

Labour Strike in the Surma Valley Tea Gardens

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The labour movement is very important from the historical point of view not only because it showed strong working class solidarity but also due to the fact that it attracted national attention and involved national political leaders. Labour Strikes in the Surma Valley tea gardens is undoubtedly a noteworthy phenomenon in connection with the Non-cooperation movement.¹ In the initial stage of the Indian labour movement an alliance took place between the Indian National Congress, (often called the "party of Independence") the vanguard of the Nationalist movement and the labour movement. In times of the Swadeshi Movement, the Khilafat Movement, the Non-cooperation Movement, the Home Rule Movement and the Civil Disobedience Movement - all conducted under the leadership of the Indian National Congress and motivated by a strong nationalistic sentiment - the Indian working class could not remain aloof from the nation's struggle for freedom. It was only during such crucial times that the Indian working class forged ahead with grim determination.

Tea gardens were kept segregated from the rest of the country by very careful means, and the wage earner labourers were not allowed to come in contact with the people in general and leaders of public movement in particular. But in spite of all these precautionary measures and other preventive steps, taken by the management of the tea-gardens, the labourers became restive for redress of their grievances, particularly grievances regarding their low wages which they said were 6 paise daily.²

The year 1921 gave the Surma Valley a definite place of distinction in the fight for freedom. One noticeable effect of the movement was the awakening it caused amongst the labour population working in the tea-gardens and other industrial concerns in the Surma Valley.³ The unbelievable low wage, obtaining in the tea gardens of Sylhet and Cachar, were the root cause of discontent amongst the labourers, who were already in a state of desperation.

R. K. Das wrote,⁴

"Uncontrolled recruitment lead to some of the grossest scandles, of which the most important was heavy mortality among the recruits on their way to labour districts."

In Karimganj District, according to S.D.O.'s report on 1883,⁵

"the average wages show an extremely low rate of wages. . . ."

Bengalees in the adjoining villages earn without difficulty Rs. 7/- per month. The Cooly who works in an unhealthy climate should at least be able to earn more than half that amount. A low scale of wages is usually accompanied by a high mortality, as I have repeatedly notified in my inspection reports”.

The labourers began to feel an urge for emancipation from the exploitation to which they were subjected by their employers. Deosharan Tripathi and Ram Prasad Choube, Trade Union leaders, worked among the labourers to refuse work in the gardens owned by the European Planters. During the upheaval of Non-cooperation movement they found a search light, a ray of hope in the encircling gloom, for their emancipation. They decided to stop work and to leave gardens.⁶

Imported Labourers

It is to be mentioned here that number of labourers imported into Assam from 1863 to 1868 numbered 108, 980 ⁷. (Table I)

In Cachar indigenous tea was discovered first in 1855. But speculations regarding the possibility of tea cultivation in this district began soon after its annexation to the British territory. In February 1834 Captain Fisher, the first Superintendent, received a letter from Mr. Gordon requested Fisher to contact people coming from the province of Yunan of China, learn from them the conditions as regards soil, rainfall, climate etc. required for the cultivation of tea, and then to report if Cachar fulfilled such conditions. Anyway, from the information gathered he submitted a report in which he dealt with every point as regards soil, climate, rainfall etc. and concluded with his opinion that Cachar would be suitable for the plantation of tea. It is curious to note that when Fisher was studying the possibility of tea plantation in Cachar, he did not know that abundant tea plants were growing wild in the jungles of the district. ⁸

With the ascendancy of the industrial capital over mercantile interest in Great Britain by 1833, the British policy in India received a clear direction towards colonisation which brought in its train several discoveries in Cachar. The first-attempt of its kind was the tea discovery in Cachar and the first tea-garden was established at Barasingha in 1856. Gradually tea became a first-growing industry in Cachar and for its economic convenience they divided the valley of Cachar into six parts.⁹

Happy Valley	..	24,420	Bighas of land.
Lakhipur Valley	..	29,850	,, ,, ,,
Langai Valley	..	35,400	,, ,, ,,
Chorgolla Valley	..	22,950	,, ,, ,,
Hailakandi Valley	..	34,280	,, ,, ,,
Chatla Beel Valley	..	32,950	,, ,, ,,

Labour Supply

The Tea Districts Emigrant Labour Act was passed in 1932. It deals mainly with the regulation of recruitment of Workers for tea gardens in the Surma Valley and Assam. It authorises the State Government, subject to the control of the Central Government, to declare any area within a State to be a controlled emigration area and to grant licence to any person to act as a local forwarding agents on behalf of an employer or employers. Recruits from controlled emigration areas can be forwarded to Assam only through licensed local forwarding agents and through the prescribed routes, where arrangements for feeding and accomodation are made by the agents.

The number of imported labourers on Cachar, on 31st December 1870, according to the Official Report, was as follows :— Under original Calcutta agreements 7698 ; under local agreements, or without agreements, 11,424 - total, 19,122. The total outturn of tea from Cachar during 1870 amounted to Rs. 4,006,822.¹⁰ In order to increase the growth and expansion of the tea industry in Assam various Rules and Regulations were encouraged in favourable terms from time to time. The first grant of tea land in Cachar which had been granted in favour of Mr. Williamson and the terms applied were under the old Assam Rules of 1854.¹¹ (Table II)

There was very little labour available for work in the plantations and most of the 'Coolies' had brought from other parts of India. The total number imported in 1900 was 51,894 and during the next decade it was 75,412. In the early days of the tea industry the mortality amongst the imported 'coolies' was extremely high and the relation between the planters and their labour force were often far from satisfactory. Between May 1863 and January 1868, 52,155 'collies' were imported to Cachar of whom 2,456 or 4.7% died during the voyage.¹²

During the mid-part of the 20th Century tea garden labourer strike was started. It had cast a far-reaching impact on the Bhorakhai, Maniarkhal, Derby, Barjalenga, Chhota-Jalenga tea gardens. Lala Mukh, Bagh Bahar, Lowerbandh, Palairbondh had launched a strike in support of the Arunabandh tea garden.¹³ The intensity,

Table - I
Number of Labourers

Despatched to	1863-64	1864-65	1865-66	1866-67	1867-68	Total
1. Assam	4,558	11,768	27,761	7,901	2,364	5,352
2. Cachar	11,249	15,598	16,008	4,212	5,088	52,155
3. Sylhet	268	916	813	374	102	2,473
	16,075	28,282	44,582	12,487	2,554	1,08,980

Table - II

Mr. Williamson had granted Tea Tract under the Rules for the grant of Waste land in Assam in the following manner.

No. of Grant	Name of Grantee	Name of occupant or Manager	Date on which grant was given	Area Acres	Annual rent	Remarks
1	Barasingha (Bursangun)	G. Williamson	Sorooop Ram Ist May 1856	454 Hals J.R.I. Poles	742 acres	16 Yrs. rent free 10 Yrs. at ... --

frequency and spatial dimensions of labour unrest, transgressing all barriers of casteism, communalism and egionalism made labour a subject matter of national importance and hence a serious subject of study. ¹⁴

The tea garden labour strike was one of the main events of the Non-cooperation Movement. Low wage, over work and inhuman treatment of tea-garden labourers had driven them to recourse to strike. In August 1921 Mahatma Gandhi, Maulana Mohommed Ali and Azad Subhani visited Sylhet and at their advent the Non-cooperation and Khilafat Movement received a new lease of life in the Surma Valley. Gandhiji also visited Silchar and the labour strikes continued in full swing alongwith the Khilafat Movement at Silchar. In those days the echo of nationalism found an easy channel through the newspapers like 'Janasakti' and 'Surma Patrika'. 'The Sylhet chronicle' played an important role on this issue. 'Janasakti' was banned for publishing some seditious news.¹⁵

The labourers were being unable to withstand such a severe life, and ran away from the gardens. On the 11th of April 12000 tea garden labourers poured into Sylhet, Karimganj and Silchar.¹⁶ Just end of the redressing the grievances, the Government at the instigation of Officials tried to punish the labourers and threatned the Congress leaders. The labourers had to live on public charity. The Congress and Khilafat workers worked hard during the period of strike, when the matter became serious leaders like Babu Jatindra Mohan Sengupta and Babu Akhil Chandra Dutta started for Karimganj. Some thousands of rupees were collected to help the labourers. After some day the labourers were sent back to Dacca by train.¹⁷

The strikes was first of its kind in the annals of tea gardens. That the thing would come to such a pass and the labourers would actually leave the garden was beyond the calculation of the management, who sat tight in the complacent belief that for want of alternative employment tea garden labourers were bound to remain in tea gardens inspite of very low wage given to them. When this belief was shattered by the large scale exodus from gardens, the angry management laid the whole blame at the door of the Congress because the Congress volunteers who worked in the gardens propagating the cult of *Swaraj*. Congress workers, they said, were political agitators, whose aim was to ruin tea industry by withdrawing labourers with false hops and alluring promises. On the contrary, untold sufferings and sacrifices awaited the strikes.¹⁸

Another important strike took place in the Chargola Valley

in Sylhet, popularly known as the Chargola Exodus. It is famous for the repression on the workers for participating in this strike.

On May 3, 1921 about 750 Coolies struck work at Ratabari Tea Estate, after demand for an increase in their daily wages to 8 annas and 6 annas for man and women respectively, was turned down. They left the tea garden peacefully and went away. The Manager went along with them trying to persuade them to return, but failed. The failure made the garden authorities furious. More than 8,000 workers participated in the strike.¹⁹

C. R. Das had visited the Surma Valley, particularly Sylhet in March and had spoken at a number of public meetings.²⁰ We find that on the 1st and 2nd May 1921 two public meetings were held at Ratabari. Hundred of tea garden workers attended these meetings. The meetings supported the workers' demand as legitimate and fair. Cachar also shared in this strike.

Following exodus from tea gardens, the labourers were stationed at Chandpur Railway Station enroute their homes in North India, Bengal and Bihar where they had to face barbaric atrocities in the hands of the Gurkha regiment on 20 May, 1921 in the very presence of railway officials.²¹ The exodus from the gardens of Sylhet and Cachar districts continued unabated, with the inevitable result that there were crowd of homeward bound striking labourers at way side Rail and Steamer stations Karimganj, Chandpur, Goalando and Rajbati in particular. Among these crowd were many old and disabled men and women with sickly children of tender age. For want of food, cloth, shelter and sanitary arrangements these people began to fall easy victims to the attack of diseases like Cholera, Discentery and fever.²² To make the already deplorable situation still more deplorable and worse confounded a tragic incident happened at Chandpur, which took the Country by surprise. A sense of horror prevailed, and the public indignation reached its highest pitch.²³

K. C. Dey, Commissioner, with S. K. Singha, S. D. O. and others is said to have ordered to Gurkhas (about 50 in number) to drive the coolies away from the station yard. The Gurkhas fell upon the innocent men, women and children and began to beat them most mercilessly and inhumanly. The heart rending sound of cries and wailing arose in the air, which startled the people of the town. Next morning it was ascertained that about one hundred coolie were wounded and some children were missing.²⁴

The tragic incident at Chandpur excited the Press and the public. The leftist Wing of the Congress Party lost no time in rendering

relief to the sufferings.²⁵ To return to Rev. C. F. Andrews,' service in the Surma Valley Labour Strike, it was mainly through his ceaseless efforts and to some extent by the force of circumstances that the Government of Assam and Undivided Bengal came down from the Olimpic heights and recongised their mistakes in not rendering help to the stranded labourers. On behalf of a non-official investigation Committee Rev. Andrews visited Chandpur and after a thorough enquiry gave a report.²⁶

According to Andrews, for want of timely help a number of them died on the way and the rest with official and non-official help were able to reach their native places in Northern India after a great deal of suffering. The Chandpur incident had tremendous repercussions in the Surma Valley. The young volunteers carried on demonstration and picketings all over Cachar and Gangadayaal Dixit, a cloth merchant of Lakhipur, urged upon the labourer not to work. The continuous strike in the gardens proved a heavy drain for the European Planters.²⁷

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