

Looking Back: Presidency Consolidation

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SUBHENDU DASGUPTA (*Frontier*, June 3-9,2007) writes about spontaneous forms of communication for discussion and action in the on-going mass movement triggered by Singur and Nandigram.

I am reminded of a spontaneous formation of forty years ago, the *Presidency Consolidation* (PC). The PC developed on the lawn of Presidency College in the wake of the spring thunder of 1967. The Presidency college students' struggle of 1966 against the expulsion of eight undergraduates and the refusal to admit three graduates, including Ashim Chatterjee (Kaka) and the present Minister of Higher Education Sudarsan Roychowdhury into the MA class, because of their Left affiliation, had been supported by the CPI(M), and had developed into a widespread movement which had captured the interest of students and young people all over the state.

When Naxalbari erupted, the band of Left students of Presidency college, trying furiously to arrive at their own understanding of the politics of revolution, were among the first to put up posters supporting the movement on the wall of Hindu School opposite to the gate of the college. Soon, the lawn of Presidency College became a lodestone for students and young people, from all over South Bengal, who were beginning to support the movement in greater and greater numbers. People came from Howrah, Hooghly, Nadia, Midnapore, and, of course, from all over Calcutta and the 24-Parganas. The main activities, at first, were demonstrations against all the issues which agitate the young mind, from any case of police firing to the visit of the US Secretary of State McNamara to Calcutta, and indoor meetings all over South Bengal to equip the local enthusiasts in defending what was then understood as the politics of the Naxalbari movement, namely armed agrarian revolution, the meetings being arranged on the lawn by word of mouth. What was unfolding was a highly politicised mass movement of young people, and the Presidency lawn emerged spontaneously as its office and clearing house.

The protagonists were still politically educating themselves and there was no cut and dried political document to which one had to pay allegiance to be part of the PC. Even the name Presidency Consolidation was given by others much later.

In their own locality, the young activists were influenced by different political trends. There were trends from past political debates within the CPI(M): followers of the Telengana line, with contacts in Andhra, the West Bengal proponents of a Chinese path, with a line to the leaders of Naxalbari, the precursors of the MCC which was finally to become part of the CPI(Maoist), and socialist revolution groups. There was a group debating about the need for a broad grassroots unity against imperialism, and even a group inspired by the late Ananta Singh's interpretation of the legacy of the Chittagong Armoury Raid, many of whose followers were later to be found in the ranks of a political group which merged with the PWG. Finally, everywhere, at that time, there were

politically dissatisfied people within the CPI(M) preaching different brands of left-of-CPI(M) politics to the young people of the locality.

That young people influenced by such a political spectrum could work amicably together while debating strongly about their political differences was precisely because there was no doctrine of the PC and no document embodying a creed. Anybody could sit on the lawn and voice his opinion. The PC was a General Body in permanent session. While the weightage to be attached to a political statement would be judged by the logic and persuasive power of the speaker, the weightage attached to an opinion on a programme would depend on the number of participants the speaker could be expected to mobilise.

The executive arm of the PC was the All-units, a regular meeting of representatives of all the students' units which participated in programmes together. Programmes were set here. It was not a place for debating political differences.

(1) With hindsight one now realises that part the strength of the PC lay in its spontaneous understanding that after drawing a line between 'them' and 'us', 'our' differences did not preclude working, marching and fighting together, and two people or two formations could work, march and fight together once they agreed on this line of demarcation; and also that even among 'them' some might vacillate, and whenever these latter veered over to 'our' side of the line, or stormy events moved the line itself to change the composition on its two sides, some common work was possible even with some of 'them'.

(An example of the last point was the participation of the PC in the resistance against the 1968 ouster of the Left Front government. The CPI(M) was, in general, clearly 'them', but participation in this fight for democracy against the rulers at Delhi, enhanced the credibility of the PC among the rank and file of the CPI(M) and helped the inner party struggle in the CPI(M) at that level)

(2) Another source of strength was the respect the PC accorded to the separate political ideas and organisational existence of the units and formations whose common work constituted the life of the PC, so that no attempt was made to construct a hierarchy of higher and lower committees of the PC itself.

The PC bred political workers from among the student activists, and political work started in certain areas, notably the GKW area of Sibpur and Gopiballavpur in Midnapore. This led to a job division into fronts working among the workers, peasants, and urban students and youth. Definite political direction was now needed. The interlude between the ouster of the Left Front and its return required the setting up, too, of a rudimentary underground. These tasks were being addressed and it would have been interesting to see how the PC related itself to the need for developing a political organisation.

Would its distinctive character have been preserved under white terror conditions? Not impossible, says history. It has seen the successes of the Resistances all over Europe during the Second World War.

Would its non-sectarian character have survived the formation of a political organisation? What would the relation between the two have looked like?

Interesting but academic questions. The fact was that the political workers in the PC joined the newly formed CPI(ML) which had no use for a sprawling mass

organisation like the PC. This party was shortly to oppose all mass organisations and finally all mass movements, and promptly disbanded the PC.

Communists have shown, in India, an inability to tolerate a multiplicity of opinions in mass organisations. Although the Communist International advocated factional work within the mass organisation, Communists here never rested till they captured the leadership of the mass organisation and converted it into an appendage of the party.

Both the AITUC and the Kisan Sabha started off as mass organisations in which there were powerful non-Communist forces. The Communists fuelled split after split till each so-called Left party had its own cooped up organisations of workers, peasants, students, women, youth. In fact, in shocking ignorance of the methods suggested by the Communist International, even each little Naxalite group boasts of its exclusive organisations, in the name of politicisation. People have forgotten why mass organisations are necessary in the first place.

The deep gash made in the psyche of the talking classes of Bengal by the sight of the blatant use of force in pursuing pro big capital policies, for example in Singur, and the consequent carnage in Nandigram, has led to mobilisation under the banners of broad, often temporary, links and co-ordinations. Organised opposition parties are not truly happy at their forced endorsement of this phenomenon, and would dearly like to dominate and capture these platforms, but, as yet, the groundswell is in favour of united action and direct links cutting across party sympathies.

Let us hope that the participants and activists in the new movement for democracy which has begun in the wake of Singur and Nandigram will be able to resist any attempt to force it into the traditional Leftist mould of exclusiveness and will be able to devise broad and straightforward forms of activity and organisation which would not exclude any possible participant or sympathiser. The example of the PC was resurrected to show that the need throws up the form. That is happening again today, and therein lies the significance of Subhendu Dasgupta's intervention. □□□