India was actually organised by none other than Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, in the first decade of the 16th century. Sri Chaitanya led a procession of angry followers before a Muslim Qazi or judge, who represented Bengal's Islamic rule. Chaitanya actually succeeded in making the powerful Qazi relent and he promised not to interfere with the *nagar-sankirtans* of the Vaishnavas.

The extraordinary importance that Bengal attaches to street protests and demonstrations is total and its numbers and scale can hardly be compared to other states except, perhaps, Keralam. Kolkata has one of the lowest percentage of road-area in India and its unplanned growth leads to overcrowding and narrower roads. This presents it with a physical geography unusually suited to protest. An area is marked at city-centre, called the Esplanade, for processions to target and halt for speeches. There are other well-known areas like the Shahid Minar zone of the Kolkata Maidan, and the gigantic Brigade Parade ground, where numerous processions converge during massive rallies.

Numbers matter in Kolkata where political movements demonstrate numbers their strength, quite physically. Even white collar workers, like bank or postal employees, or even teachers, come out quite regularly in processions. For several decades, left unions regularly gave calls to their supporters, at least once a month, to leave their offices and join processions on the streets. The tradition of taking out processions became very serious soon after Independence, as millions of homeless refugees poured into West Bengal from East Pakistan. They were huddled on footpaths and on any open space available, as the government hardly made any arrangements for them — which is quite unlike what their counterparts from divided Punjab received in Delhi and surrounding areas.

This ushered in the era of perpetual processions in Bengal, especially in Kolkata. The more police and the administration tried to handle the chaotic situation as a law and order problem, the more unruly became the situation. Violence broke out at regular intervals and the protesters depended of their numbers to take on state power. This also united participants in a feeling of oneness and camaraderie.

So well organised were the common people of Kolkata that when the tram fare was increased by just one paisa in July 1953, they collectively resisted it.

People felt that the British-owned Kolkata Tramway Company was profiteering and the Left parties launched a major and indefinite agitation in the Kolkata-Howrah, area. It continued for a month and Kolkata rocked with processions. When the police sought to break them up, violence erupted and several tramcars were set on fire. Then tram workers joined the movement also, after which the government agreed to review the fare increase.

The next year, 1954, saw the secondary school teachers of West Bengal organising a landmark 10-day strike and sit-in protest in front of the Raj Bhavan. Again, the state government treated this as a law and order issue and police used force to disperse the numerous processions that came out. When the situation was beyond control, police beat up teachers and then started firing, killing 5 people and injuring many. The severe public backlash and strength of the unified strike ultimately compelled the government to accept the teachers' demands.

Agitations and processions continued throughout the next few years and in 1959, the communists organised violent demonstrations of citizens against rising food prices, which was exacerbated by hoarding and black-marketing of essential commodities. The agitation soon expanded into a mass mobilisation as students from schools and colleges also joined it. On 31 August 1959, a massive demonstration assembled in central Kolkata and attempted to march towards the seat of government. The police response was to fire indiscriminately, and though official and public estimates differed, there is little doubt that anywhere between fifty and a hundred people were shot dead. The movement demonstrated that, even after Independence, democratically elected governments could be challenged through mass mobilisation,

The next Food Movement of 1966 was even more revealing and this time, and Kolkata's protest culture spread to the districts and to villages. This rural-urban connection soon became enormously important in Bengal politics.

1967 saw the left parties romping through state elections, but within a short time, a rebel faction of the Marxists challenged the government after the police opened fire on a farmers' rally in a village in Naxalbari, near Siliguri, on the 25th of May. This triggered an armed revolt. Naxalism, however, believed more in violent annihilation of their class enemies than in taking out processions. But, by then, mainstream politics in Bengal was wedded to processions and public meetings. Even the Congress soon became adept at organising them. Regular fights broke out, however, between rallies organised by the Left parties and the Congress. Violence and fatalities became imbedded into Bengal's politics — with the Naxalites fighting both the Left and the Congress, often with casualties all around.

The Left parties continued their radical fervour, even after they were in power for 34 years from 1977. This is when another political force appeared in the form of Mamata Banerjee, who led a belligerent faction of the opposition Congress.

On the 21st of July, 1993, the police opened fire on her protest march of Youth Congress workers, killing 13 political activists. Soon enough, she quit the main Congress and her Trinamool Congress brought out street processions at the drop of a hat, over the fifteen year period from 1995. The tradition of violence only increased by several notches and reached a peak during this stage — with numerous deaths in political clashes and from police action. This is when the Trinamool Congress resorted to aggressive rallies opposing a proposed car plant of the Tatas at Singur. It started agitations against land acquisition from farmers at Nandigram for an industrial park, as the compensation was at unjust rates. The Tata Nano project at Singur developed into a prolonged movement involving farmers, opposition parties, intellectuals, civil society groups and activists. Mamata Banerjee's 26-day hunger strike in December 2006 obviously grabbed national attention. The Nandigram project was even more consequential and generated intense local resistance. On 14 March 2007, police opened fire and killed 14 people, which became international news. It finally propelled the Trinamool Congress to power just four years later. The Singur–Nandigram movements of 2006–08 are particularly interesting, because they demonstrated that Bengal's protest tradition survived the long Left Front era and could eventually challenge the Left government itself. They also attracted the intellectual, literary and artistic community, even in a non-Left ideological scenario, and this group agitated alongside farmers, workers and students.

But then, protests and processions did not end with the Trinamool Congress coming to power in 2011. In fact, Mamata Banerjee fell into the habit of organising and leading massive processions, even as chief minister on some issue or the other. The Left parties and the Congress went on with their protests against her regime, despite the very little impact these made on the government. But once the BJP came to power at the Centre in 2014, its state unit in Bengal emerged as the most belligerent opposition to the Trinamool regime, with active Central government support. It took out several important political rallies and often clashed violently with the police, but was somehow not taken seriously.

The real problem for the Trinamool government began once the regime's corruption and highhandedness became the vortex of public opposition to it. Issue after issue surfaced, agitating the public at large — but it was the rape-cum-murder of a young lady doctor in the R G Kar Medical College in August 2022 that proved to be the last straw on the camel's back. Spontaneous public protests broke out not only in the state but at a pan-India level too, and processions were taken out condemning the ghastly incident by all sections of society. Apart from political parties, students, youth and workers, Kolkata saw doctors, medical staff, intellectuals, artists, actors, musicians, football fans and even rickshaw pullers and gig workers coming out in processions.

The very short-notice rally called "Reclaim the Night" organised by some women activists on the evening of the 14th of August was a sight to behold. Millions, yes millions, of women — grandmothers, mothers, sisters, granddaughters — were

there, accompanied by almost as many men. This was a volcanic upheaval of a type one has spent an entire lifetime to witness, and be a part of — till glorious dawn broke out on Independence Day. We had seen it all from the volatile 1960s, through the Vietnam protest years to gargantuan rallies on Brigade Parade Ground, where Indira and Mujib raised hands together after the 1971 Liberation War of Bangladesh. But this was, indeed, both chastening and exhilarating, to be part of an ocean of humanity that was just one very bruised soul.

These must have helped topple the government, but the new BJP regime that replaced it caught everyone by surprise, when the chief minister himself led a protest of saffron-party workers and religious elements, including semi-clad Naga sadhus, to demonstrate outside the state's best university. This was really the nadir.

Many say that protest and political violence are both ingrained in the DNA of Bengalis. Both are arguably deeply embedded in the state's historical-political culture, but as we discussed, Bengal developed an unusually early modern public sphere. Her finest writers, Bankim Chandra, Tagore, Nazrul and later generations of writers, poets and intellectuals were frequently engaged with political question. Thus, literature and politics became increasingly interconnected. The anti-colonial movement, which reached new heights in Bengal, called for and obtained public mobilisation from all strata. Soon, boycott, picketing, processions and public meetings were considered respectable political instruments. Student politics became exceptionally important, and the Left mainstreamed and institutionalised protest. Trade unions, peasant organisations, student organisations and party branches made collective mobilisation a routine feature of political life.

But then, Bengalis are not permanently “a people on protest.” The same turbulent society produced remarkable poets, writers, scientists, thinkers, film and media personalities, economists and creative talents too. It also resulted in long periods of political stability and much of Bengali protest is electoral and institutional rather than revolutionary. The fact is Kolkata has historically possessed a particularly low threshold for converting social grievance into organised public expression. Perhaps the most distinctive feature is the combination of intellectual argument and mass-level street politics. In Bengal, the intellectual and creative sections have historically been much closer to mass concerns and detachment is often taken as amiss. Thus, protests and processions are not oddities restricted to some classes, but quite a respectable option for many, if not most, people of West Bengal.