

Occupy College Street: Student Radicalism in Kolkata in the Sixties

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Occupy College Street, 1966–69

India saw a wave of protests and student radicalism in 1968, some of the tactics and issues of which were reminiscent of those in Europe and North America. The anti-imperialist theme was similarly vocal, if not more so, and the movements posed serious challenges to the old established Left, sharing traits of a global New Left agenda. The upsurge of post-independence radicalism, however, drew on different historical legacies, exhibited many specific features, all of which culminated in the student movement of 1968–69.

In order to demonstrate the complex history and legacy of 60s radicalism in India, this note takes us back to the sixties in Kolkata when the insurgent movement in West Bengal had taken to occupation and had developed the tactic, which helped the movement to crystallize and caused ironically the undoing of the mobilization in the end.¹ Occupy as a tactic thus has a history, and the radicals of today perhaps in their enthusiasm for the New Left ethos have ignored the history of the insurgent tactics of the past—especially tactics developed in the postcolonial context.

The tradition of *gherao* began in a strong way in West Bengal in the 1960s. The Hindi or Bengali word means encirclement, and denotes a tactic of labor activists in India.² It is like picketing. Usually, workers would keep a management boss, or a factory owner, or a management or government building under *gherao* until their demands were met, or answers given. This tactic was advocated as a means of workers' protest by Subodh Banerjee, the Public Works Department (PWD) and Labor Minister, respectively, in the 1967 and 1969 United Front Governments of West Bengal. *Gheraos* became the occasions when rebellious workers showed that they disagreed with the managers and bosses by standing or sitting around persons in authority and not letting them leave until they agreed to do what the protesting workers wanted. *Gherao* became the site of assembly of a mass of workers picketing, sitting, slogan shouting, throwing questions at bosses, and waiting with courage or in trepidation, apprehension, or resignation for the police and the goons to appear any time, pounce upon them, and free the bosses. The tactic of *gherao* was also deployed in jails at that time, when jailed activists (for instance in Medinipur Central Jail in 1970) demanding improvement of living conditions

1. The Naxalite movement was perhaps the most significant social movement since Independence. The popular revolt erupted in 1967 and continued until 1972. Influenced by Maoism, the Naxalites were equally critical of US imperialism, Soviet-style communism, the local system of landownership, and the established Indian Left.

2. On the origin of *gherao* movement in India, see Sugata Dasgupta, Ronen K. Bhat-tacharjee, and Surendra Vikram Singh, *The Great Gherao of 1969: A Case Study of Campus Violence and Protest Methods* (New Delhi, 1974), 3n1; Dasgupta and others also bring to light the contribution of Ram Manohar Lohia in inventing the form, “*ghera dalo*” in the wake of the anti-famine agitation in Palamau, Bihar, in 1958, 4n2.

and better treatment of prisoners by jail officers and warders stood their ground outside their wards and cells and refused lock up. The prisoners were mercilessly beaten, kicked, dragged inside, torched, maimed for life, and a few eventually killed.³

While *gherao* made the city of Kolkata infamous and became irretrievably associated with the labor movement in West Bengal in the 1960s and 70s, and made the radical a figure of terror, the most noticeable use of this tactic was by the rebellious students and youth of that time. *Gheraos* of principals of colleges became familiar incidents. A famous case was the event of the *gherao* of the Principal during the anti-expulsion movement in Presidency College, supported by the broad student community, in 1966–67. It was preceded by the *gherao* of Eden Hindu Hostel in 1966, when the boarders of the hostel went on hunger strike with their demands for improving the living conditions at the hostel. They picketed at the gate of the hostel for three days and nights, confining the hostel superintendent to his residence in the hostel building, eventually forcing him to resign. The *gherao* of the historic hostel established in 1886 shocked the educated middle classes of the city. Subsequently, the Principal of Presidency College was *gheraoed* by the students with a charter of demands.

The movement against the expulsion of radical students in September 1966 led the students to encamp in the college, which was closed *sine die* and eventually opened only after six months, during which the expelled students were accommodated in other colleges. The long closure of the college helped the students to stay put at the gates, inside, and in the locality. Gradually, this became a fine technique, which would mean rebellious students camping in the college at night, and the college running as usual during the day. The college lawn became the meeting ground for political discussions, strategy meetings, and consultations. It was a rendezvous site, also a control room, where news of any attack on radical students or youth in any part of city would reach fast, support for comrades under attack would be mobilized, and help would be sent at Godspeed. In time, crude bombs (called *peto*) and other handy tools for self-defense would be stored in both the college and the hostel. After dusk fell, the college lawn, the portico, and the corridors reverberated with animated discussions and exchanges of views, only to become silent as night progressed and weary, tired activists fell asleep. By morning the cadres would leave the precinct, the college would be returned to its due owners—students, teachers, administrative staff, and police spies. As evening approached, the students and youth activists had to be alert about informers and spies, that ever present possibility of police contingents suddenly landing in the college to pick up the wanted (and other) activists. At night, whispering voices of volunteers on duty were to awaken the occupiers to the marching sound of police boots ready to swoop down on unarmed youth and student activists.

Who camped in the college? During the day the union room, the canteen, and the corridors were frequented by the rebellious students of the college with some outside delegates joining them. As the day ended, however, the

3. For details of these prison revolts and killings of prisoners, see *Ebong Jalarka*, special issue on *Jail Bidroha* 14, no. 3–4 (October 2011–March 2012).

number of outsiders, comrades of other student and youth units would join. The college would become what is called today the “commons” of radical forces. Representatives of other units and unions, and curious participants joined the virtual camp. The college in this way would be occupied.

First, in order to secure the college the vicinity had to be secured. Thus, students had to go out to the neighborhoods, visit slums, shops, dens, and pits to befriend the populace and neutralize the potential attackers. The vanity of birth and education had to be left back. If students had to be welcomed in the neighborhoods, the rough and plebeian denizens of the lower depths had to also be welcomed in the college. Friendship led to comradeship; comradeship broke boundaries at college and outside of it. The college became the commons.

Second, for the college to become an occupation camp of the students and other radical activists, links had to be forged with radical fraternities of other colleges, and equally importantly, with other localities. Students had to be companions of the youth. In this way an “All Units” (units of students and youth organizations, and trade union solidarity platforms) organization was formed. The college precinct became the headquarters.

Third, no potential enemy was to be allowed in the area or immediately beyond. Intense education, conscientiousness, deliberation, visits, and unionization—all these became the mode of neutralizing threats of terror. Moreover, failing all these, occasionally strong-arm tactics were needed. In brief, in order to occupy the college, the neighborhood had to be secured.

Fourth, the occupy site had to become the general site of revolution. Thus, besides students, youth activists and leaders, union militants and organizers, and political educators from the party who would take political classes in the evening, all considered the college space as their own. In those days with few landline phones available, no computers, mobile telephones, or social media, delegates from units afar, for instance from North Bengal University, could come to College Street without prior intimation to seek advice or extend an invitation to a meeting or conference, because they were sure to find someone in responsible position present at the college. That someone was not always a student leader of the Presidency College, though.

Fifth, the flexibility of the assembly was one root cause of the metamorphosis of the college precinct into an occupy zone. Flexibility helped crossing boundaries of education, the institution, birth, locality, surveillance, and a pre-determined schedule. Nobody declared that the Presidency College lawn was to be the headquarters; no one inaugurated it; no celebrity came to visit the rebellious students and youth activists. It was an open university, a never ending workshop of ideas. Yet this was different from today’s occupy stories, because there were lines of command. Activists were not present there day and night. They went out on organizational tasks, came back, convened consultations, and made decisions. This required discipline, but it was not excessive. The All Units had regular meetings, though there was no chairman, vice chairmen, or general secretaries. The meetings were conducted strictly democratically. The units had equal status, and consensus on modes, methods, and programs developed without much deliberate effort. It was more of a coordination of units, although ironically, the name by which it became

finally known was Presidency Consolidation. The occupation was reinforced continuously through new ideas and new personnel generated by activities outside College Street, the college, and the city—in the factories of Howrah or the villages of Medinipur.

The nearly six-month long Presidency College movement became the center of the rebellious students and youth of Bengal. The leaders of the movement became well-known in radical circles and organizations. The sudden fame of College Street, however, was built on its historical reputation. The University was the center of radical movements in the fifties and sixties, such as student mobilizations in the anti-tram fare rise movements in 1953 and 1965, food movements in 1959 and 1966, student movements against the educational policies of the government, including a rise in educational expenses including tuition fees. The links with non-student actors were not new either: from the late 50s, student activists had been going to villages to stay with the peasants and mix with peasant activists. College Street occupation carried that legacy and bore the spirit of a militant communist style of work.⁴

The balance, however, was too delicate to last. As what became known as white terror mounted from 1969–70 and an atmosphere of fear enveloped the city, the efficacy of occupation as a tactic of struggle declined. Arrests, killings, and torture decimated the insurgent ranks. The lane next to the college, Bhabani Dutta Lane, now stands as mute witness to the killings by the police of seven neighborhood youth activists who had a regular presence in the college in the evenings. The police shot them dead at night, and now only the memorial plaque at the mouth of the Lane on College Street speaks of that time. The camp evaporated as years passed and activists became escapees. When the violence subsided and “normalcy” returned, the activists sought to recreate the tactic more than a decade later, but the milieu of mass upsurge was over. The college once again had shrunk within its structural boundary.

Occupy Today and Elsewhere

The tactic came back from the depths of popular memory in the early years of this century when on different occasions protesting people occupied various sites, such as agitating workers occupying the automobile factories in Gurgaon near Delhi and farmers and political activists occupying the road leading to Singur for days. Before that, in the 1980s, Indian farmers had occupied district headquarters in Satara in Maharashtra and Merut in Uttar Pradesh.⁵ We must not forget, however, the workers occupying Kanoria Jute Mill in Kolkata at the beginning of 1990s. Kanoria Jute Mill was the laboratory of the autonomous workers’ movement, which ran the mill later under the collective

4. On this history, see for instance, Shyamal Chakrabarty, *Shat Shottorer Chatra Andolan* (Kolkata, 2011). Chakrabarty’s account, though one-sided and extremely critical of the radical students and youth movement, sheds light on the various aspects of the student movement in the 50s until the mid-60s, and the presence and spread of the movement in the districts. See in particular his analysis of the Presidency College movement, 285–308.

5. On the farmers’ occupation, see D.N. Dhanagre, *Populism and Power: Farmers’ Movement in Western India, 1984–2014* (Milton Park, 2016).

leadership of trade union leaders like Prafulla Chakrabarty, Purnendu Bose, Kushal Debnath, Dola Sen, and others who shot to prominence because of the Occupy movement.⁶

Over much of the world, echoes of the occupation of factories and universities, such as in Paris in May 1968, reverberated in the 60s. A little earlier, the occupation of campuses in the United States in 1965–66 in protest against the Vietnam War also took place. Indeed, Occupation Wall Street was preceded and followed by occupations across the Middle East in Tunis, Cairo, and Istanbul. In some cases, occupation was a tactic. In others, as in New York, occupation became a goal in and of itself, hence a strategy.

College Street and the Presidency College precinct had no park to defend, such as Gezi Park in Istanbul. It was not even a square. Possibly, this was the reason, the flexibility if you like, that helped the mutineers to retain possession of College Street for nearly two years. Presidency College functioned during the day, as did the University; College Square brimmed with children playing in the swimming pools; radical literary functions took place, including progressive publications that rolled out from College Street; Minerva Theatre, known to be defended by youth volunteers from attacks by the toughs of the party of order still staged revolutionary plays; and couriers and emissaries from fraternal organizations kept on coming in and going, talking of revolution. It was an occupation of a different type. Perhaps purists will not call it an occupation. Perhaps College Street functioned as a base. In a sense this was natural, given the place's history of association with rebellious memories of the past, particularly memories of suburban and *mufossil* students, youths, and teachers coming to College Street and being sucked into its mutinies. In other words, space had not been idealized yet. It was still a part of the general struggle. There is no doubt that the epic demonstration in the city in November 1968 against the visit of Robert McNamara, then World Bank President and earlier US Secretary of Defense, for which he was known as the "butcher of Vietnam," was possible because of the flexible marshalling of the organizers of the All Units quartered in College Street. McNamara's cavalcade could not pass through the rebellious city to the Governor's House for his planned stay and meetings, and he had to be flown there in a helicopter directly from the airport.

Beside the fact that in Kolkata the occupation of College Street originated from the radical students with traditional communist backgrounds, while in the west the occupy movement, such as Occupy Wall Street, owed its assembly to a variety of political persuasions (new left, anarchist, do-gooders, liberal left, environmentalists, feminists, and others) that at times held pronounced criticisms of communist politics. There is one more difference between the form of occupation at Presidency College precinct and the College Street as a whole in the 60s and the occupations that happened decades later in the west. In the latter case, the occupiers focused on the physical occupation of a place, enlarging the assembly there, improving the dynamics of occupation in that

6. Prafulla Chakraborty, *Kanoria Jute Mill-e Noer Dashake Shramik Andoloner Udbhab O Kromobikash*, Fourth Jayanta Dasgupta Memorial Lecture (in Bengali, Kolkata, 2015).

defined space, and proposing that space as a counter-space to the power of Wall Street (or Westminster in London, or other seats of authority).

Fifty years ago, the Presidency College precinct occupation leading to the College Street occupation was different. It was not a busy multi-road traffic junction, indeed the street was not wide at all as it is still not today, and not all kinds of publics would naturally converge there. Institutions such as the University of Calcutta, the Presidency College, the two prominent schools, the Hindu and the Hare, the Calcutta Medical College, the Institute of Welfare and Business Management, the City College of Commerce, and the Goenka College, as well as the surrounding arc of plebeian educational institutions such as the Bangabasi College, Surendranath College, Vidyasagar College, City College (main campus), Maulana Azad College, and finally with the hundreds of office goers landing in the city at the Sealdah Station all made College Street an initially unnatural but understandable place of mobilization and occupation. College Street up to Boubazar Street was for at least two decades before the 60s a place of student and youth mobilization. The rebellious student and youth activists seized this legacy, and built their strategy of occupation on this history.

In that animated space called College Street, there was also a considerable intermingling of students belonging to different persuasions. Three researchers in a meticulous study of student unrest that took place at the University of Calcutta in March 1969 analyzed the responses to four student formations and found considerable overlap of opinions among the formations' student leaders. In Saguta Dasgupta's account, the flexibility of the student activists in pressing their demands (the withdrawal of certain unfair administrative measures) is clear.⁷ The intermingling of students of various persuasions was also evident in the student demonstrations against the visit of Robert McNamara in 1968.

There was one more crucial difference with today's Occupy Movement. In Occupy Wall Street, the strategy was to converge and assemble, while in case of Presidency College there was no such strategy. Rather, it was to use the place as the rebellion's headquarters, and hence to foster contact and dialogue, a place to decide issues of the deployment of cadres to go elsewhere to spread the message of unrest.⁸ It was thus the live center of a growing network of points of upsurge.

The inside and the outside of the occupation—at least College Street and Presidency College precinct occupation—were not clearly marked as two separate territories, temporalities, or figurations. The slums and the

7. *The Great Gherao of 1969*, particularly chapter 4, 85–126.

8. Some of accounts on that time tell us of the spirit of dialogues among the radical activists. Besides the three volumes of *Sattar Dashak*, edited by Anil Acharya (reprint, Kolkata, 2012), (in particular, in Volume III, Dipananjan Ray Chaudhury, "Chatro-Andolon O Presidency College," 131–58, and Kaushik Bandopadhyay, "Shat Dashaker Chatro Andolon Proshonge," 201–28), see also Alope Mukherjee, "Shat Sattar Dashaker Sandhikkhane B.E. Colleger Chatra Andolan: Kichu Katha," *Ebong Jalarka* 17, no. 1–2 (April 2014–September 2014): 194–214; Kaushik Banerjee, "Katachenrai Barbar: Naxalbari, Charu Mazumder," Parts I and II, *Ebong Jalarka* 16, no. 3–4 (October 2013–March 2014): 219–44; and *Ebong Jalarka* 17, no. 1–2 (April 2014–September 2014): 250–84.

lower-middle-class inhabited lanes of the area had traditionally produced toughs that for decades were utilized as foot soldiers of reactionary forces in communal riots and to beat down radical demonstrations. Not only they were neutralized now, but large sections of the youth came forward to help the insurgents and several of them courted death in the ensuing battles with the armed police.

The history of occupation is varied, as are the outcomes. It is important to see the movements in the specific context in which they occurred, the nature of popular mobilization, and its overall relation to the broad revolutionary movement. It is a tactic (at least this was the case in Kolkata) developed in the 60s, just as popular movement in the 40s and 50s developed other tactics of struggle, such as stone throwing, burning buses and trams, mass mobilizations aimed at petitioning the Legislative Assembly, and occupying neighborhoods of the roads where skirmishes with the police took place.

Boundaries of Occupation

I have already alluded to the fact that the boundary-redrawing capacity of the occupation was crucial in the new grammar of mobilization. There was recognition of the need to consider the space as an active process rather than as a fixed container or marker. The boundaries of the occupy zone were in constant flux; they were social processes taking place in a particular spatial context. Occupation College Street became a strategy of flexible territoriality, where nothing was pre-given about what was to come. The boundaries of College Street were thus constantly contested and often led to unknown outcomes. Encounters within that space were thus transformative. The Presidency College campus occupation led to the production of College Street—represented to and by the State as anarchic, violent, extremist, and the dry gun powder that might explode at any moment and anywhere. Yet, the state could not appropriate it, because the way the space was being reproduced was beyond appropriation. As Henri Lefebvre would have said, space attained its full meaning only when contrasted with “the opposite and inseparable concept of *appropriation*.”⁹ In this way, power on College Street flowed from a kind of dialectical spatiality that made “possible tomorrow what was impossible today.”¹⁰ The equality, friendship, and comradeship under conditions of occupation generated a dialectical situation, which meant a refusal to accept the given ways of politics, even given notions of non-conformist politics and party building, and a resolve to master the conditions of existence. New politics came out of new territoriality born out of the need to occupy spaces outside the form of the State. These were “territories in resistance.”¹¹ The narrow lanes and streets, educational institutions, centers of cultural repertoires, publishing houses, slums, bookshops, lower class and lower middle

9. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford, 1991), 165.

10. Henri Lefebvre, *The Survival of Capitalism: Reproduction of the Relations of Production* (New York, 1976), 36.

11. Raul Zibechi, *Territories in Resistance: A Cartography of Latin American Social Movements* (Oakland, 2012).

class houses—were all laden with the memories of street rebellions over the years and decades. Resistance created the territory.

The occupation also invited full-scale violence by the state. The trend of the activists to huddle back in the sanctuary of occupation proved in the long run a wrong tactic. The fault lines grew wider. While occupation undid many old boundaries, it drew new ones. The police killed several of the denizens of the occupation site, others spent years behind bars, and the authorities in the following decades changed the face of College Street indelibly. Camping on College Street unwittingly helped the secret police to identify the key persons, and when white terror came down upon the camp, the college and all those who would assemble there in solidarity were trampled under the boots of paramilitary forces that meticulously prepared for counter-insurgency tasks. Other colleges also paid a heavy price. To date, there is no scholarly analysis of the occupation of College Street, the clashes and skirmishes, mobilizations and street battles, the defeats, deaths, and the legacy. College Street along with the Presidency College of the 60s has become a myth.

Yet, the purpose of this essay has not been to set up two contrasting, ideal categories of political and social occupation as two parallel models of political and social mobilization—one that happened in the 60s and one that has happened in the beginning of this decade. In real life, the political and the social have meshed with each other on various occasions and in varying degrees.¹² The experience of College Street, including the experiences of different kinds of friendships along with practices of an alternative kind of public ethics suggest a history not to be found in a standard political text book. It will be a history of techniques of mobilization, action, deliberation, and the birth of a collective that perhaps perished with the death of the insurgency or perhaps lived on in the lives of some organizations, forums, and platforms, which were all rooted in the contentious politics of the time. They affected postcolonial polity, reinforced the notion of popular politics, brought forth the idea of radical democracy, and forced the authorities' acknowledgement of the right to rebel as the only real historical right in democracy for a long time to come. Seen in this light, occupation suggests an alternative history that will force us to retrieve the silenced moments that lay behind the roar of power. Today, as popular politics spreads across the country, this work of broadening the narrative of democracy and breaking down the intellectual orthodoxy of the story of democracy has never been so urgent.

12. Fifty years later, in 2017, when the government of West Bengal proposed banning protests and processions on College Street on the ground that these hampered the day to day academic functioning of the colleges and the university there, many of the participants of the unrest in 1967 recalled the days of that tumultuous time. One erstwhile student leader said explicitly that those were the days of "Occupy." From burning trams in protest of rising tram fare to resisting police onslaughts against a students' strike, to erecting a barricade with hundreds of blackboards pulled down from the university, to jamming College Street with the demand to release political prisoners, to preventing Robert McNamara from arriving in the Governor's House by road—these were, they said, acts of occupation. See the report, "Boma-Barud-Pratibader Itihas College Streeter," *Ei Shomoy*, June 5, 2017, 3.