

# The History of the SFI and the Students' Movement in India

The student community of India is the torch-bearer of a long heritage of struggle - struggle within the campus for our academic demands, struggle on the streets hand in hand with the common people of our country for freedom against the exploitative British rule, and later a struggle for equality, democracy and progress in Independent India. We have learnt the hard way that whenever students put aside the baton of student politics handed down to them by their seniors, their access to quality education and their democratic rights are curtailed. The huge organization of students that exists today in the form of the Students Federation of India (SFI) is the fruit of over a hundred years of dedication, sacrifice, and experience of thousands of students all over the country. As students we need to know this history, we need to know the role that our community has played in the building of this nation and its education system, we need to know how every single right we enjoy has been hard won by struggle, to realize that the forces that are trying to disband us and discourage us from joining the students' movement have long been at work in this country and how they stand to gain if we weaken our positions. As lack of adequate Government investment and privatization continues to reduce access and increase inequalities in the education system, the need for resistance from the student community heightens. In this critical hour we feel it necessary to take a glance back at the past and understand more fully the historical role assigned to us. In the short history that follows we have tried to cover some major points only.

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### Prehistory: Before Organized Students' Movement

Though the birth of the AISF (All India Students' Federation) in 1936 is said to mark the beginning of organized students' movements in India, for a long time before this students had been trying to organize themselves and had also been taking part in the struggles of the common people of India.

#### The 19th Century

To trace the origins of social consciousness among students we must go back to the age of the Renaissance - to Bengal in the first half of the 19th Century. Exposure to modern literature and sciences at the newly established colleges of British India paved the way to rational and progressive thought among the educated youth. In 1828 the first students' group of India, the Academic Association, was founded in the Hindu College under the leadership of a young teacher Derozio. It brought out its own organ, the "Parthenon", campaigning for the education of girls, and against superstition. The Association met stiff resistance from the conservative society of the time and the Parthenon never made it passed its first issue. The British rulers were also afraid that free thinking and ideals of freedom and liberty would nurture rebellion among their Indian subjects, and a British newspaper of 1830 refers to Hindu College as a breeding ground of sedition. Throughout the 19th century students formed a major force in the different nationalist societies that were being formed - including the Deshhitaishee Sabha of 1841, the Bengal British India Society of 1843, the Bharat Sabha, and the Samadarshi Group of the Brahma Samaj. In 1875 Anandamohan Basu and Surendranath Bandopadhyay formed a student organization called the "Students Association", to propagate ideals of nationalism and independence from foreign rule among students. The imprisonment of Surendranath sparked a wave of protest throughout the province of Bengal leading to the first students' strike in the history of the Indian Students' movement. In that age the French revolution and the Italian and Irish struggles for independence became a source of inspiration to the nationalist movement in India. The emergence of the new working class and a class of indigenous businessmen, both of whom had independent clashes of interest with the foreign rulers also fuelled the nationalist and anti-imperialist sentiments.

#### The first few decades of the 20th century

**The Swadeshi movement:** The move to divide the province of Bengal into two in 1905 ignited a massive uprising, famous in history as the "Swadeshi" movement. The student community threw itself headfirst into the rebellion. A suppressive circular was issued by Bengal Governor Carlisle, threatening to punish and rusticate any student participating in the Swadeshi movement. After this 3000 students met at College Square, Kolkata protesting the circular on the 4<sup>th</sup> of November 1905 and formed the "Anti-circular society" - the first student organization with a mass base. The society's activities spread to Dhaka, Maymansingh, Noyakhali, Barishal, Medinipur, Bankura and Tripura. During this period over 10,000 students were punished variously by the repressive tactics of the foreign Government.

**The beginning of armed resistance:** After this a new wave of armed resistance against the British rulers began, enacted by idealist youths like Kshudiram, Prafulla Chaki and Kanailal. They were the first to declare complete independence as the goal of the nationalist movement. Though this path of individual militancy was later forsaken, the heroes of this era inspired thousands of students in the later years of the struggle.

**The arrival of socialist thought:** The triumph of the working class in the Russian revolution in 1917 and the ideas of Marx and Lenin were also beginning to capture the dreams of thousands of Indian students in the 1920s. The Communist movement was beginning to take roots in India. Workers' Unions and Farmers Organizations began to form. Bhupendranath Dutta was among those who strove to spread the idea of scientific socialism among the youth.

**The first Students' Union:** In 1919 the first elected students' union of India was formed in Ripon College - Niranjana Sengupta, its President, later became a revolutionary and a communist leader. The students' Unions of Scottish Church, Presidency, City colleges became platforms for the anti imperialist struggle. Students' Unions were

also formed in several colleges outside Kolkata, and in the absence of an unified platform they served as the voice of the student community. There would be yearly provincial political conferences in those times, and parallel students' conferences were held, in which students from all different paths of the movement came to participate.

**The non-cooperation movement:** The 1921 Non-Cooperation movement got a huge response from the Student community. Groups of students from Vidyasagar College, Ripon College (now Surendranath College) and City College left their studies and joined in the movement. There was a Students strike on the 20th of January and 3000 students met at Shradhananda Park and vowed to not return to college till Independence was attained. Protests with black flags met the crown-prince when he arrived at India. Thousands of students braved the severe punishments meted by the British Raj for the movement, only to be met with disillusion and disappointment when the congress suddenly backed out in 1922.

**The protests against the Simon Commission:** In the aftermath of the Non-cooperation movement there was a period of quiet. From 1925 onwards the people's struggle began to regain momentum, and as a part of the bigger struggle the students' movement also reorganized itself. In 1928 the entire country rose up to protest the Simon Commission for not including any Indian representatives. On the 3rd of February when the commission lands at Bombay there is a nationwide hartal (strike). At Kolkata there is also a strike at the schools and colleges. Bethune College joins in the protests and for the first time girls participate in a strike. During the protests the police lathi charged on students of Presidency College, and the Secretary of the elected Students' Union Pramode Ghoshal is severely injured. Immediately thousands of students assemble at College Square. The police also use suppressive tactics at Hooghly, Srirampore, Srihatta, and Bethune colleges. After this several students including Pramode Ghoshal were expelled from Presidency, and the college along with the Hindu hostel was closed down indefinitely.

**The ABSA (All Bengal Students' Association):** By now the need for a unified student organization became self evident and the All Bengal Students Association was formed. The first organizing committee of the ABSA consisted of Pramode Ghoshal, Birendranath Dasgupta (Engineering student of Jadavpur University), Sachindranath Mitra (Scottish Church) and Rebati Barman. 500 representatives from different Zillas were present. The program of the ABSA included forming a volunteer group of students, establishing night schools for the workers, collecting information about the real state of the nation's farmers and bringing out a magazine to be the official organ of the organization. The ABSA split in 1929 into the ABSA and BPSA on ideological grounds.

**The years of resistance:** The general mood of the students' movement remained rebellious. The Meerut conspiracy case of 1929, the execution of Bhagat Singh, Jatin Das's 63 day long hunger strike in prison and the Chittagong armory raid had a huge impact on student. Thousands of students participated in the Civic disobedience and non-cooperation of 1930 and 1932. However, at the same time students were drifting away from the politics of compromise and mass movement involving workers-farmers and students were slowly coming into being. The Communist Student League was formed, and till its members were arrested in 1934 it laid some of the groundwork for a future Student organization. By 1935 the ABSA and BPSA were dying out; the two main revolutionary societies had also been suppressed to a large extent; students were going to have to reorganize themselves in order to continue the struggle.

## Post 1936's: The Birth of Organised Student Movement

### Formation of the All India Students' Federation (AISF)

From 1933 the scene of student politics quietened down for some time. The tide started turning in late 1935. In spite of the 1934 ban on the Communist Party more and more students were being attracted to the ideology. In 1935 the leftist section of the Congress formed the Congress Socialist party. A number of other leftist groups were also working in the country at that time, including the Radical Communist Party of M. N. Roy, the Labour Party, Soumendranath Thakur's R. S. P. I. Students involved with all these groups were constantly trying to re-organise the students' movement. This finally led to the establishment of the Bengal Provincial Student League at the All Bengal Student Convention held at Albert Hall in 1935, presided over by the young Marxist teacher Hiren Mukhopadhyay. Student movements had taken definite shape in many of the other provinces from 1919 onwards, and from 1935 there was an active attempt to unify these under one national banner. In 1936, on the 12th-13th of August the All India Students Federation was formed in Lucknow at the All India Students Convention. Muhammad Ali Jinnah presided over the convention, and it was inaugurated by Jawaharlal Nehru. The AISF framed a charter of demands pertaining to educational and democratic rights, among which were universal compulsory and free primary education, using mother-tongue as the medium of education, recognition of students' Unions, giving the public a say in controlling primary and secondary education. For the first time the academic demands of the students were incorporated within the larger framework of anti-imperialist ideology, allowing a much more mass-based organisation to be built. The delegates from Bengal came back to the state and formed the BPSF (Bengal Provincial Students Federation) on the 12th October with Kali Mukhopadhyay as Secretary and K. M. Ahmed as President.

### Demanding the freedom of political prisoners

Though there were many ideological debates yet to be resolved within the AISF it was on a whole an unified organisation and it led a number of fiery protests. In 1937 the BPSF spearheaded the movement demanding the freedom of all political prisoners of Bengal and the return of all the prisoners held in the Andaman Islands. The movement spanned over almost 2 years, and was joined by the Trade Unions and Farmers' Organizations. 187 prisoners went on a hunger strike. Public pressure finally made the congress support the cause. At first all those imprisoned without trial were set free. Later on in 1938 all political prisoners not serving long sentences were acquitted. With the success of this movement the impact of the BPSF increased manifold. On the other hand the revolutionaries who returned from jail added new vigor to the freedom struggle.

## Spreading roots in the campuses

At the same time students from different colleges and schools were building movements around their various problems and demands. Among these the demand for elected students' Unions came foremost. In St. Xavier's, Khulna Daulatpur College students remained firm on their demand in spite of severe punishments like rustication. The Students Federation also protested against physical punishment in schools. They played a credible role in the campaign for spreading literacy. There were also many rallies, meetings and other programs organized by students in support of the worldwide struggle against imperialism and fascism. The Spanish Civil War and the invasion of China generated ripples of unrest among the student community, more and more were attracted towards socialism as the true alternative. The Chhatra Abhiyan, the organ of the BPSF, played a major role in educating the opinion of the student community.

## Debates and differences: The Left emerges as leaders of the students' movement

From its inception there were different ideological viewpoints within the AISF. The differences came sharply into focus during the 1938 Haripura Congress centering the contest between Subhash Chandra Bose supported by the leftist groups and Pattavi Sitaramaiya backed by Gandhiji and the right wing. Just before the Congress met at Haripura the 3rd all India conference of the AISF was held, presided over by Minu Masani, leader of the Congress Socialist Party. A furious disagreement broke out over a proposal in support of the Soviet Union's new constitution which recognized education and health as fundamental rights, tabled by the representative from Andhra Pradesh, P. Krishnamurty. Minu Masani stopped the conference and walked out followed by a group of delegates. But the conference continued and the AISF championed the leftist ideology. By the time the 2nd world war began Subhash Bose had been forced to leave the post of Congress President. But the AISF continued to endorse the idea of a New Leftist world order based on the principles of equality and democracy.

In 1940 the Delhi conference called for movement against the repressive tactics enforced on the pretext of war by the imperialist Government. Thousands marched in protest of the curfew on the 25th of January 1940, and on the 26th they observed "Independence day". On the back of this many students were expelled from college, many were imprisoned. In July, the students of Bengal under the leadership of Subhash Bose campaigned for the removal of the Hallwell monument. In 1941 several important movements came to fore with 3 student strikes being called to demand for the freedom of political prisoners at Deuli, to protest the police lathi charge on students at Kanpur and Guwahati, and against the arrest of Faruri, the erstwhile Secretary of the AISF, at Ashutosh College.

## During the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War: Which side to chose?

Towards the end of 1940 at the Nagpur conference the debate between leftist and rightist sections returned to prominence. This heightened in 1941 when the Soviet Union became involved in the 2nd World War. The attack on Russia changed the very character of the war on many levels. In India, the Communist Party declared that they now thought of the war as a people's war, and the victory of the freedom struggles of the colonial world was now intricately linked to the defeat of Fascism. The Indian left was of the opinion that it was against the interests of the national agenda for freedom to support the Fascist powers directly or indirectly in the name of opposing the British. The Soviet was to be protected at any cost, and simultaneously the British Government was to be pressured to leave the country. This stand was later vindicated by the liberation of the colonies in the post-war era, but at that time it created severe differences within the freedom struggle. The AISF was similarly divided by debate, and at the end of 1941 and during the August movement of 1942 students who did not support the stand of the communist party left the organisation. A number of students groups were formed after this, and a vicious campaign of political and physical attack on the Communists began. During this entire period while the AISF continued to campaign for the defeat of Fascism, it also continued to organize movements demanding the formation of a National Government, the release of imprisoned national leaders. The AISF raised the slogan of unity among all student groups, and unity of the Congress and Muslim League.

## The famine of 1943 and its aftermath

In 1943 Bengal faced a severe famine. The Students Federation joined in the unified resistance to black-marketing and the fight against the food crisis. The Bengal Provincial Student Federation (BPSF) organized a relief fund and

set up relief camps. At the call of the AISF students from other provinces also came forward to help in relief activities.

## The countdown to Independence: The sleeping dragon awakes

With the defeat of the Fascist camp in 1945 the Second World War came to an end. And as with the other colonies, the Freedom Struggle in India became several hundred times more intense. The war-ravaged economy, the famine, the manifold divisions in the student movement and the closing down of many schools and colleges during the years of crisis had led a section of the youth into a state of passivity and depression. In 1944 the BPSF in its provincial conference and the AISF in its conference in Kolkata took upon itself the task of bringing the student community out of its despair and uniting the student movement against imperialism with fresh vigor. On the 29th of August 1945, 15000 students assembled for a mass meeting and rally against the police attack on students of Coochbehar College, and demanding the freedom of all political prisoners. From this day to Independence every day and every moment was intensified by struggle. The year 1946 was a year of mass uprising, the organized power of the workers, labourers and farmers of India came to the front in full force.

**Tram workers strike:** The immense strength of the Indian working class had never before been comprehended. Under the leadership of the Students Federation the students joined the mainstream of public unrest. They called a strike in support of the Tram workers strike in September 1945. Likewise, students raised funds for the strike of the dock-workers in 1946. On the 29th of July 1946 in the Nationwide strike the Students Federation bravely resisted attempts to foil the strike at the GPO.

**Freedom to the Azad Hind:** On 21st November 1945 the Students' Federation participated in the strike and protests organized throughout Bengal for the freedom of the prisoners of the Azad Hind Fauj. When the police fired on students in Kolkata, all sections of the public joined in the struggle. In those 3 days 50 people were killed and 300 injured. Among them were Rameshwar Mukherjee, a student and Abdul Salam, a worker. On the 11th of February of 1946 the police unleashed violence on a demonstration demanding the release of Captain Rashid Ali of the Azad Hind Fauj organized jointly by the Students' Federation and Muslim Students' League. Again the whole of Kolkata erupted in anger. Military rule was enforced on the city. The Congress termed the people's spontaneous protests 'hooliganism'. From this time onward the Congress seemed wary of the mass uprising gradually gaining momentum throughout India. In July the Surabardi Government of Bengal complied to the demands of students and the public to release political prisoners after a powerful protest march.

**The Navy Uprising:** The Uprising in the Navy was the next major struggle. The Students Federation along with the different mass-organisations of the working class gave the uprising its full support. In Bombay AISF leader Kamal Donde was killed by the British military. The Navy revolt had the potential of turning into a huge mass uprising. But the Congress and Muslim League withdrew support from the rebels, and they had to surrender. The leadership of the Congress and Muslim League were now coming forward as representatives of the upper classes, intent on curbing the revolutionary consciousness and organized strength of the common people, so that they could retain power of the state after India attained independence.

On the 16th of August there were communal riots in Kolkata at the provocation of the British. The Trade Unions, the Communist Party and the Student's Federation did whatever was in their power to resist the riots. Then in 1947 on the 21st of January students thronged the streets of Kolkata in support of Vietnam - two students Dhيرانjan and Sukhendubikash were killed. The following day a student was killed in a police-student standoff in Maymansingh. Students also took part in the Tebhaga movement of the farmers of Bengal against police atrocities and the exploitation of Zamindars. During those times more and more girls were taking part in the struggle.

**Hopes for the future:** The students' movement had now begun to debate about the future of Independent India, on the democracy that would be, the new society which had to be built on the basis of equality and secularity, on the educational policies that would be pursued. This debate featured highly on the dialogue at the last pre-independence conference of the AISF from the 3rd to 6th January.

## Post-Independence and The 1950's

### Changed circumstances and broken promises

With Independence the backdrop of student politics had changed along with a change in the character of national politics. The common enemy, the foreign ruler, had left the land, and newer struggles emerged. Instead of uprooting all remaining traces of colonial rule the new Government came to an understanding with the imperialist countries. The Congress was also protecting the interests of the national businessmen and land-owners. This had already become evident when the Congress and Muslim League betrayed the mass uprisings of 1946. After Independence the new Government became intolerant of any movements by the people. It conveniently forgot the promises that had been made to common people about eradicating poverty and universalizing education. It soon

became evident that it was not possible to protect the interests of the moneyed classes and the common people at the same time.

Not only had the people's hopes of economic improvement been dashed, the democratic rights of people were also under considerable duress. Within a few months of Independence laws were passed to allow imprisonment without trial. Attempts were made to limit rights to assemble and curb freedom of speech. The communist party was declared illegal once again, being the leaders of workers and farmers struggles across the country - including the rebellion against the Nizam by the farmers of the Telengana region. At that time the AISF's organ "The Student" brought out a list of 50 incidents of police firing on citizens between the 15th Augusts of 1948 and 1949. The Government issued a prohibitory notice against all activities of the AISF. It was only after a hearing at the high court that it withdrew the ban.

## The students' movement draws up its demands: Resisting depoliticisation

The Congress started to propound an argument that the students' movement had become irrelevant in the new India - students should not bother about national or international politics, their sole duty was to study and to worry about their own careers. This was the central message in Nehru's speech at the formation of the National Union of Students in 1950. The united student's movement that had been painstakingly built in the pre-independence years suffered greatly in these years. The temporary quietude in the campuses blew over very quickly as students' became disillusioned about the new Government's education policies and with continued attacks on democracy. They rallied around the AISF with these two agendas and a new revolutionary student movement was formed. In 1947 the council of the AISF had taken a stand that the Students' organisations must continue forward with a program in support of academic progress and democratization, raising the standard of life of teachers and the working class in general and upholding the rich heritage of the Indian Student movement at international student and youth conventions. After Independence the main demands of the Student Federation included increasing Government allocations to education, adopting the mother-tongue as the prime medium of teaching, the right to form student Unions and the recognition of all democratic and political rights of students and teachers, the right to a job, free and compulsory education to all those below 14 years of age, the distribution of books at low cost, the liberation of the syllabus from colonial overtones, the withdrawal of India's name from the commonwealth, voting rights at the age of 18, rights of assembly and protest to all sections of society, and helping the peoples of Asia in their struggles against imperialism and oppression. From 1947 to the beginning of the 50s tuition fees in colleges and schools continued increasing steeply, almost 150% in colleges, and 28% in schools. This evoked a wave of protests.

## Partition and crisis: Bengal in the 50's

The partition profoundly affected Bengal - lakhs of people crossed over from East Bengal, leaving behind land and property. The problems of the migrant masses were to influence the politics, economy, social life, and literature of Bengal for many years to come. From 11th to 20th January 1949 a historic movement unfolded demanding the rehabilitation of the refugees. Several people were killed in 2 police firings on the refugees. In protest students assembled on the Calcutta University Lawn on 18th January 1949. The police opened fire and 6 students were killed.

In 1953 there was a 17 day long protest against a hike in tram fares in which 10 student organizations took part. In 1954 students came out in support of a 12 day long teachers' strike for respectable wages. In 1959 the food crisis hit a new low and people from all over Bengal marched the streets of Calcutta demanding grains at an affordable price. The police came down on them with tear gas, lathi charges and gun firings, and in the course of the movement 80 people including 4 students were killed.

The 50's also saw a number of anti-imperialist demonstrations and debates organized by students - against the invasion of Korea and Vietnam, against the US-Pak military treaty, demanding punishment for the nuclear warheads being built by the USA, in support of the freedom struggles of different countries. In 1956 volunteers were sent from West Bengal to Goa to help in fighting out the Portuguese rulers. In 1959 when the newly formed Communist Government in Kerala was broken up by the Centre, there was a students' strike in Bengal.

During the 50's the Students Federation tried to build itself as a platform for alternative culture. In 1952 the students of the Federation took up the initiative to build the Students Health Home to provide low cost health care. Students organized camps and helped in the relief work during floods and famines.

## Differences of opinion: The split in the AISF and the path forward

Up to 1956 the AISF had no illusions about the Congress Government. It saw through their plan to subdue the students movement in the formation of the "apolitical" National Union of Students, knowing that such an organisation could do nothing more than sheepishly agree to every change in educational policy brought about by the Government.



In the 2nd 5 year plan the Nehru Government took steps to build heavy industry and spread technical education. The Nehru Government's policy of non-alignment basically amounted to putting it in a position to bargain with both imperialist and socialist camps. Though it is now evident that these were merely to serve the interests of national industrialists, at that time it created debate within the ranks of the Students Federation, some were of the opinion that India was headed in a socialist direction and they should be co-operating with the Congress Government. Even a section of the Indian left went to the extent of saying that there was no further need of the AISF, that there should be a single national student's organisation.

Till the end of the 1950s the AISF maintained its separate existence, with a clear ideological stand, organizing unified students movements with different student organizations. Though a national non-political student's organisation never replaced the AISF, a major section of its new leadership were now willing to follow a path of compromise with the National Government taken in by the Governments make-believe "socialism". During the Sino-Indian war the people who refused to participate in ridiculous anti-communist propaganda and demanded a peaceful conclusion - those who opted for international freedom and peace instead of irrational and extreme nationalism - were called traitors of the country and arrested. The AISF split.

The President of the undivided BPSF, Dinesh Majumdar, gave leadership to the reconstitution of the BPSF (Bengal Provincial Students' Federation) on 17th, 18th and 19th August 1964 with Subinoy Ghosh as Secretary and Dinesh Majumdar as President, freeing the student movement from an attitude of compromise.

## The Sixties

### The role of the BPSF

The Bengal Provincial Students Federation had for several years been faced with the dual attack of the state administrative machinery and a group of armed anti-socials belonging to the Congress. Many of its state leadership were arrested, and the organisation had to function part openly part underground. In spite of these difficulties students continued to organize for their rights, campaigning against the intrusion of the USA into Indian economy and policy making, proposing a peaceful conclusion to the Sino-Indian War, demanding the freedom of the political prisoners. There was a constant campaign of hate propaganda and misinformation against the BPSF in that period.

It became important to have an organ to put our own views out there. A privately owned magazine "*Chhatro-Chhatri*" was published in 1965 to serve this purpose. Then 1966 braving severe constraints, economic and otherwise, the leadership of the BPSF published the "*Chhatra Sangram*" (in English 'Students' Struggle'), on the 15th of June. To this day the *Chhatra Sangram* continues through thick and thin in its mission of upholding the views of the organisation and the student community. In 1965 the BPSF led a strong movement against tram fare hikes. In '66 there was a huge protest against the food crisis, with public anger against the chief minister Prafulla Sen's agricultural policies reaching a boiling point. Thousands of tons of produce were being shipped out of Bengal while commoners starved. Kerosene and several other necessary products simply vanished from the market. The last straw was the hike in the price of rationed rice. A "*Chhatra Sangram Committee*" (Student Struggle Committee) was formed. The movement spread out throughout Bengal, with strikes, rallies, demonstrations everywhere. Police lathi charged and fired on the masses, and a curfew was enforced. This marked the beginning of a new age of political consciousness among the rural masses. Parallely, students of smaller towns and villages became actively involved for the first time in large numbers in the activities of the BPSF.

### The first defeat of the Congress: Strengthening mass struggles

In the 1967 state assembly elections the Congress lost for the first time in Bengal along with 9 other states including Kerala. The days of one-party rule had come to an end, and people were excited - giving way to popular demand the Left took part in the formation of a combined front Government under the leadership of Ajoy Mukherjee of the Bangla Congress. The Congress applied every means possible to break up this Government. People were furious when CM Ajoy Mukherjee decided to resign. On the 4th of October lakhs of students assembled to save the Jukto Front, and the chief minister withdrew his decision. After this a group of ministers under the leadership of Prafulla Ghosh walked out of the combined front. Overnight, without calling the Assembly to house, the cabinet was dissolved and Prafulla Ghosh sworn in as the chief minister.

A fury of protest broke out, on which the police used every means of violence available. 4 students were killed. Hundreds of students were arrested under the 144 clause. On the 24th November and 18th December two state wide student strikes were observed. After the 18th a civil disobedience movement began. Thousands of students took part in it on the 20th, many were injured. Finally this movement led to the fall of the Prafulla Ghosh Government.

In the 1969 elections a second coalition Government came into power with the left even stronger than before. The farmers and workers movements gained in strength, and for the first time the police were not sent to strangle protests against the rich and powerful. The farmers began to take over the land that Landlords held in excess of the

ceiling amount. This immediately had repercussions from the propertied classes and the private press. Bengali society was split into two camps, the propertied and the poor. In times like this people have to take a stand - the BPSF took the side of the working class and raised the slogan that it would not let the coalition front Government fall. In the demand charter of the BPSF written at the 19th state conference in 1969 Srirampore there was mention of land-reforms, bank nationalization, free primary education, and in the following months movements were organized around these demands. Finally with the Chief Minister's resignation the coalition Government fell, and Presidential rule was enforced. Immediately students went on strike.

## The Formation of the Students' Federation of India (SFI)

The year 1970 was set to become a landmark in the history of organized student movement. On the 27th-30th December of that year an all India Conference was held from which the Students Federation of India was born. The Students Federation had been reorganizing itself since 1964 in Bengal, Tripura and several other states. But there was no national organisation to give definite direction to the country-wide movement. The preparation for this conference began in June at Netaji Nagar, Kolkata, with representatives of 10 state students' federations including Comrades Biman Basu, Subhash Chakraborty and Shyamal Chakraborty. The slogan that was raised from the conference was "Independence, Democracy, Socialism". A new program and constitution were written.

## The 1970s: The Dark Days

### Fascist terror against the Left

When the fall of the coalition Government could not stop the tide of movement and protest in Bengal the Congress adopted three strategies - a constant storm of propaganda, creating disunity among the left, and provoking the extreme left to lead the leftist movement astray. A wave of physical attacks on the activists of mass movements ensued - first murders, then group violence, and later using the CRPF and Military. The Congresses band of anti-socials and their *Chhatra Parishad* launched a relentless terror campaign on the left.

### The extreme Left meets extreme Right: *Ekattor Bahattor*

The Naxalite groups were also led into a destructive line - vandalizing schools, libraries, colleges, disrupting examinations, killing police constables, left activists, destroying statues and engaging antisocial - thus generating an aversion to the leftist ideology among common people. The Naxals gave the impatient slogan of immediate revolution, without going through the phase of preparatory struggle. Strangely they chose those engaged in the organized left movements as their principle enemies, not the congress. Over 1200 schools were attacked between '70 and '71. Many schools had to close down. Teachers, Principals and Head masters were murdered in broad daylight. BPSF leaders were killed when they tried to resist the violence. The Vice Chancellor of Jadavpur University Gopal Sen was murdered because he wanted the CRPF out of the campus and examinations to resume. In Durgapur Head Master Bimal Dasgupta was tied to a chair and burned to death. In Nadia BPSF Joint Secretary Prasanta Sarkar was murdered while giving an examination.

Even through those terrible times the BPSF kept the flags of the progressive and democratic student movement flying high. There was a continuous march of rallies, strikes, meetings, demonstrations by students. In 1971 the Students Federation won majority of seats in the College and University Students Union Elections.

After the general elections of 71 and the students' Union elections in 70-71 it became evident that false propaganda could not disperse mass movements. Thus the attacks on left activists, driving them away from their homes, torturing and killing them, became more and more widespread in 71-72, the Naxals were pushed aside, and the Congresses thugs came to the front of the charge wholly assisted by the paramilitary and police. Student Unions were taken over with blunt force.

### Resisting terror

The resistance on behalf of the left also intensified in the form of greater struggles. The SFI continued to organize protests against the Indira Congress's repression, the arrest of SFI State Secretary Subhash Chakraborty, the mass murders at Kashipur and Baranagar. Rallies and gatherings were held in support of the freedom fighters in Bangladesh, in consolidation with the Vietnamese people's war, against the entry of US navy into the Indian Ocean, against the bombing of North Vietnam by the US.

The general elections in 1972 were held in an atmosphere of terror. After this the little appearance of democracy had also been abandoned. Students with the SFI could not speak in public; many had to leave their studies, their homes. While the radio and newspapers began to announce the end of tumultuous student movements, right under their noses student activists continued to organize and spread word of resistance braving difficulties and taking risks. It also became an important task of the movement to protect the lives of its invaluable activists.



In May students protested in front of the US embassy about the attack on Vietnam with a continuous 5 day long sit in. In October there was a march for right to food, in March '73 a protest against unemployment. In 1974 the conferences of the BPSF and SFI were held. After this a month long protests ensued for low-cost paper, kerosene and free Madhyamik Education among other demands, in which over 2-3 lakh students took part. This was followed by 2 three day long strikes in May and September. In February of that year the protests by students in Bihar and Gujarat spread out over the whole country. In 1974-75 the nation was prepared and unified for massive movements against the Government. Not surprisingly, the Congress was paranoid against anyone who dared to disagree with it.

## Emergency: The frantic cries of a stifled democracy

The Emergency was enforced on the 28th of June marking the beginning of one of the blackest periods of Indian democracy. The press was censored. Thousands were thrown in jail without trial. And the 42nd Amendment of the constitution basically allowed an autocratic rule. Even in that darkness students in Bengal observed the 50th Birthday of poet Sukanta. The work of organizing students continued openly and secretly, with the determination that the purpose of the emergency had to be defeated. In the 1977 General Elections the Congress lost, with a whole nation venting its anger at being gagged and handcuffed for 3 years. The SFI demanded the political trial of Indira Gandhi and others for their crimes during the emergency.

## The Eighties and Nineties: Great upheavals

### Post '77 Bengal

There was a huge assembly of students on the lawn of Calcutta University on the 7th of April 1977, to decide which way their movement was to head after coming out of these difficult times. That year in June, the Left Front came to power in Bengal with a record majority of votes. For the first time the student's movement did not have to fight against the state's repressive machinery every time it tried to speak up. To an extent some of the demands of the student's began to be fulfilled. Democratic students' Unions were formed; students' representatives were given a voice in the administration of colleges and universities. An academic ambience of freedom returned to campuses. Examinations were regularized. Standard entrance examinations were organized to ensure fair admissions. New colleges, schools were founded. Secondary education was made free. The demands of other mass organizations also began to be given proper recognition, the panchayat system was started, land reforms were accomplished, the Trade Unions rights were protected. The financial struggle and political handicaps of a State Government under the Central Government also became evident. In these changed circumstances the nature of the student's movement in Bengal also subtly changed, because now not only could movements be organized without being held at gunpoint by the police, the movements were successful and brought about progressive transformations in the campus.

### The 1980's: Free markets, corruption and divisive politics

The 80's saw growing popular discontent about corruption in high places, especially after the Bofors case involving the Congress came out. Communal forces like the BJP grew in power. The emergence of divisive politics, around the issue of OBC reservations, fanned by the ABVP and other casteist organizations was a new challenge. The SFI supported the reservations, but with the exclusion of the "creamy layer". The slogan we raised was "Education for all, Jobs for all" - demanding increased access to education for everyone. It became the primary responsibility of the student's movement at that time to ensure the unity of the students. It was at that time that the Dalits and other backward sections were rising into democratic consciousness, fighting centuries of oppression, and the Left welcomed this change. While others tried to reduce this to a question of identity alone, the Left pointed out the root of the problem, the question of ownership of the land and so tried to fight sectarian politics with a broader unified class consciousness in the Dalits as being allies of other oppressed classes.

**The 1986 Education Policy:** In the 1980s the Indian economy began to be opened up. Commercialisation and privatization of education were set to be the change the entire scenario of Indian education. The first warnings of this change came from the 1986 New Education Policy. This was set to increase the elitism and disparities in the education system, introducing institutes of excellence, Navodayas and KendriyaVidyalayas - islands of excellence in an ocean of mediocrity. The overall upheaval of the education system was not even considered.

### The 1990's: Liberalisation and its consequences

**Globalisation arrives in the subcontinent, the beginning of another struggle:** In the beginning of the 90's there was the massive liberalization of the Indian economy. This began a continuous struggle which has only increased in intensity down the years as the privatization and commodification of Education and Health, the liquification of Government enterprises, the relentless inflation, increasing unemployment and the removal of subsidy in agriculture led to the disillusionment of the masses regarding the free market.

**The fall of the Soviet:** Simultaneously came the fall of the Soviet Union. The Soviet and its great achievements in Health, Science, Education and Employment had been a source of inspiration to the student masses in India, especially the Left student's movement, and its collapse constituted a setback.

**Communal forces:** The demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 and the new lease of life that it gave to Hindutva politics of the RSS and the BJP, also constituted a major landmark. There was a large scale attack on the secular content of education, with large scale changes in the syllabi of the social sciences and history. Thousands died in the aftermath of Advani's Rathayatra. Communal forces basically exploited the frustration of the youth as access to jobs and education decreased propagating a perverted anti-dalit anti-minority politics. The SFI at this time moved to preserve the secularity of the syllabus and continued political struggles against communalism within and outside the campus.

**The Right to Education Act:** A major achievement of the student's movement in the 90's was the recognition of Education as a Fundamental right. The Supreme Court first gave recognition to the constitutional status of education after the Unnikrishnan case. Later the 86th amendment was passed formally accepting this. Though the act has many flaws it is a step in the right direction, and the fruit of almost half a century of organized struggle by students.

**The Cause of Student Politics:** The students' movement has repeatedly had to argue the case for student's participation in politics. With the neoliberal market taking over Indian society the attack on students' politics has increased manifold. By doing so it seeks to prevent the students from linking their demands and rights to questions of policy which are decided by larger political processes. In this context the students' movement has had to sharpen its defense. Ever since the days of the AISF students' have felt the need of a student organisation that does not shun politics. We have realized that in the larger interests of the student community it is necessary to take political stands on many issues. Again, in times of turbulence it becomes necessary to take to the streets and join hands with our fellow countrymen. The bottom line remains that in doing so the organization needs to maintain its broad based student character, upholding at all times the interests and demands of the student community. The slogan of the students' movement is "Study and Struggle", and we move forward to fulfill the historical role assigned to us as the harbingers of a new age and carry forth the legacy of the Students Federation of India.

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