

Assam tea garden labour strike of 1920-21, having at its crest the famous and well known Chargola Valley labour exodus (beginning on May 3, 1921, at Ratabari Tea Estate), was the most significant labour movement in India in the pre-independence period. No other labour movement – not even the equally famous, though for a different reason, Ahmadabad textile labour strike of 1918 under Gandhiji's leadership – caused so much tremor in the country as this one did. In fact, while the strike was on, its impact spread out far beyond the precincts of Assam tea gardens and became a 'national issue' in the eastern region of the country. There was hardly any public forum where this event was not repeatedly discussed or debated, participants either supporting or opposing it.

That a labour movement taking place in the remote eastern corner of the country, and that too among the most unorganised, backward and a heterogeneous mix of labour, should draw so much public attention, shows how significant it was. That is why there is hardly any book dealing with the history of Indian labour that does not devote any space to this unique strike.

(1) Apart from earlier books like "The Coolie" by Dewan Chaman Lal (or articles in contemporary journals and newspapers), even in recent period many scholars have once again taken up the theme for their research and study. As a result, more and more details relating to different aspects and facts of this strike are coming out, enriching our knowledge thereof.

However in spite of the fact that much work has already been done, a comprehensive study covering all aspects of the movement is yet to be undertaken.

The purpose of this short note is to identify some of the missing links that need filling up, and to examine critically facts already known.

As is well known, tea garden labour in Assam was recruited in the past from various parts of India, local labour forming only an insignificant proportion of the total labour force. It was thus essentially a conglomeration of diverse communities - mainly tribals and schedule castes - coming to the tea gardens with different backgrounds (social, cultural, linguistical, etc). Labour catchment areas (like Chotonagpur, Eastern U. P., Western Bihar, some dis-

tricts of Orissa) lay in the economically backward regions in the country. During the famous exodus from the Chargola Valley tea estates, labourers decided to quit the gardens and go back to their respective native villages. This unprecedented form of labour protest needs further investigation. What reasons or motives actually caused this exodus? In some cases, we have evidence to show that labourers coming from some of the eastern districts of U. P., were tempted to quit the gardens and go back to their villages because of the prevailing higher wages available to agricultural labour there, because of a temporary shortage of field labour. This information about labour shortage and consequent higher wages obtainable in their villages, acted as an incentive to a section of the striking tea garden labourers. But the same cannot be said about labourers coming from other regions. In the case of Ranchi (Chotonagpur) district, contemporary tribal movement of the district played some role (particularly among the younger section of labourers), but how importantly, needs further investigation.

(2) We have some evidence to show that local villagers around tea gardens extended their support to the striking labourers and encouraged them to leave their gardens. Here also we have to investigate if there was "class support" in general, i.e., one section of the exploited class extending support to another section of the same class fighting against their common class enemy. Because, in some cases at least, the motive for support came from a totally different reason: in their hurry to leave the gardens, labourers were forced to sell their cattle at cheaper prices and some of these villagers wanted to avail of this opportunity of buying cattle at cheaper prices. Though this was certainly not the major trend in the villager-labourer relationship vis-a-vis the strike, yet this phenomenon needs further check up.

(3) From the Evidence Volume of the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee (1921) Report, we find that some members of the Committee, representing European tea planters, refused to allow a missionary to submit his evidence before the Committee. Not much details of this episode are however mentioned in the above volume. Nonetheless, it shows that not all missionaries wholly supported the white planters in their handling of garden labour. Further probe in this matter may throw some interesting information regarding the relationship between white planters and the missionaries vis-a-vis labour.

(4) There are sufficient evidences to show that the members of the Indian Tea Association (I. T. A.) could not take any unanimous

stand regarding the demands of the strikers. While some members thought that a wage increase was justified, others opposed this view. In fact, inspite of broad agreement on some fundamental issues relating to the management of tea industry in Assam, difference of views among the various member-companies of the I.T.A., occasionally crept up. A critical examination of this conflict among garden authorities is important because this will help us to get a clear picture of one facet of the movement.

(5) As scholars working in this field do not have much access to contemporary local materials relating to this strike, some missing links remain untraced. For example, how were the local markets (Hats) around tea gardens organised and controlled? What sort of political activities (and how) did the local non-cooperators carry on in these markets? It is known that officially, industrial labour (including tea garden labour) movement was excluded from the purview of non-cooperation movement and Gandhiji was personally against this particular strike and labour exodus from tea gardens. He even advised workers to go back to their respective gardens. But inspite of such strong opposition, local Congress workers and leaders (including Khilafatists) did take a significant part in organising this strike. This interesting conflict (in preaching and practice) between top leaders and grass root cadres of the Congress working among garden labourers, needs serious study and for this, local materials are indispensable.

Lastly, a few words on studying labour movement in general and this strike in particular. For this purpose official documents are necessary but not sufficient. These have to be supplemented by the participating workers' version of a movement. But in our country at least, such versions are not generally available in the form of written documents. Herein is the chief obstacle to studying labour movement. It is to be remembered that in this particular case, most of the available source materials come in some form or other from the garden authorities or the ruling class. These documents therefore express basically their view and attitude regarding the strike and this view point differs radically from that of the striking workers. This is only to be expected because in a conflict, the two main participants groups cannot have the same view point vis a vis the conflict. Hence documents coming from the establishment should not be accepted without critical scrutiny. For example, on the question of law and order, any challenge tending to disrupt the smooth functioning of the establishment is considered to be a violation of the existing norms of law and order. The

question to be posed here is, which section of the society derives benefit from this smooth functioning of the establishment ? Or does it satisfy the aspirations of all sections of the society ? If it does not, then for the 'have not', this law and order itself appears as a tool to maintain the vested interest of the exploiting classes at the cost of the exploited class and is therefore considered by the latter to be against its own interest. So the same facts relating to a social or 'public' disturbance have different relevance for the two contending parties in any mass movement. This divergence of views should be noted while studying a mass movement.

Earlier historians usually studied mass movements under three broad but rather rigid categories : causes, course of movement and results. The validity of such rigid compartmentalisation is questionable because such a method of study leads to a simplified version of history only, whereas historical reality is a much more complex phenomenon ; it is a resultant of a number of interlinked factors operating through a complicated process of "thesis, anti-thesis and synthesis".

That is why it is often found that in history, same causes do not produce the same results, neither do events follow the same course. In other words, as is often said, history does not repeat itself.