

‘Occupy Kolkata’ Movement

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THE OCCUPY KOLKATA solidarity Movement was initiated with the creation of the Facebook group, Occupy Kolkata on 16th October, 2011, the primary objectives of which were making the city aware of the mass global movement that has broken out, and showing solidarity to the Global Occupy Together Movement.

The Global Occupy Together Movement can perhaps be described as having a ‘Domino Effect’ resulting in mass unrests that have their original roots in the ‘Arab Spring Revolution’ at the end of 2010. What the world saw was an apparently spontaneous reaction from the citizens of Egypt, Libya and Tunisia in response to decades of oppressive incumbency. The relatively isolated events have some common unifying features. The call to action was not given by any conventional political organization, but by the ‘common people’. This movement, if not revolution, has been unique in the fact that there is no hierarchical structure among the participating activists. Other commons in the modes of protest show mass gatherings in public squares, and an efficient co-ordination via the internet. This was a novelty that caught the imagination of the rest of the world. Wisconsin, USA, saw spontaneous public initiatives demanding the roll back of the ‘Wisconsin Budget Repair Bill’ which sought to curb labour rights. Other movements that have come in focus are the Greek protests in opposition to ‘austerity measures’, Spain’s indignance at their rising unemployment rate (22% as of August 2011) and the London riots. It is in this background that a Canada based activist group called *Adbusters* gave the call to “Occupy Wall Street” in New York, identifying the iconic location as the single largest source of the misery of the common people of America. With no rigid guiding philosophy, but a general ‘anti-Capitalistic’ sentiment, the “Occupy” movement has caught on in other cities, big and small, of USA, including San Francisco, Oakland and Denver, as well as in many European nations and Australia.

Occupy Kolkata seeks inspiration from the ongoing movements, where the common people are no longer content with just voting a party to power as their only say in governance. Something has changed in the way people perceived politics and socio-economic order for the last few decades, with people now preferring to take things up in their own hands. Then, the question comes to mind, if the people of the western world, with their relatively high standard of living can take to the streets, why are the Indians lagging behind? In Chile, the whole student fraternity has exploded in vehement protest demanding the right to government-aided education. Chile’s education budget accounts for 4.4% of the national GDP, while in India it is a meagre 4.1%. One does not have to be too observant to notice that the Indian student fraternity has taken no such initiatives. Occupy Kolkata, apart from conveying solidarity to the Global Occupiers, also seeks to highlight issues relevant in the socio-economic context, and to

urge people to 'do something about it'. To get things started, a call was given over the internet for a rally and a march from College Square to Esplanade on 22nd October, 2011. After a brief period of campaigning, involving sporadic postering and leafleting in sections of the city, the Kolkata Occupiers gathered in College Square. The protestors included students, political activists and individual citizens interested in the cause. The rally at College Square led to the march to the Esplanade where the marchers gathered in front of the Esplanade Metro station. The march differed from other processions that snake through Kolkata's streets almost everyday. Though it appeared to lack organized efficiency, there was a spontaneous spirit of protest in the procession made people take notice. The colourful posters made people stop and take a second glance, as did the wave of songs which replaced the usual slogan-shouting. By common consent, the Occupiers decided that if they were to attract the attention of the people, a change in body-language was needed, for the man in the street is quite exasperated with the frequent 'bandhs' and 'michhils' which never seem to get anything done. Also, taking a lesson from the global movement, activists presented the police controlling the traffic on the route of the rally with flowers to show their non-violent spirit. The little play at the end of the march was a great success.

Through mutual agreement, the protestors agreed to meet again on October 29th for the first General Assembly of Occupy Kolkata. Accordingly, they gathered in the Calcutta University Institute Annex Hall on the appointed date to answer the single largest question lingering in everyone's mind: "What next?" As evident from the people assembled, the movement fell quite short in numbers to really represent 'the 99%' to which they feel they belong to. Because of its modest proportions, the movement could die out if there was a lack of proper focus, particularly as it does not have a distinct long term goal or objective. As was indentified in the assembly, one of the main reasons why the same slogans which attracted huge crowds in the West does not appeal to the majority of Kolkata's citizens is the fact that the perverse nature of Capitalism, which is rather obvious in America and Europe, is not openly evident in India. A revised outlook seemed needed. It was decided that Occupy Kolkata needs to broaden its focus and address all that plagues society in Bengal, as well as in India overall. Gradually formulated key slogans demanded the safeguard of natural resources like water, forest and land from capitalist aggression. All assembled felt that the price of daily commodities and of fuels was a grave issue that needed to be addressed. It was noted that the number of people assembled there did not in themselves have the capacity to outline a complete alternative to what they regard as a decrepit and obsolete socio-economic order. For this reason, it was decided that the main focus of Occupy Kolkata, until the next General Assembly, will be on propaganda and raising awareness. The silence of the conventional media concerning the Global Occupy Movement meant that the onus fell on the Occupiers themselves to spread their message. Students present volunteered to spread the word in their respective campuses. The few workers who had participated in the session promised to return to their own circles with the message of Occupy Kolkata. The need was felt to reinforce in the people the awareness of their basic rights. That it is lacking is evident from the lack of protest against how the limit in text messages enforced by TRAI, the recent ordinance in Bengal regarding University

governing bodies and the elaborate and expensive Public Database program which would infringe on right to privacy. The assembly sought to resolve this very issue, to imbibe in the people the rebellious spirit that has gripped the rest of the world. Other than that, all present saw the need for another central public gathering, which had since then been scheduled on 19th November. The success achieved by the unorthodox approach of the rally and march on 22 October was discussed. Occupiers are trying to arrange a screening of video recordings of different ongoing movements abroad and have extended an open invitation to all performing artists interested in helping spread the message of 19 November.

While deciding the main course of action was relatively easy, much harder was resolving the questions regarding ideology and philosophy. Occupy Kolkata has decided to adopt the principles of horizontal leadership and non-partisan outlook at par with the global consensus. Other than that, the questions regarding the movement are yet to be completely answered. The search is on for what the common man may perceive as 'a better alternative to the current system'. Though there is no official charter of demands, a gradually developing 'document' on the page of the Occupy Kolkata Facebook group already lists 'privatisation of education', 'inhuman working conditions in the IT-Corporate sector', 'commodification of basic needs (education, health etc.)', 'corporate plunder in agricultural sector' as but a few of their sources of discontent. Other than that, Occupy Kolkata currently refuses to tag itself with any Left, Right or Centrist faction, maintaining that it will only stand for the common man. It insists on the common platform structure as in the General Assembly where all present has equal weight in the decision-making procedure. It reasons that in this way, without any predefined constitution or manifesto, it will be easier for everyone with the best interests of the movement in their hearts, to unite and struggle.

All in all, the hopes are high in this fledgling movement which is yet to complete a month of its journey. While the Facebook group already boasts a 3000+ membership, efforts are underway to spread the movement to the vast major section of the people which cannot even read or write, let alone avail itself of the internet. It is only through this process that the group can truly call itself 'the 99%'. □□□