Fare Hike and Urban Protest
Calcutta Crowd in 1953

Siddhartha Guha Roy

Riots and insurrections have been part of Calcutta's history and one of the interesting features of crowd action in the city, before and since independence, is the attack on trams by frenzied mobs. This paper attempts to capture the urban disturbance and mob violence that erupted in Calcutta in 1953 in the wake of a sudden rise in second class tram fares and studies the tramwaymen's attitude towards people's protest as also the reaction of the West Bengal government to the episode.

Calcutta, as a city, has a long history of riots and insurrections* mob frenzy and mass violence. The city population, particularly its poorer section, often resorted to the practice attacking the locus of political power which affected their lives. They frequently indulged in riots or insurrections or otherwise exerted direct pressure on the authorities operating within their range. One of the interesting features of crowd action in Calcutta, during both colonial and post-colonial periods, was the attack on trams by frenzied mobs. One of the earliest instances took place as far back as October 1907. Police repression on a Swadeshi rally triggered off a serious outbreak of mob violence in Calcutta and trams were the "ready victims". According to an estimate, at least twenty-nine trams were damaged in the first two days of violence.

Dennis Gill, a British tramcar specialist, wrote in this connection,

Because they are easily accessible, tramcars have frequently been targeted for attack by unruly elements. In some disturbances heavy damage has been inflicted on them by violent mobs bent on destroying everything in their path. Nowhere has this been more prevalent than in Calcutta.

Eric Hobsbawm had also observed that of all forms of urban transport in Calcutta, the tramways, in particular, were "usually convenient for rioters". He saw two reasons behind this. He described a fare hike in any public transport system as "natural precipitant of trouble" which tended to affect the poorer section of the city. On the other hand, the rioters could help themselves by blocking the streets and disrupting traffic with the burnt or overturned large and track bound vehicles.

Urban disturbance and mob violence erupted in Calcutta in 1953, in the wake of a sudden rise in the second class tram fares. It is instructive to have a look at the tramwaymen's attitude towards people's protest and at the same time the reaction of the West Bengal government to the entire episode. The Calcutta Tramways Company was a British-owned concern registered in London. Even after the transfer of power in 1947, British ownership continued. Before going into the details of the movement against the fare hike in 1953, it is essential to look into the background.

The first instance of fare rise took place in early 1922. The labour unrest in the Calcutta Tramways throughout 1921 had compelled the company to give certain concessions to its employees. But this did not make any dent in its profits, as it took an immediate decision to raise the tram fares. The burden of the additional labour cost fell on commuters, who by and large represented the poorer sections of the city population.

The decision to increase tram fares caused disgruntlement among the people of Calcutta. The Employees' Association, representing white collar employees of several concerns of Calcutta, articulated their protest in Karmi, the mouthpiece of the Bengali middle class. But this protest in the early 20th remained a mere intellectual exercise, in the form of writing articles. Immediately after the transfer of power in August 1947, the tram company was once more seized with the idea of raising the fares. But this time people from all walks of life threatened not to pay the enhanced fares and to boycott trams. The government, in apprehension of people's protest, immediately appointed a commission, under the chairmanship of Justice Das of the Calcutta High Court, to examine the pros and cons of the situation relating to the proposed enhancement of tram fare. In a written statement before the commission, the CTWU criticised the decision of fare rise by the company. In support of its statement, the CTWU categorically mentioned two things: the wartime abolition of cheap midday ticket, all-day ticket, etc, which were not still reintroduced, as well as the subsequent abolition of the surplus profit tax by the government which had already led to an enormous increase in the profits of the company.

Purnendu Sekhar Basu, a councillor of the Calcutta Corporation, therefore asked the commission not to support the company's decision to raise the fares. His statement was furnished with figures indicating the steady increase in the company's profits since May 1947, and the CTWU told the commission that the people of Calcutta were already disgruntled over the proposed fare rise and that such fare rise would hinder the smooth running of trams in the city.

After going through all relevant documents, Justice Das came to the conclusion that the rise in fare at that particular stage was not at all essential, as the company "almost doubled its profit" from the level of 1935, which he took as the base year. In 1949, the Calcutta Tramways Company arbitrarily raised only the first class tram fare. People of Calcutta protested, but not so vehemently.

The much-talked-of resistance and boycott did not actually take place, as only those who travelled by first class were affected.

But the incidents of 1953 did not reflect a similar story. In the middle of June, a news item appearing in the press announced the possibility of raising the second class fare in Calcutta trams. On June 22, the Calcutta district committee of the CPI, opposing the move to increase fares, exposed the "hidden hands of the West Bengal government behind this move" and appealed to the Calcutans to resist this "fresh attack on the interest of the common people".

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 government of West Bengal. A section of the political forces operating in West Bengal suspected that, in view of the opposition of the private bus owners and to placate the people's reaction to the move, the government "deferred for the time being, its plan to increase bus fares".

On June 27, a joint statement by the leaders of the opposition parties, including the CPI, Praja Socialist Party (PSP), Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP), Socialist Unity Centre (SUC), Forward Bloc, 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 (SUC), 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.

Meanwhile the CTWU registered its vociferous protest at the decision of raising second class tram fare. It organised several rallies and processions through the Calcutta streets to mobilise public opinion against the proposed fare rise. It published detailed facts and figures in the daily Swadhinata, then the Bengali organ of the CPI, showing how the fare hike was "abolutely uncalled for" in view of the "swelling profits of the company". The CTWU also expressed utter disbelief in the statement of the company that the increase was essential to meet the additional expenses for replacing and improving the tramcars, as the company still had a huge reserve fund and a massive
balance in its renewal and replacement fund."

On June 29, the Resistance Committee asked people to refuse to pay the enhanced fare. Accordingly posters appeared with such appeals in each and every corner of the city. But all such protests went unheeded, as the British company stuck to its earlier decision. The West Bengal Government also went on Supporting the proposed fare rise.

The agitation against fare rise started in full with the first day of the hike, i.e. July 1. Hundreds of Resistance Committee volunteers, mostly 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. As the conductors were not authorised to accept the old amount, they rode free. With the approach of the office hours, the trams began to be filled up and the shouting slogans turned the "condition inside the cars unbearable". The agitators were numerically reinforced at every stop, as fresh elements got in. The agitation was taken up rather hesitantly in the early morning. But by the afternoon, the people themselves had taken it up and enthusiastic crowds boarded the trams refusing to pay the enhanced fare. On July 2 also the same tense situation prevailed in the city as free rides and slogan-shouting inside the cars continued, causing enormous loss to the Calcutta Tramways Company. The agitators adopted a new form of struggle. They boarded the trams, armed with plenty of coins of various denominations so that the passengers, willing to pay the old fare might be able to tender the exact amount rather than giving any chance to the conductors to return them change after deducting the new fares. On the evening of July 2, the then West Bengal chief minister, B C Roy, defended the increase of fare in unequivocal terms. In a press note, 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".

July 3 turned out to be an eventful day, when the Congress government of West Bengal unleashed a "reign of terror" deploying its entire police force, including the reserves. This, however, could not stop the Resistance 'Committee volunteers from picketing, demonstrating and appealing for not paying the increased fare. Consequently there followed "police action to curb tension". The overall situation became so tense as a result of all this that the city's tram services on all but five of its sections were withdrawn in the afternoon of July 3 and by 6.30 p.m. all cars were back in their respective sheds. Faced with heavy losses for the preceding two days, the tram company decided to "enforce new fares with the help of the police". As the people refused to pay the new fare, they were arrested. This brought the "forces of law and order under direct attack" by the people. This incidentally resulted in turbulent clashes in different areas of the city. Being hindered by the police in their "free way" in the cars, a section of the agitators resorted to more "violent" means of voicing their disapproval of the new fares. Barricades were erected across the tram tracks at Baghbazar-Chit pore Road, Harrison Road, Rashbehari Avenue and the Lower and Circular Roads—but they were all removed by the police. In Ballygunge, Kalighat, Bhowanipur and Syambazar, police tried to keep the crowd in check. Lathi and teargas charges and even scattered firing by the police, in some "sensitive" zones of the city, failed to curb tension. All this resulted only in violent clashes between the agitators and the police. At least six hundred people, including leaders of the CPI and other non-Congress parties, were imprisoned. Among the arrested leaders were Jyoti Basu and Ganesh Ghosh, both of CPI, Subodh Banerjee, of the SUC, and Jyotish Joardar of the Socialist Revolutionary Party. All of them were members of the Bengal legislative assembly. The Resistance Committee, in protest against the arrest and other types of "police atrocities", gave a call for a general strike on July 4.

The hartal (general strike) seriously disrupted life in the city and its surrounding areas. Shops and markets remained closed. Dams and buses were off the road. Train services in South Bengal were badly dislocated and taxis and private-cars were obstructed by the agitators. Police fired several rounds throughout the city "to disperse the defiant crowd".

On July 5, the Resistance Committee organised a meeting at Subodh Mullick Square in which they appealed to the people to boycott the tram cars. On the same evening, B C Roy, on the eve of his departure for Europe, strongly condemned the movement and stated that a government "can never accept the position that rowdy elements should control the city's affairs". The comment of the chief minister invited vociferous protest from different sections of the people of Calcutta. Reacting sharply to it, the Crossroads editorially commented: "Describing the peoples' leaders as rowdies, the present chief minister of West Bengal is walking closely in the footsteps of its British predecessors."

Only July 6, the agitation against the fare rise took a new and more 'serious' turn. It was then that the demonstrators attempted to enforce a boycott of tram travel in place of the non-payment of the fares. Instead of crowding into second class trams and appealing to the people not to pay the enhanced rates, the agitators stayed outside; shouted boycott slogans and appealed to the public not to travel by tram. Another new aspect of the movement was mass participation of the students of Calcutta. A Calcutta daily reported that "in fact, it was they [students], who caused the police the greatest worry". The intervention of the police and arrests of several students gave the demonstration a more violent turn. To make things worse, a police violent entered the Asutosh College building in south Calcutta and resorted to "severe torture". 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.

The call for boycotting the trams by the Resistance Committee met with "surprising response" in Calcutta and Howrah from July 7 and the busy streets of Calcutta witnessed "most empty tram service of recent years". This incidentally resulted in "forces of law and order under direct attack" by the people. This incidentally resulted in turbulent clashes in different areas of the city. Being hindered by the police in their "free way" in the cars, a section of the agitators resorted to more "violent" means of voicing their disapproval of the new fares. Barricades were erected across the tram tracks at Baghbazar-Chitpore Road, Harrison Road, Rashbehari Avenue and the Lower and Circular Roads—but they were all removed by the police. In Ballygunge, Kalighat, Bhowanipur and Syambazar, police tried to keep the crowd in check. Lathi and teargas charges and even scattered firing by the police, in some "sensitive" zones of the city, failed to curb tension. All this resulted only in violent clashes between the agitators and the police. At least six hundred people, including leaders of the CPI and other non-Congress parties, were imprisoned. Among the arrested leaders were Jyoti Basu and Ganesh Ghosh, both of CPI, Subodh Banerjee, of the SUC, and Jyotish Joardar of the Socialist Revolutionary Party. All of them were members of the Bengal legislative assembly. The Resistance Committee, in protest against the arrest and other types of "police atrocities", gave a call for a general strike on July 4.

The hartal (general strike) seriously disrupted life in the city and its surrounding areas. Shops and markets remained closed. Dams and buses were off the road. Train services in South Bengal were badly dislocated and taxis and private-cars were obstructed by the agitators. Police fired several rounds throughout the city "to disperse the defiant crowd".

On July 7, the students and citizens put up a massive demonstration before the head office of the company at Mango Lane. Five Resistance Committee leaders, including Jyoti Basu (who was freed on bail on the 5th), met Blease and asked him "to revert to the old second class tariff". Although Blease gave an assurance that he would forward their demand to the board of directors in London as well as to the West Bengal government, he refused to recommend such a proposal. The Resistance Committee then stuck to the decision of continuing their agitation. The same evening the Calcutta police, anticipating a more violent turn of the movement arrested at least five hundred citizens, including Jyoti Basu, under the Preventive Detention Act.

The police action was strongly condemned and on July 8, six members of parliament, who also happened to be residents of Calcutta, in a telegram urged the prime minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, to intervene in the indiscriminate application of the Preventive Detention Act from the "leaders and participants in the peaceful movement of persuading the people to refrain from travelling in the tram can in protest against arbitrary increase of fares". In course of a statement, they urged the West Bengal government to "cease the policy of repression which it has launched" and requested it to advise the tram company "to...
rescind the increase in fares, which has roused such widespread opposition". Meghnad Sana, the eminent scientist, and Hiren Mukherjee, the famous historian, were among these MPs who had signed the statement.58

Meanwhile another factor played a vital role in precipitating the crisis, viz the police firing in Burnpur, an industrial township in West Bengal. Police let loose terror when if opened fire on the striking workers there on July 5, killing at least seven and injuring many.50 The public wrath was at its height and the entire working class of West Bengal protested "against the anti-people policies of the Congress Raj".41 On the initiative of the BPTUC, several trade union organisations, excluding the Congress-affiliated INTUC, got together with a view to chalking out plans for facing the new 'threats'.

On July 8, a Joint Strike Committee was formed, comprising the representatives of the BPTUC, UTUC and HMS. With them also were several middle class employees' federations, not affiliated to any central organisation. The Joint Strike Committee issued an appeal to the people of West Bengal to observe a general strike on July 15, as a protest against enhancement of second class tram fare, rise in the prices of essential commodities, retribution in different industrial sectors and, particularly, against government "repression in Burnpur and Calcutta".45 At this stage, the West Bengal state committee of the CPI, with a view to "echo the sentiment of masses" and "canalise peoples' discontent in a correct direction", raised the demand that the Congress ministry in West Bengal should resign and seek a fresh mandate of the people.44 The call for a general strike unnerved the government. A high-powered bureaucrat, describing the new programme of people's resistance committee. A high-powered bureaucrat, commented, "amateurs have retired and professionals have taken over".45

Under the new circumstances, the ruling party also could no longer remain passive. 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".46 Atulya Ghosh, president of the Provincial Congress Committee, in a statement assured 'protection' from 'hooliganism' with the aid of the police.47 This was too long a wait for those who would not join the general strike on the 15th.48 The Provincial Congress Committee also held a public meeting on July 14, just on the eve of the proposed general strike. After the meeting a very thinly attended 'anti-hooliganism' procession, organised by the Congress, paraded the streets and shouted slogans denouncing the general strike.49 When the procession came in front of a massive pro-strike demonstration near Esplanade, the handful of Congress volunteers however staged 'a hasty retreat' under police protection.49 In this connection, mention may be made of a story circulating in the city. In the aforesaid Congress rally, a placard reading "Goondaism won't be tolerated" was in the hands of Tinu, a well known anti-social element of north Calcutta.50 The mass meeting or the subsequent procession organised by the Congress failed to make any impact. A popular Bengali daily commented: "the antics of the Congress only helped to strengthen the determination of the people."51

On July 15, West Bengal saw one of its biggest and most successful general strikes in its history. About ten lakh people struck work, affecting practically every industry, including jute mills, collieries, engineering works, bus transport and offices. Shops and markets remained closed even in the Congress strongholds like Burabazar area dominated by Marwari business magnates. Bandh was observed in many of the rural districts as well.52 A series of clashes took place between the people and the police throughout the day. The police repeatedly resorted to lathi charge, teargas and firing in 'many places' as a result of which a worker of a small factory in Jadavpur, named Sannyasi Sardar, died of gunshot.53 But the general strike was marred by one lacuna. The city's tramwaymen "who had so long been regarded as the traditional leaders of any general strike in Calcutta" did not participate in this strike.54 This aspect will be dealt with later.

The situation did not improve even on the 16th, as fierce clashes between the police and the people continued. Peoples protest against the increase of tram fares went to such dizzy heights that the West Bengal government was compelled to clamp Section 144 of the Indian Penal Code, which prohibited assembly of five or more persons anywhere within the town and suburbs of Calcutta.56 On the evening of July 16, troops were called out.

From July 16 to 18, police and military cracked down on different localities of Calcutta. Numerous FIRs were registered. The police and military turned the situation worse. A sixty-year-old school teacher was beaten to death by the police, while the army killed an eighteen year-old student. 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 smash 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.58 Police and army atrocities throughout Calcutta were condemned everywhere. Manik Bandyopadhyay, the famous Bengali writer, disturbed at the army actions in the city on July 15 and 16, wrote his famous Chhara which was published in Jugantar on July 17.59

But the final blow at this stage came from the tramworkers of Calcutta. The tramwaymen, with a view to breaking their isolation from "the main current of democratic movement" decided to join the struggle launched by the Resistance Committee, The CTWU formed a joint strike committee along with another union of the tram-workers, the Calcutta Tram Mazdoor Panchyat. The Joint Strike Committee decided to launch an indefinite strike from July 17 in support of the demands raised by the Resistance committee.60 The decision of the tram workers to withdraw themselves from their duties meant a signal blow to the British company as well as their 'protector', the West Bengal government. The entire press, including the British-owned Statesman and the Congress organ Janasvayak, sharply criticised the government activities. The Jagantar and the Ananda Bazar Pathika editorially supported the peoples' reaction against fare rise.61 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 fair rise to meet the cost of living." Yet it branded the protest against the fare rise as "unscrupulous".62

Puzzled at the increasing intensity of the agitation and tramwaymen'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 defuse 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.63 Similar advice was given by a committee of prominent citizens, headed by Radha Binode Pal, the noted jurist.64

On July 9 the West Bengal government seemed to beat a retreat from its erstwhile rigid stand, when it announced that the tram fare issue would be referred to a tribunal, pending which the old rate would be restored.65 But the government persisted with imposition of Section 144 in the city and, at the same time, refused to release the thousands of detenus arrested in connection with the resistance movement.66 The Resistance Committee, with a view to violating Section 144, decided to organise a mass meeting at Calcutta Maidan on July 22. Defying Section 144, thousands of Calcuttans assembled at the Maidan. Police atrocities broke out to disrupt the meeting, but with no result. Failing in its mission to bring about a disruption in the meeting, the police made the press reporters their special target—you have already taken enough of our photographs—and smashed their cameras. En masse protest of the pressmen only helped to invite police attack on them.67 This assault on the pressmen became an "international scandal blackening the face of West Bengal government".68 The Indian Journalists' Association sent a telegram to the prime minister of India, seeking protection against "the savage assault on the pressmen". The telegram also
stated that the recent attack on the press reporters of Calcutta represented a "reprisal for the exposure of the police excesses". Public indignation was at its height in the wake of this incident and the demand for the resignation of the acting chief minister, Prafulla Chandra Sen, and home minister, Kalipada Mukherjee, was echoed by the people, the press and even by a "section of Congressmen".

The government on July 26 hastily withdrew Section 144 from the city and released five leaders of the Resistance Committee including Jyoti Basu, Hemanta Basu and Ganesh Ghosh. But the rank and file of the agitators who were jailed were not released. On July 29, the prisoners in Presidency Jail, arrested in connection with the agitation, went on a continuous hunger strike, demanding their classification as political prisoners. On July 31 the prisoners of the Dum Dum Central Jail joined them.

As the situation in Calcutta grew worse and efforts of the government to establish an ordered life failed, Bidhan Chandra Roy, the chief minister of West Bengal, had to cut short his European tour and return home rather hastily. On July 31, B C Roy assured the leaders of the Resistance Committee that all their demands would be accepted. The Committee then decided to withdraw its agitation. 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.

On August 2, 1953, Roy agreed to release all prisoners and also to allow bail to those prosecuted for acts of violence. Relating to the tram fare, he gave a written statement that even if the tribunal advised increase, he would consult public opinion before agreeing to it. He also agreed to provide government relief to the injured and to the families of those killed during the clash with police. He also announced a judicial enquiry into the attack on the pressmen. People accepted the announcements with jubilation.

Now let us look into the attitude of the tram workers towards this agitation at its different phases. Despite their glorious tradition of struggle against the management and their long history of responsive reaction towards significant political issues, they for the first time experienced a movement launched primarily against their management, the leadership of which did not rest with them. We have noted in course of our discussion that in 1948 the representatives of the CTWU spoke against the raising of fare before the Das Commission. This time also, in June 1953, the CTWU tried to mobilise public opinion against the proposed rise in the second class fare. Due to their sympathetic attitude towards the Resistance Committee, the Calcutta tram workers fell prey to police attacks from the very beginning of the resistance movement. On the evening of July 1, for example, the police assault on the workers began with the raid on the tram workers' mess in Belgachia and manhandling of a number of them. During the first few days of the movement, the agitators were tremendously aided by the tram workers. During that particular stage of the agitation, when the demonstrators and the people refused to pay the enhanced fare, the tram workers "helped the movement by their sympathy and generally by not pressing for the increased fares and in many other ways". Not a single instance of clash between the demonstrators and the workers had been reported. On the 4th, when the Resistance Committee gave the call for a "bandh", the tramwaymen "refused to bring out the trams, with help of the police".

What was then the factor that temporarily prevented the tram workers from joining the central strike of July 15, the call for which was given by the Central Trade Union and the CPI?

No evidence is at all available for answering this intriguing question. Newspaper sources, CPI pamphlets and official papers, fail to throw any light on the issue. Contemporaneous communist leaders or the leaders of the Calcutta tramwaymen did not open their lips in spelling out the cause of the non-participation in the general strike of July 15. Hence we are forced to have recourse to a plausible assumption. During the first few days of the agitation, the tramwaymen despite their "help" and "sympathy" towards the agitators possibly received some maltreatment from them. It was nothing unusual, as in the preliminary stage of the struggle, the main participants came from the petty bourgeois sections of the people and possibly also anti-social elements. Hence, the men on duty being harassed by some of the demonstrators became temporarily alienated towards the fare increase resistance movement and thus did not respond to the general strike call of July 15. However realising their mistake, they soon joined hands with the people and decided to launch a continuous strike. In fact, this decision brought about a qualitative change in the entire situation. Being alarmed at the new development, the government decided to step down from its, early rigidity and announced that the decision of fare rise would be examined by a tribunal. It appears that only the participation of the most organised section of the working class could decisively influence the peoples' movement at this stage and "save it from being wrecked on the shoals of petty bourgeois revolutionism".

Thus the Calcutta trams played a leading role in generating a mass movement in Calcutta. An apparently 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 essentially a struggle against British capital. But the entire tide of mass indignation finally went also against the Congress regime of West Bengal and as the most trusted ally of British capital. The episode also discredited the Congress as a political party in the eyes of the people throughout India. Even the capitalists did not take the ultimate surrender of the Congress government to the people's pressure with good grace. The Eastern Economist of the Birlas described the entire incident as an "ignominious surrender" by the West Bengal government. It wrote:

It is a signal blow to the Congress Government; and every blow to a Congress Government of this magnitude is a blow to the Congress organisation and to its President.

The crowd action of Calcutta in 1953 stands out as a glorious instance of protest against the whimsical decision of the authorities that meant an economic strain for the poorer section of the city population. The crowd was violent, impulsive, easily swayed by rumour and quick to panic—but it would be a mistake to paint them as fickle and peculiarly irrational elements. The Calcutta crowd of 1953 was in fact George Rude's Crowd in History, which reacted sharply to a specific historical situation. Hence, to dismiss the crowd behaviour of Calcutta as a mysterious, vague and haphazard phenomenon, composed of social misfits, would be overdrawn, tendentious and misleading.

Notes

2 Ibid.
5 Karmi(Bengali version), Magh 1328 (BS), Vol 1, No 6, p 113.
6 Karmi (Bengali version), Chaitra 1328 (BS).. Vol 1, No 8, p 143.
13 Ibid.
14 Ananda Bazar Patrika, June 26, 1953.
15 New Age (monthly), November 1953, p 73.
16 Ananda Bazar Patrika, June 28, 1953.
17 New Age, November 1953, p 73.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
20 The Statesman, July 2, 1953.
21 New Age, November 1953, p 73.
23 The Statesman, July 3, 1953.
24 The Statesman, July 4, 1953.
26 The Statesman, July 4, 1953, also New Age, November 1953, p 74.
27 The Statesman, July 5, 1953.
28 The Statesman, July 6, 1953.
29 New Age, November 1953, p 74.
30 Crossroads, July 12, 1953.
31 The Statesman, July 7, 1953.
32 Ibid.
33 Crossroads, July 12, 1953.
34 The Statesman, July 7, 1953.
35 New Age, November 1953, p 74.
D I S C U S S I O N

D i s t o r t e d  S c a l a r  D y n a m i s m

A m i t a  S h a h

THE set of articles on Kerala's Industrialisation (EPW, September 15) provides a very comprehensive understanding of the paradoxical characteristics of the state's industrial sector. Among the various dimensions, the issue of scalar organisational structure is of special relevance. The scalar structure has a direct bearing on employment generation which is perhaps the most crucial challenge facing the Kerala model of growth. Hence our specific focus is mainly on the article by Alice Albin [1990].

In a detailed analysis of the organisational structure, Alice Albin has clearly demonstrated that the unorganised (household + non-factory small-scale) sector has remained less developed in Kerala as compared to industrially more advanced states. This has been evidenced by the fact that: as compared to other states (a) the relative share of household sector has declined at a faster rate (Table 8); and (b) the growth of unorganised small (i.e., non-household and non-factory) sector is almost the lowest among the major states in India (Table 9). Thus it is indicated that the unorganised sector has remained a relatively less active partner in whatever slow industrialisation Kerala has achieved.

The above phenomenon is quite contrary to the expected pattern (a la Anderson’s framework [1982]) which suggests low or declining share of household-small-scale units only when the economy attains an advanced stage of industrialisation. Moreover, in view of the fact that the unorganised sector still continues to occupy a significant place in some of the more developed states like Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, etc., its stunted growth at the early stage of industrialisation in Kerala needs to be understood more closely. The paradoxical situation according to the author is an outcome of ‘regional’ rather than the ‘structural’ factors.

Which are these regional forces? And how do they constrain the growth of small-unorganised sector? Alice’s analysis has not gone into these questions; hence we propose two exploratory hypotheses. The first hypothesis refers to the general environment of class-consciousness among the workers which may get manifested through different forms in different segments of the unorganised sector. For instance, the most relevant factor for the non-household and non-factory small-scale units could be the entrepreneur’s ‘psycho-cost’ which has evidently proved to be the major constraining factor for the growth of small-scale (factory) sector in the state. The workers in Kerala are generally class-conscious and its effect pervades the entire economy. It is quite likely that the psycho-cost of this class-consciousness is felt more severely by the entrepreneurs in the unorganised sector because of their fragile socio-economic power compared to those in the organised small-scale sector. The rapid decline of household sector could also be partially attributed to the social value system which attaches higher status to wage employment as against self-employment. Given the overall higher awareness among the workers, the wage income, either actual or expected is often higher than that from self-employment. This is quite contrary to the process taking place in industrially more advanced states (e.g., Gujarat), where the self-employment (or ownership of even a tiny business/manufacturing unit) acquires a superior social status over the status of being employed. This phenomenon may persist even if the earnings (actual or expected) in self-employment are somewhat lower than that in wage employment. This type of status respect provides motivations and avenues for self-employment accompanied by prospects of enhanced productivity (or earnings) over time. Absence of a status respect in Kerala probably results in growth of viable self-employment. Thus it is plausible that a higher degree of class-consciousness and workers’ movement manifested through ‘psycho-cost’ on the one hand and ‘cultural value system’ favouring wage employment on the other may have resulted in a prematurely retarded growth of the unorganised sector in the state.

The second hypothesis could be the relative absence of inter-firm linkages between the organised large and the unorganised sector because of the relative inability of the former to control or promote the latter. This could happen partly due to predominance of the suite owned enterprise which might be lacking the required dynamism to provide fillip to the unorganised-small-scale units. The inter-firm linkages often get established through personal-social contacts (Shah, 1982) and a somewhat rigid bureaucratic management might be hampering this process.

While it is difficult to test the validity of the above hypotheses with the existing data, the issue of constrained development of small-unorganised sector in the state can hardly be overlooked. For, apart from often being a low productivity (hence low paying) sector, this sub-system of industrial production has a definite positive role to play in the growth of the entire manufacturing sector. The positive role emanates from the buoyancy in small-sector, which is a special feature of the production of small-unorganised sector. Due to this characteristic the small-unorganised sector can facilitate smoothing out of the market fluctuations arising out of seasonality, small size of demands, changing preferences/specifications, wearing off of old machinery, etc. Thus, in a way, this sector works as a ‘shock absorber’ to a growing industrial system, particularly in those segments where economies of scale are still not important.

Kerala’s process of industrialisation thus obviously lacks the necessary scalar dynamism for ensuring rapid industrialisation. Conceding that there is a strategic resistance to the growth of small-unorganised sector due to its (allegedly) ‘exploitative’ nature and employment-generating effect which is too ‘scattered’ to be (easily) mobilised, there may still be scope for reviewing its role in the industrial system. The relevant issues to be considered would be: (i) Is the small-unorganised sector always more ‘exploitative’ than the other sectors? (ii) Is there any scope for improvement in productivity of this sector by adopting alternative production organisation? (iii) Can ensuring a ‘reasonably good level’ of earning (in the absolute sense and not relative to the earnings of the organised sector) to a large number of workers in small-unorganised sector be viewed as an acceptable goal? If, the answer to last question is in the affirmative, the immediate task would be to examine in detail the constraining factors—may be on lines of our proposed hypotheses—and provide positive encouragement to small-unorganised sector at least in selective industries. It must, however, be understood that the revival and strengthening of the small-unorganised sector has to