

Genesis of Labour Movement Among the Non-Plantation Workers and Wage-Earners in Assam

Dipankar Banerjee

In this essay, I would try to throw some light on the early beginning of wage-earners and workers' movement in the non-plantation sector in Assam. Though much emphasis is being laid these days by the historians on "Peoples History" or "History from Below",¹ the working class movement in Assam has remained a neglected area of research. Only recently some students of history have taken some interest in the subject.² In this essay, my endeavour will be to present before you the accounts of some strikes, (which was the main weapon in the hands of the workers to compel the employers to come to terms) among the wage-earners in the non-plantation workers and the white collar employees in Assam during 1918-1930. In the non-plantation sector, these strikes were the early signs of labour movement in the state.

Since the termination of World War I, Assam, characterised by slow growth of industrialisation and the lack of emergence of an organised labour force, experienced some important developments in the economic, social and political fields. During the period 1914-1920 the prices of all articles increased in the province and the cost of living was increased considerably. This led to wide spread discontent among the plantation and other wage-earning labour who fetted with problems both financial and otherwise, started to organise themselves.

In Assam also it was after the First World War and during the twenties of the present century that the labour movement began to crystalise. "In Bengal, Bihar and Assam, extensive industrial strikes characterised the period. The old inadequate wages and the new quadrupled cost of living were working havoc amongst the people, and the big capitalists and profiteers of the previous years, facing a slump in business, began to effect extensive reductions both in the number of employees and in their pay. Large numbers were thrown out of work, the working class could not support their families, people died of starvation, women committed

suicide for nakedness and wretchedness stalked wide. Strike followed in the railways, in the steamer services, in the coal mines, in the mills, in the tea estates, in every industrial concern mostly in the hands of the Europeans."³

During 1920's we get the first instances of unions and associations being formed in Assam. Some of these were white collar associations which were formed to safeguard the particular interests of the white collar employees. For example, the State Civil Servants formed the Assam Civil Service Association in 1923. This was two years after the Civil Servants of the central cadre posted in Assam formed Indian Civil Service Association. In the same year i.e, in 1923 non-gazetted ministerial staff of Assam Secretariat formed Assam Secretariat Ministerial Association for the improvement of the members' service condition and to safeguard their rights and privileges.⁴ Their demands were basically economic. Their activities were mainly limited to prayer and petition to the authorities with whom they never came into confrontation. Labour struggle of a different kind was witnessed elsewhere. In 1918 we get an instance of strike when the Assam Government press employees struck work. During 1920-21, the workers in the Railways in the state also struck work. A study of these strikes follows.

Strike in the Assam Government Press

The first recorded instance of non-plantation workers' strike in Assam was that of the employees of the Assam Government Printing Press in Shillong, which took place in 1918. The staff of the Government Press, Shillong along with the ministerial officers and clerks of the Assam Secretariat (Shillong) demanded an immediate increase of pay in June 1917. They argued that during the last few years the cost of living had been increased but their pay-scale was not revised. In a memorandum to the Chief Commissioner they demanded immediate revision of their pay-scale and also ex-gratia payment for the rising prices due to the War. But the Chief Commissioner expressed his inability to concede to their demands as paying compensation to the Shillong staff would lead to demand for compensation from all the employees of the State Government as the entire province was suffering from the price rise. As a result, the employees of the Government Printing Press went on strike for an indefinite period since August 18, 1918.⁵

The strike continued for 29 days and all the printing works of the Government came to a halt and all official publications

had to be suspended. Important Government notifications like postings, transfers and appointment of officials had to be communicated by wire as the State Gazette could not be published.⁶

A number of strikes among the Government Press employees took place in different parts of the country (like Mysore, Calcutta, Madras etc.) in the following years on similar demands but Assam Government Press employees were, most probably, the pioneers in this field.

The Dibru-Sadiya Railways Workers' Strike (1920)

The next strike was that of the workers of the Dibru-Sadiya Railways. The Dibru-Sadiya Railways was a private concern (established in 1885 in the Lakhimpur district of Upper Assam) which laid down a 91-miles railway net-work. The Company was established primarily for the transportation of logs and tea but subsequently it started carrying passengers also. The railway was earning good profits and the management paid high dividends to its share holders every year; but its workers were ill-paid. In July 1920 the workers of the railways struck work demanding a fifty per cent increase of their pay and also for some allowances which the supervisors and the middle-management cadre employees were receiving.⁷

The strike continued for ten days, it was well organised and virtually paralysed the entire railways. The strike was so complete that the running of trains was totally suspended. The Government communication network, specially the postal department faced much difficulty as the mails were completely held up. They had to despatch the mail by a substitute arrangement with Assam-Bengal Railways.⁸ These circumstances compelled the authorities to come to terms. The workers' salary was increased by thirty to thirty-five per cent (in case of those receiving wages below rupees one hundred).⁹ The strike was withdrawn on 28 July.

This strike and its success had an important bearing on the neighbouring areas. Many of the workers of the Dibru-Sadiya Railways had their relations in the neighbouring areas, specially the tea gardens, through which the Railway line passed. The success of the strike and the Railwaymen's wage increases inspired the exploited tea garden labourers of the district to follow a similar course and a wave of lightning strikes followed in the neighbouring tea gardens.¹⁰

The Assam Bengal Railway Workers' Strike (1921)

Perhaps the first sympathetic strike in our country of a tre-

mendous magnitude took place in 1921 when the workers of Assam Bengal Railways and the steamer workers of East Bengal resorted to an indefinite strike to protest against the oppression of the British Government towards the plantation labourers at Chandpur. Following an exodus of tea garden labourers due to insult, suffering and repression by the planters, the tea garden labourers camped at Chandpur and Laxman junctions enroute to their homes in Central India, Bengal and Bihar (majority of these people were working at Chargola and Longai Valley). At these junctions they had to face barbaric atrocities in the hands of the Gurkha regiment on 20 May, 1921 in the very presence of railway officials. In protest against this Gurkha outrage on the stranded labourers the Railwaymen at Chandpur and Laxman junctions spontaneously struck work on May 24 ; they were joined by the local steamer workers on May 29. The strike also spread to the Barak and the Brahmaputra Valleys and the railway workers of Habiganj, Lumding, Silchar and Gauhati joined the strike subsequently.

(I'll not go into the details of this strike as there are some published papers on the subject)"

Dibru-Sadiya Railways Strike (1928)

The workers of the Dibru-Sadiya Railways who went on a strike in 1920 and succeeded in getting their pay increased by thirty to thirty five per cent, again went on a strike in 1928 demanding wage increase. The strike continued for more than a fortnight and the railway communication in Upper Assam was disrupted. The main demand of the workers was the revision of their wages and introduction of a pay scale with periodical increments. Their main argument was that the Company, inspite of its huge profits, had not revised the wages of the workers whereas the dividends for its share-holders increased every year. About four hundred and thirty workers had been involved in the strike and the company had to concede to the workers' demands. The management ultimately declared a fifteen to twentyfive per cent increase in the wages on different categories of labour and only then on the sixteenth day since its beginning, the workers called off the strike.¹⁵

Assam Match Company Workers' Strike (1928)

The workers of the Assam Match Company, Dhubri (established in 1925) went on a strike in 1928. The Swedish owned company had a working force of nearly five hundred heads of which about 350 comprised of unskilled labour and it were these semi-skilled and unskilled labour who went on a strike on and from

November 2, 1928 demanding increase of pay, better working condition etc. Their charter of demands ** included (a) the period of working hours should be from 8 a. m. to 4 p. m. on all weekdays except Saturday when it should be from 8 a. m. to 2 p. m.; (b) no fine should be imposed on workers absenting themselves from duty for less than three days; (c) any worker receiving injury within the workshop (factory) while on duty must be paid his full wages; (d) no wrongful dismissal; (e) rate of wages, once given to any particular category of workers, cannot be reduced; (f) the moslem workers should be provided with a plot of land within the factory premises for offering their prayers; (g) revision of wages.¹³

The Company was making huge profits since its beginning but the workers were ill-paid and wage reduction became a regular feature of the Company's administration.¹⁴

The workers of the factory had the support of local citizens. The conference of the Goalpara Youth Association which was being held at Dhubri at the same time (under the Presidentship of Nripendra Chandra Banerjee) expressed its sympathy with the workers of the factory.¹⁵ The strikers were "financially assisted by the daughter of a Goalpara Zamindar who is said to have taken an active interest in the strike."¹⁶ The cause of Match Factory workers was also taken up by local Congressmen and social workers.

The Raja of Gauripur (Assam), one of the provincial Directors of the Company, and Mr. R. N. Chowdhury were appointed arbitrators to settle the matter amicably between the parties but they failed to come to any settlement.¹⁷ The management of the Company was firm and they did not yield to the workers' pressure. The strike ultimately did not succeed. Fifteen men were discharged*** All the workers joined (except those who were discharged and about 50 workers who were still hesitant to join) from the 9th evening.¹⁸ Though the strike failed, its importance was immense because it was the "first labour unrest which had manifested in the district."¹⁹

Jorhat Police Strike (1929)

We should note here a strike which is different in nature from the rest of the labour strikes described in this paper. The constables of the Assam Police went on a strike at Jorhat, in Upper Assam in 1929. The strike attracted serious attention of the British Government as being unprecedented in the police department in the state.

The trouble started when some policemen (numbering about

twenty-two) beat some people in the Kengapatoí area of Jorhat in the evening of August 16, 1929.²⁰ The action of the police was questionable.²¹ The businessmen of Jorhat called a meeting of the people of all the communities in Jorhat in which the police atrocities on the common people were condemned. They conveyed their grievances to the Governor, Judicial Member and the local Deputy Commissioner.²² A general strike (hartal) was observed in Jorhat on August 19 protesting the police action and demanding punishment of the constables involved in the incident. Perhaps this hartal was an expression of the people of Jorhat of their anti-British feeling which convulsed the whole of India that time.²³

The Deputy Commissioner and the Superintendent of Police visited the place for an on-the-spot study on the day of the incident.²⁴ Four constables of Jorhat town police were arrested and sent up for trial on specific charges for the incident. This led to discontent among the sepoys and the armed constables. They called a meeting on August 22 and decided to go on strike.²⁵

On that very night (i.e. on August 22) the constables struck work and announced that they would refuse to obey the orders and attend the parade the following morning.²⁶

The authorities took a serious view of the strike and described it as the "most serious event of the fortnight".²⁷ "The strike, which was quite unexpected, disclosed a regrettable lack of discipline among the police in Jorhat" wrote the Commissioner of Assam to the Home Secretary, Government of India.²⁸ The Deputy Commissioner immediately called on the Assam Valley Light Horse for aid which took the possession of the police lines in the following morning.²⁹ The strikers were disarmed and arrested. The Inspector-General of Police also rushed from Shillong to Jorhat with a platoon of Assam Rifles and took the control of Jorhat in the following day.³⁰ The IGP also held a departmental inquiry. While ninety constables were dismissed from service other offenders were given departmental punishment.³¹

Assam Oil Company Workers' Strike (1929)

The workers of the Assam Oil Company went on a strike in 1929. This strike was important because for the first time, different political parties supported the labour and sent their representatives to study the situation.

The socialists were trying to take up the labour cause wherever possible. Mr. M. K. Sahu of Madras, a representative of the Trade Union Congress came to Assam in 1928 and he visited coal-

mines, oil fields and gardens of Assam to gather first hand information about the labour condition in Assam.³² Chowdhury Chowka Singh of Jamshedpur, a trade union activist came to Tinsukia and Lakhimpur district outwardly for the purpose of starting labour unions but actually to foment strikes among the employees of the Assam Oil Company at Tinsukia and Digboi.³³ He declared that he was sent by Sri Subhash Chandra Bose.³⁴ He addressed the oil workers of Tinsukia on September 25, 1929 and emphasised the need of organised movement of the labour and of forming trade unions. He distributed pamphlets printed in Hindi and Assamese formulating the demands which labour should make in future.³⁵ He and one of his lieutenants, Swami Jitananda addressed several public meetings from time to time in the subsequent period to gain the labourers' confidence.³⁶ It was mainly at the instigation of these people and a band of local socialists that the workers of Digboi Oil field, who were the victims of capitalist exploitation, began to organise themselves for the first time.

The working condition of the Assam Oil Company, Digboi was not satisfactory. Though the physical facilities and working condition in this factory was certainly better than the plantation labourers in Assam, those were certainly worse than many other factories in India of similar status. The workers were subjected to hard work-in many cases fourteen hours a day including Sundays. They were not entitled to enjoy any holiday nor did they receive any extra allowance for the over-time work.

Protesting against such working condition, about 800 workers of Digboi Oil field struck work. They demanded weekly holiday, extra payment for overtime work and additional proportionate pay for working on Sunday.³⁷ The authorities after a few months of bargaining, conceded to the workers' demands. Weekly holiday or proportionate pay for working on Sundays were allowed including over-time allowance.³⁸ These concessions secured by the workers from a foreign capitalist enterprise was considered to be an achievement on their part.

From the above discussion we may construe that it was during 1918-30 labour movement in the non-plantation sector and among the white collar employees began to crystallise in Assam. In the plantation industry also this period saw the sudden out burst of labour protest and strikes, in increasing number. Compared to industrially developed regions like Bengal or Bombay, industrial labour in Assam was quite late to organise themselves for collective bargaining. One main factor for this was the late emergence

of industrial working force in the state. Beside this, there were some other reasons also which explain why the non-plantation workers were even late to form Trade Unions compared to other parts of the country. The local Assamese entrepreneurs found it very difficult to attract local labour which resulted in the inflow of immigrant labour into Assam, this explains the numerical preponderance of the immigrants in the labour force of the state. As a consequence, the composition of labour force in the state became heterogeneous and multi-lingual in character ; this might have hindered the mobilisation of workers into labour organisations for a considerable time. Another factor might be the isolation of the workers in Assam from the mainstream of industrial working force.

One noticeable point in these strikes was that in almost all cases the workers organised themselves against the employers without any external assistance and in most cases the strikes were spontaneous. Congress or its provincial wing did not take up the workers cause. More pathetic was the role of the Indian National Congress which could not give the workers any guidance or assistance which was expected from this national organisation. They even did not pay any serious attention to the workers struggle in Assam-be it plantation or in the non-plantation sector. In some isolated instances like Assam Bengal Railway Strike, Digboi Oil workers strike or Dhubri AMCO workers strike, some Congressmen took side with the workers, but Congress as an organisation failed to give the workers any effective leadership.⁹⁹ In most cases the workers in Assam had to carry on their struggle on their own. Thus we see that it was during this period that the workers in Assam began to organise themselves for collective bargaining. This period also see the emergence of class consciousness among the workers. This was the prelude to wider struggle and movement of the workers which took place in Assam both in the plantation and non-plantation sector in later years.

Note & References

1. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, "*History from Below*", Presidential Address, Modern India Section, Indian History Congress, Kurukshetra, 1983.
2. a) Rana Pratap Behal, "Some Aspects of the growth of the plantation labour force and labour movement in Assam Valley Districts (Lakhimpur, Sibsagar and Darrang) 1900-1945, Ph. D. Thesis, Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, N. Delhi, 1983.
b) Dipankar Banerjee, "Labour Unrest in Assam : Some

Aspects of the Labour Movement among the Non-plantation Workers (1919-39)," M. Phil Thesis, Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, N. Delhi, 1983.

3. Mitra, N. K. ed., *Indian Annual Register.*, Vol. 1 of 1922, Calcutta, P. 71 ; *Report of the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee*, 1921-22, Govt. of Assam, 1922, pp. 13-14.
4. B. Dutta Roy, *Assam Secretariat (1874-1947)*, Calcutta, 1978, pp. 187-91.
5. Order of the Chief Commissioner, Finance Dept, Govt, of Assam, dated 3 Nov. 1917 and 23 Oct. 1917 and other relevant orders cited in *Assam Legislative Council Proceedings (1918)*, No. 1, and No. 4., Shilong, Assam.
6. Amalendu Guha, *Planter Raj to Swaraj - Freedom Struggle and Electrol Politics in Assam 1826-1947*, New Delhi, 1977, p.107 ; *The Statesman*, Calcutta, Sept. 6 and 11, Cited in *Assam Legislative Council Proceedings (1918)*, No. 4, P. 162.
7. *Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report*, Govt. of Assam, Shillong, 1922 ; *Am ita Bazar Patrika*, 20 July, 1920.
8. *The Statesman*, 20 July, 1920, p. 5 ; *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 20 July, 1920, p. 6.
9. *Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report*, *op. cit.*, pp. 7-8.
10. *Ibid.*
11. For details see :
 - a) Dipankar Banerjee, *Historic Assam-Bengal Railway Workers' Strike (1921) : A Survey*, published in the *Proceedings of North East India History Association*, Fourth Session, Barapani, (Shillong, 1984).
 - b) P. Saha, *History of Working Class Movement in Bengal*, N. Dehli, 1978.
 - c) Dipankar Banerjee, "Working Class Non-Representation in National Movement : The Assam case," Paper presented at the Annual Seminar of the Dept. of History, Calcutta University, pp. 7-8.
12. A. Guha, *op. cit.* pp. 188 ; *Asamiya*, Oct-Nov. issues, 1928 ; also relevant Home Political Files 1928, NAI.
**Similar demands were also raised by the workers of Western India Match Company in Bengal, a sister concern of AMCO
13. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, Nov. 9, 1928 ; Copy of the charter of demands in possession of Sri Bepin Ch. Chakraborty, the veteran leader of AMCO workers during 1936 onwards.

- 14 *Assam Police Abstract of Intelligence*, D.O. No. 106, 1 Feb. 1936.
15. Home Political File (Fortnightly Report), No. 1/1928 Second half, Nov. 1928. 16. *Ibid.*
17. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, Nov., 1928, p. 3; also 14 Nov., 1928, p.6.
- *** The fifteen discharged men were given shelter in a house at the bazar area of Dhubri town and the rent of house was paid by public donations. Local Socialist and Congress workers carried a fund collection drive to support these fifteen discharged employees. The workers hoisted a flag and placed play cards in front of the rented house and in several other places which inscribed "Be men again", "Independence of India" etc. They called themselves a "Seva Samity" (Home Political File No.1/1. Second half, November, 1928).
18. Home Political File (FR), No. 1/1928, Second Half Nov.
19. *Ibid* ; *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, *op. cit.*
20. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, Sep. 1, 1929, p. 6. 21. *Ibid.*
22. *Asamiya*, 24 Aug, 1929, Gauhati, p. 5.
23. *Ibid.* 24. *Ibid.* 25. *Ibid.*, 31 Aug, 1929, p. 5. 26. *Ibid.*
27. Home Political File (Fortnight Report), No. 17/29, Second half, Aug, 1929.
28. *Ibid.* 29. *Amrita Bazar Partika*, 1 Sept. 1929, p. 6.
30. *Ibid.* 31. *Asamiya*, 7 Sept. 1929, p. 5.
32. Home Political File No. 1/1928 (FR), Second Half, April, 1928.
33. *Ibid*, File No. 17/1929 (FR), Second Half, September, 1929.
34. *Ibid.* 35. *Ibid.*
36. A. C. Bhuyan ec. *Political History of Assam*, (Gauhati, 1978). Vol. II, p. 261.
37. Home Political File (FR) No. 1/1929, January 1929 ; A. Guha, *op. cit.* p. 188.
38. *Ibid*, File No. 17/1929 (FR), Second half, Sept. 1929.
39. Dipankar Banerjee, *A brief note on the role of Congress in the Labour struggle in Assam during 1919-39*, Published in the *Proceedings of the North East India History Association*, Third session, Imphal, (Shillong, 1983), pp. 182-190 ; Sajal Nag, *Working Class Alienation in Swadeshi and Non-Co-operation: a reflection of the class character of Nationalist Movement in Assam (1905-24)*, published in the *Proceedings of the North East India History Association*, Third Session, Imphal, (Shillong, 1983), pp. 169-181.