

# Solitary, Poor, Nasty, Brutish and Short (1971)

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“Life was solitary, poor, nasty,” droned the professor on a hot, lazy afternoon when the body clocks of most students signalled that it was time for a lovely surreptitious siesta, without actually dozing off on to the next guy’s shoulder. This was sometime in my first year at Presidency, when I was being introduced to the wondrous possibilities of how the State had emerged in history: to lord it over society and its hapless citizens. NCBRC (Prof Nirmal Chandra Basu Ray Chaudhury), the ‘head’ of our department of Political Science, insisted on going over the details of all the postulates that wise political theorists like Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau had presented. This erudition fought some sort of a futile battle against the insistent waves of sleep that lashed against our eyelids and were certainly more powerful. As a really mild gentleman, all NCBRC could do was to cough, rather hesitantly, in a vain attempt to draw our attention.

He began once again to narrate Hobbes’s classic description of the utterly lawless, anarchic and chaotic ‘state of nature’ from which mankind had to rescue itself by creating an overwhelming, colossal leviathan called the State. “Life in the ‘state of nature’ was solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and”, his eyes rolled large behind his high-powered, round spectacles, oblivious of the muffled sound of an explosion that our trained ears had picked up, “and short!”. “Brutish and short”.

Hardly had the words tumbled out that our sleepy class was all agog with excitement, as the now-familiar sounds of explosions followed, one upon the other, in quick succession: shattering the lulling stillness of the afternoon. Chattering birds flew all over in shrill protest and the shouts and yells from somewhere nearby only added to the confusion and cacophony. The staff of the Geology laboratory on the ground floor just below our classroom struggled with the reluctant and rusty collapsible gate, bought obviously on the ‘lowest tender’ principle, and finally managed to shut it; just in case the protestors decided to vent their aggression on State property.

Welcome to our Presidency, College Street and Calcutta (oops, Kolkata) in the late 1960s and the early part of the ‘70s! Literally, on fire: the red flag fluttering atop the college; vitriolic political posters plastered on every available wall; gigantic portraits of Chairman Mao prominent everywhere (even in classrooms) screaming “China’s Chairman is our Chairman”; deafening slogans at odd intervals: “Amaar Naam Tomaar Naam: Vietnam, Vietnam”, “American imperialism and Yankee devils beware!” Mao’s Red Book was a status symbol and Radio Peking was the voice of liberation. It was as if the College was ‘allowed’ to open only incidentally, as the imminent revolution was more important and the pro-Naxalbari students (the term ‘Naxalite’ had not yet been fully formed, but we may use it for

convenience) had taken over the entire institution. A police firing in Gopiballabhpur or Debra in distant Midnapore or in nearby Kailash Bose Street in which one of the comrades had been shot was enough to shut the college down for at least two or three days. The incessant and hoarse political chanting often continued throughout the day and was so loud in the Main building that soft-spoken teachers could hardly be heard.

Bhabani Dutta Lane, that skirts the northern boundary of Presidency, was a 'mukta-anchal', i.e., a liberated zone and even the police dreaded to enter there during the day, without adequate numbers and firearms. And this was the college that I had chosen and dreamt of joining! the college my uncles, aunts and so many brilliant relations had proudly called their alma mater!

Could anyone who was angry as we all were, in our teens, and straining to change this unfair world not be gripped by the fever of the late sixties! Chinese youth responding so vigorously to Mao Zedong's call for the Cultural Revolution, tearing down all that was feudal and exploitative; thousands of students walking defiantly, arm in arm, along the iconic boulevard of Paris, Avenue des Champs Elysees, to topple the mighty General Charles de Gaulle from his invincible height in May 1968 and, of course, our own home-baked armed insurrection at Naxalbari in 1969: could anyone with a social conscience and a mission in life ignore their inspiration?

For me, it was therefore either Presidency, the cradle of all ideas that shook our part of the world (from Derozio and his Young Bengal to red-hot Maoism that would scorch all the forces of evil) or nothing else! I was clear on that, but was a little unclear about whether to take History, which captivated my heart (and to whose charms I would surrender later) or Political Science, that would reveal the path to salvation through class struggle. The qualifying tests were surprisingly easy and my name appeared among those eligible for both subjects, but I opted for the political one.

But dreams die young: as I was in for a rude shock on the 8th of August, 1969 the very day when I walked into the hallowed portals of the College. My jeans and my 'upper class' school background was pointed out by (of all persons) a Xaverian-turned-extremist and I became an instant target of class vengeance. I made vain attempts on Day One to explain my radical intellectual pedigree and my profuse reading of revolutionary literature: but to no avail. Roopen, who could combine effortlessly his zemindari lineage with the Marxist cause of world liberation, had introduced me quite early to the mesmeric message of the Communist Manifesto in class 9 in Saint Xavier's: where such acts would have led to our expulsion, had we ever been discovered circulating this 25 paise book.

Leading the pack of hounds who knocked me around in front of gaping 'freshers', as some sort of an example of how a 'class enemy,' was this despicable chap from my own school. He was more 'privileged' than I, but had conveniently 'denounced his bourgeois' family. I learnt later that his angst arose not from the 'cause' but because his parents had split. I tried to explain over the next few days, to the comrades that I was honestly 24 carats, but who would listen? My erudition and my lectures on

Maoism fell flat, for I soon realized that almost none of them had even bothered to read Mao and most were simply living out their private prejudices, under the cover of class war, or just wanted to be with the winning majority.

There was, for instance, this horrible so-called 'topper' son of a revenue inspector (aren't they all unusually rich?), who took it out on all those he perceived to have a father who was better placed than his own. He was among the first to opt for the U S of America, as soon as the green Statue of Liberty beckoned, with a fistful of green dollars. I narrate this deliberately, as there is a genuine need to de-romanticize the Naxalite movement in Presidency during this period and disentangle facts from fiction. I can give many other examples, but that would take too much space: so, let us move on.

Classes were rare and outstanding teachers even rarer, which leads me to believe what is often said about the best of Oxford and Cambridge: they attract the cream of each generation and thereafter prosper from decade to decade, mainly because of 'peer competition' and the 'brand equity of excellence'. Our experience was also somewhat similar; Amal babu (Mukhopadhyay) was the most articulate and effective teacher (we looked forward to his classes) and NCBRC was very erudite. While Ashok Mukherjee, Radha Raman Chakraborty and Sobhanlal Dutta Gupta (as well as Partha Chatterjee, who taught us for the last few months) were quite well informed and taught us diligently, but to what avail?

Classes were held or abandoned at the mercy of these ultra-reds and it was only the special tutorials that some dedicated teachers conducted amidst this anarchy that actually rescued us from remaining uneducated. NCBRC even took us to his tiny flat in Belgachia to rush through the syllabus. An entire decade was being wasted as 'the uncle' (who would later join almost every party that gave him a few inches of space and lost in all elections) and his ilk went about spreading poison. A professor would be roughed up in class for protesting the presence of a giant Mao portrait on the class-room wall.

Poor Vidyasagar had to suffer his statue in College Square being beheaded, low-paid policemen and some bright youngsters were killed and terror gripped the city. Families worried whether their men or children would return home unharmed and even before the night had set in, an eerie silence would descend upon the once-lively city, like a dense fog. The city's glittering lights and its vibrant night life, its reputation for being safe throughout the night, the late parties or addas, its night shows in movie halls were all gone, along with the late-evening public transport facilities: as an unwritten curfew was observed. Gunshots, explosions and staccato sounds of firing shattered the tranquillity of the night, especially at night: more in some localities, less in others.

The myth spread that Presidency's "Naxals," the crème de la crème, were sacrificing brilliant careers to lead the just 'cause'. Of course, there were a few, just a few, who fit the bill, but they were a tiny number, mainly ex-students, who had indeed gone 'underground.' Most of this band of so-called extremists were on a 'high', as the authorities were overpowered by the overwhelming or latent

possibilities of violence. Many came from genuinely needy families (didn't they come in the past and don't they come even now?) and were living out their anger against an unjust social order: "Where order stands for injustice", exhorted the wall writings, "disorder is the beginning of justice!" But never before had they wielded such untrammelled power over Presidency, the state and society.

Our participation in inter-college competitions was banned as 'bourgeois', because they would never qualify against sharper minds, but Supriya of English, Kalyan of Physics and yours truly did manage, nevertheless, to romp home with quite a few Inter-College wins: in quizzes, debates, et al. Presidency did not fail to top, even in its darkest hour.

It was then that some of us, who had just had enough, decided to stand up. The 'official' Communists were in total disarray and their ex-compatriots had a special hatred for both the major parties and never missed an opportunity to torment their supporters. The Congress was yet to regroup under the 'Siksha Bachao' banner only to launch new tactics of street battles. It was, therefore, left to the non-political students and their organisations to do something.

The problem was that most of us were normal humans who had better things to do and came to despise the horror and ferocity that we were forced to witness so regularly. Honestly, many were genuinely scared of the armed marauders, who moved around in large groups. We were all losing several months and realized that most of us would not even be considered for admission to PG courses outside this doomed state. The Naxal students kept up their severe provocations and beat up several innocent boys on the slightest pretext and forever disrupted classes at their sweet will.

The glorification of China's Chairman and the desecration of all symbols dear to Indians, the deliberate destruction of national icons would make our young blood boil: so some of us decided to say so. Our euphoria was short lived. The Maoists decided to gang up and teach us a lesson; fisticuffs were not enough, so Neptune, Ashok, Rajat, Shiladitya and others like me were called out of class even as horrified students looked on. We were punched and kicked, to the accompaniment of the vilest of abuses. Those who resisted or fought back were pounced upon, by a dozen Naxals while the rest of the band cheered on; they left us only when we could move no more. Our friends, especially the girls who showed more courage, would come and pick us up after the Maoists had gone, and help us get back on our feet. We left, limping and wounded, but even more defiant.

Life was indeed "poor, nasty, brutish and (they hoped) short" and the police was on the back-foot: complaining to them would not only be 'squealing' but also meaningless. There was also a sense of solidarity; where Vietnam and many other socio-political issues were concerned, more or less. All of us had boycotted McNamara's visit because of his role in raining Napalm bombs with devastating effect over the gutsy peasants, including women and children, in Vietnam.

The way the Naxalites severely thrashed and nearly killed a man, who looked quite harmless, at our college gate on the suspicion that he was a police informer, was inhumanly brutal. His screams for

help were so piteous that we had to stop our class in despair. His helpless appeals went unheeded, as every passer-by just moved away, leaving him bleeding profusely, right there on the pavement, until some policemen picked him up. Yet, all hope was not lost, because common students started moving away from the romance of the revolution and some had even picked up the gumption to tell their ultra-Left classmates what they thought of their high-handedness.

People in Kolkata, who were known to be so warm and considerate, simply disappeared once the rampage started or a couple of bombs were burst; they had near and dear ones at home to return to. President's Rule was imposed in the state in 1970 once the second United Front government was shown the door and this brought about a change in governance: the police started retaliating. In September 1970, sometime before the Durga Puja holidays, the last straw broke on the long-suffering camel's back.

I have a vivid memory of that fateful day when I walked into college and the barely contained tension was palpable. Word spread that some Naxalites had been killed in a police encounter: they would thus shut the college down. For a change, a few police vans were visible in the neighbourhood and the armed constabulary peered through protective 'cages' in the vans with menacing rifles at the ready, even as their bullish officers were busy issuing orders endlessly on crackling wireless sets. Police were not allowed to enter the campuses of colleges and universities, nor did anyone (not even periodic victims like us) want them in. We did go to the Principal, Dr P C Mukherjee, but that was mainly as a formality as we realised his utter helplessness. So, whatever be the 'security' that was being strengthened outside, life within the college continued to be run by Mao's boys, and they were getting really restless and aggressive.

The first warning came from 'mota durwan' of the main gate of Presidency; he advised me to get lost, at least for the day. My classmates looked on, perplexed; at 18, who ever listened to reason if that meant being branded as the coward who had run away? Even if one was lanky and underweight, with no knowledge of the arts of self-defence: so what? How could one miss out on the excitement? I used to feel a tingling sensation in my mouth whenever a fight became imminent or inevitable. I tried to contact my friends so that we could be at least together, but we had neither mobiles in those days nor any clue as to who was where; we belonged to different 'years' and different subjects. Nothing untoward, however, happened in our Pol Science-Economics building that was quite far away from the 'main', though others told us that they had seen large numbers gathering at the portico in the main building, shouting belligerent slogans. They said that they were taunting and heckling the few policemen who were near the gate, knowing fully well that they would never enter.

As soon as my Honours classes ended, I had to move to the main building for the English class. My friends told me repeatedly not to go there, but the heady obstinacy of youth dismissed sagacious logic. When I reached the 'main', I tried my best to be quick and discreet in my movements. I had to weave



my way dexterously through the turbulent crowd at the bottom of the stairs of the building and in the portico area. I managed this successfully despite a few jostles, but I was sure that I had been observed by a few.

As soon as I managed to clamber up the steep and unusually crowded stairs into the English class on the first floor of the historic main building, we could hear the ominous threats getting nearer, louder and more virulent. We could literally feel them coming up the stairs, in hordes, and prowling on the veranda of the first floor. I began feeling really scared and excited all at the same time. They did not enter the classrooms; instead all exits from the building were sealed off, leaving only the single main staircase open to the landing below. There, it was reported to me that a large number of outsiders had joined the Naxalite students. I remember the warning of my classmates, (Sati Prasad, Kum Kum, Irene, etc) not to be foolhardy and stay away from trouble. I was, however, mesmerised by the idea of 'fighting it out'. Gripped by a sudden surge of emotion and kissing wisdom goodbye, I handed over my watch and my wallet (which hardly had any money, anyway) to Krishnakoli and my notebooks to some other boy.

Prepared, I walked down alone towards this ferocious group. I found myself quaking in fear and my throat was parched, for I realised that this would be a one-way battle. There were dozens of my fellow students observing the drama; I pretended to be brave and kept walking coolly down the stairs: to my fate. They had beaten up Neptune and some others and they were bleeding, but none had 'surrendered': whatever that meant. Adrenaline pumped into my blood and gave me what I needed most at that moment: a shot of courage! Muttering "Cowards die many times before their death", even though my teeth were chattering in terror, I consoled myself "the valiant never taste of death but once". The mental torment was almost immediately replaced with the physical one, as a particularly disgusting character from Chemistry (he is also in America now) ran up a few steps and dragged me down, head first and feet off balance.

I landed on some sweaty, dirty fellows, who pounded me with their fists and feet simultaneously. I recall one of my classmates from Pol Science looked on, rather helplessly, and may have tried to reason with the cowardly gang. It was then that the ruffians, the "outsiders" took over the job and like professionals rained blows that really hurt. I was no hero and I was sobbing silently as this merciless pounding continued unabated and I felt certain they had broken my ribs, for the pain was blinding, until a new vicious 'amusement' drew most of them away from me. The distraction offered by two more 'class enemies' ferreted out from the library who were being dragged like bleating sheep to the slaughter, despite their shrieks of being innocent (whatever that may mean) gave me time to wipe my bleeding face which I knew from past experience would heal soon.

Even as I was being "punished," I could hear the reverberations of the thunderous political protests in the atrium of the main building, shaking the old foundations of the college. Every sensible person had

by then either escaped or bolted themselves inside the classrooms. Teachers and the college staff were nowhere to be seen and they must have worked out some evacuation drill ever since Principal Prof Sanat Bose had been heckled a few years ago and the college was thereafter 'taken over' by the ultra-left. The roars of bestial joy continued as the goons went about breaking whatever they could, with sticks and bars; window panes, electric bulbs, the windshield of a car parked nearby were smashed. They tore down the notice boards and twisted which ever object they could bend and then, before I could regain my sense in this bedlam, a couple of nasty fellows tore my shirt or whatever was left of it. Their abuse continued and the 'topper' who hated me egged on the louts to carry on battering me. Someone with hard shoes began kicking. I felt a wickedly slashing of a blade or a knife cut my body at the waist; it was excruciating. Then, suddenly, I felt a blinding blow on my head; I had 'blacked out'.

The next I remember was being in a car, which was driven by (oh my God: Sharmistha of English: I thought she disliked me!). Two ladies were wiping my face with some cold cloth, but I was in pain and the bleeding would not stop. In the blur, I have a hazy recollection of being taken out and staggering along, leaning on two shoulders on either side, into some smelly hospital room. I was half dragged and half lame-walked past a score of wounded persons and their anxious relatives and made to lie on a bed, where most of my clothes were taken off, in full public view. They washed my wounds with some Dettol, which seared into the open cuts and some moron then started 'cleaning' the sensitive open lacerations with some reddish liquid (Mercurio-chrome) that was equally unpleasant. A burly hospital staff and a well-built nurse grabbed me and jabbed in a Tetanus toxoid injection and I was force-fed some tablets. They started dabbing a smelly, sticky fluid, Tincture Benzene, on the incision near my abdomen and on some other gaping gashes, without any care for what I felt, but it effectively stopped the bleeding. The duo then examined my head rather seriously and scolded me roundly whenever I fidgeted.

We waited for a doctor and then a young chap, possibly an Intern who was hardly older than me, came in and spoke in medical gibberish and began working on my head injury as two attendants held me down on either side. I had no idea what the 'doctor' was up to, but I could feel my scalp 'stitched' without even a proper anaesthesia. The cure was getting to be worse than being beaten up! The attendants kept berating "these young mischief-makers" and 'goondas' (was I now one?) and seemed to enjoy my acute discomfort. My agony was compounded as dormant aches suddenly came alive in several parts my body, I couldn't even grimace, because I could see two girls and a boy from my college peering from behind the cheap and dirty curtains, quite aghast at the sight. At long last, they completed their task on my scalp and the industrious medical student curtly answered my repeated queries, in short cryptic sentences: "we have put seven stitches on your head"; "it was a bad gash, its lucky that you escaped with just a concussion"; "you may still have internal haemorrhage: one can't be sure." How positively encouraging!

I heard them almost without emotion and then I think I had dozed off for some escape, but was rudely

jerked awake by a policeman who asked me, rather gruffly, to confirm my name, my father's name, age and address. I responded to the insistent cop's questions and finally scrawled mechanically on some register that he had pushed towards me. Little did I realise then that I had 'entered' the police records and would have to pay for this indiscretion (and a few others) when the verification of my antecedents would come up just before my entry into government service. My job and my fate would be precariously linked to this 'knock on the head' and a juvenile fight for what I thought was right. At that moment, what was bothering me more was this throbbing pain on top, the sore wounds and aches in several parts of my body, especially the agonising one below my chest: I was sure I had broken a couple of ribs, but I kept quiet as I did not want to extend the woeful hospitality of either the doctors or the police.

My main worry was what to do next, for I could not go home in this condition: my father who had a low opinion of my adventurism would throw me out, summarily. I reassured my friends that I was hale and hearty. I learnt that I was at the Calcutta Medical College and Hospital down College Street and that the entire area was almost depopulated, because our Naxal friends had gone on the rampage all over and had managed once again to declare their daylight curfew. Someone got me into an antediluvian taxi, for I had no money and an almost unknown boy from my college, who felt I was brave in standing up to this form of terror, accompanied me.

To cut the long story short, I went to a school friend's house in Mandeville Gardens, where I had spent a few nights before, and my parents did not mind. Sandip was horrified to see me, but he paid the taxi fare and took me to 'his part' of the large house, where no one else normally came, and I spoke 'cheerfully' with my mother and sister on the phone. I lived off Sandip's clothes and care and recovered in just a few days, except for that awful stitch on the head. Once I reached home, I sold a story of a cricket ball hitting my head: which only my mother believed and I stayed out of father's sight. The problem was that many from my college had telephoned my house to enquire about me and hence my brothers knew much of the truth, but they did not tattle. I was pleasantly surprised to receive a few friends, most of all an attractive first-year girl from my subject, to whom I had been introduced a month or so ago. Nandita would come home occasionally to check my recovery on her way to the nearby Lake Stadium, where she and her friends practised athletics, under a professional coach. Her visits were rather nice.

The news from the battlefield was, however, quite startling. College was closed for quite some time and the 'police action' had begun in right earnest. A police force that had been held back by the two elected governments was now raring to give its response to the extremists. It must have finally received a go-ahead from the State administration in Writers' Buildings, which was bent on cleaning up the place during the short-lived phase of 'President's rule'. Armed Central para-military forces had then taken up their position within (yes, inside) the College premises that had several sand-bag bunkers, with intimidating rifles. It was the same in other vantage spots of the entire university area.



The hard-core Naxal students had disappeared (gone 'underground') and what was stranger was that some of us were also told to stay clear until the heat died down, lest the ultra- left kill us.

Kill? For the first time in my life, I faced the stark and brutal reality of death and the newspapers listed every day how students were called out from their houses by the Maoists and shot at point-blank range: in Haltu, Garia, Jadavpur, Baranagar, Dum Dum and God knows where else. I was alone with no experience of being on the run, but I made the best of it, by hiding first in my uncle's flat on the eighth-story in an anonymous and boring block of buildings. Then I moved in with my aunt in Kharagpur; the train journey was terrifying, as I was sure that I was being watched. When we reached each station, I was certain that I had been trailed and would soon be pulled out and shot on the platform! Nothing so exciting happened, but I stayed away for quite some time, even after the college reopened. Nandita continued her visits and kept me informed about the activities in the department over phone (our calls started getting longer and eyebrows were raised) and she passed on library books and class-notes from Amitabha, Kaushika and Dipankar of my 'year'.

The Presidency College that I re-entered, at long last, was so different. Gone were the red flags and most posters had all been torn off. The PWD's thin whitewash on many a wall hardly obliterated the Mao portraits, but they did try. Classes were more regular, but troubles continued outside and on the streets: bombs and clashes, pipe-guns and annihilation of 'class-enemies', police reprisals and massive numbers of arrests, all of which naturally affected us. But the tide had turned and the Naxals were now running helter-skelter, for they were the 'targets'. Some of them would give me glares in college, but I glared back. Soon enough the senior student leaders and political honchos started haunting the college. Elections were called within a year, after several years, and most of us who had borne the brunt of the battle however decided to stay out, as we were not interested in the 'political' brand of student politics and join parties.

Besides, we had to make up for months of lost time and studies: our batch was behind by more than a year, which effectively meant 'two', because few universities outside the state would ever entertain our admission forms, without the University's degrees (which took years) or at least the complete mark-sheets. Exams continued to be delayed and disturbed and the system would take several years to stabilise. The marks that Calcutta University gave were known all over for their stinginess, especially in Arts subjects. It became more terrible in those gloomy days, as exams were frequently disturbed and papers torn up by slogan- shouting, politicised students or shameless vandals, irrespective of their affiliation. The postponed exams had then to be re-conducted quite frequently, sometimes again and again. We were hapless victims. When one of our exams was disrupted up by goons, the small number of students in my subject in Presidency went through it again; my entire class was given just a flat 42 out of 100 in that paper! My hope for a 'first class' was thus shattered.

Sheer disgust drove many of us out of academics and though I went through my Master's course, I

chose to be foolhardy enough to take on a tough competitive examination: and managed to get into the IAS, obviously by fluke. I compensated my soul's yearning for knowledge by taking up fresh subjects for two MAs on my own, and continued my research and writing, while fighting 'flood, fire, fracas and felony' for the next 37 years. Oh, I forgot to mention: I married Nandita.