

LABOUR MOVEMENT IN ASSAM

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The period intervening the two World Wars saw the formative stage of the organized working class movement in different parts of India. Assam was no exception. Labour movement of this period, though basically fought on economic grounds, has been a part of the imperialist movement as well. However, labour history of North East India has remained a barren field of research and there is no single monograph on the subject to refer. In this backdrop, *Labour Movement in Assam* is a pioneering work which makes an attempt to fill that void.

The study examines the nature of the working class movement in Assam during the period intervening the two World Wars in the non-plantation sector with special reference to the Assam Oil Company Workers' Strike of 1939 which got the unique distinction of being the most important labour movement in the province during the pre-independence era. In addition, the book throws light on the strike of the workers at the Assam Government Press, Dibru-Sadiya Railways, Assam Bengal Railways, Assam Match Company and Assam Railway and Trading Company. The study also refers to a strike by the police force at Jorhat. The narrative is structured chronologically with an integrated historical framework and is based on a wide range of primary and secondary sources of varied nature.

LABOUR MOVEMENT IN ASSAM

A STUDY OF NON-PLANTATION WORKERS'
STRIKES TILL 1939

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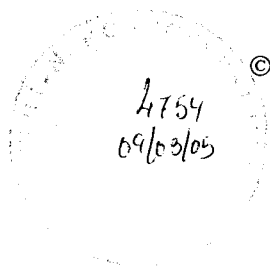
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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this study is to make an investigation into the nature of the working class movement in Assam during the period intervening between the two World Wars in the non-plantation sector with special emphasis on the Assam Oil Company workers' strike of 1939. This period witnessed the growing solidarity and consciousness among the working class in Assam and non-plantation workers were no exception. Attempt has been made in this study to bring to light some aspects of this movement with appropriate documentation. While giving a general idea of the non-plantation workers' movement, which has been arranged chronologically, the strike of Assam Oil Company workers of 1939 (which incidentally has got the distinction of being the most important strike in Assam during the pre-independence era), has been incorporated as a case study.

The study is undertaken following historical methods of investigation predominantly on the basis of hitherto unexplored primary source materials.

The term 'working class movement' is used in this study to designate all the organised activities of the industrial wage earners in the non-plantation sector in general and petroleum industry in particular for the improvement of their overall condition, including wages. The very term 'movement' signifies a dynamic process having its own background gestation, birth, growth and progress propelled by the changes in the structure of relations. In this study we have taken up only some aspects

of this complex process. Further, we have incorporated a case study of the Oil industry workers' movement in Assam which, next to plantations engaged maximum labour force in Assam in the organised sector. However, we have also included in two initial chapters a survey of other non-plantation workers' struggle in the state during 1919-39 as this area practically has remained a barren field of research. It is to be noted that the data on the plantation labour are available (Indian Tea Association papers, Annual proceedings, Reports of different companies etc.), but data on non-plantation labour force, particularly in relation to Assam, are not plentiful.

Ramkumar Vidyaratna wrote one of the earliest books that highlighted the problems of Assam labour. In his *Coolie Kahini*, published from Calcutta in 1884, Ramkumar depicted a painful story of the exploitation of tea garden labourers by the European planters. But except for a few articles which appeared occasionally in the Calcutta press in the later part of the nineteenth century and in the local press at the beginning of the twentieth century, the problem of industrial labour was never taken up seriously by the intelligentsia. The Royal Commission of Labour in India recorded some written evidences about labour related issues of Assam (London, 1930 Part I in relation to Assam and Douars). Mill's Report on Assam (1854), and two earliest works on Assam industries—one by Gownthrop and the other by Griffiths have practically ignored the subject of labour movement. However, some correspondence of the Indian Tea Association in relation to labour movement, which were previously marked confidential, are now available for the research scholars for consultation. V.V. Giri, Sukomal Sen, V.B. Karnik, A.S. Mathur and J.S. Mathur—who have made pioneering contribution towards labour research in India, unfortunately remained practically silent on the developments in the labour movement in Assam, except for some casual mention about the Digboi strike. G.K. Sharma who has authored a book on Labour movement in India from 1885 to 1980, surprisingly kept limited his research on labour movement of the North-Eastern India to just one line. Except for Chargola exodus of 1921 the movement of the working class in the rest of the province remained practically unmentioned in the pioneering works of the scholars engaged in research of working class movement in India.

Amalendu Guha, in his *Planter Raj to Swaraj* (1977), touched on this important subject, though his work had a different focus altogether.

Still, it must be admitted that Guha touched upon different aspects of the labour movement in the province of Assam—both plantation and non-plantation. Though extremely sketchy and all inclusive he dealt the matter in about two and half pages in total covering several chapters, it gave a food for thought for the future researchers in the related field. In 1978 *Political History of Assam*, Vol II, edited by Arun Ch. Bhuyan and Sibapada De was published where a full chapter was incorporated on the Trade Union and allied movements in Assam of which about five pages have been devoted to AMCO and AOC workers' strike. *The Comprehensive History of India*, Volume V edited by H.K. Barpujari, gives a good narrative of the beginning of oil exploration and influx of immigrants in the tea industry. But this comprehensive work, spread in five volumes, has not touched the subject of labour movement. Except for a Doctoral thesis by Rana Pratap Behl on tea workers' struggle in the Darrang district of Assam, and a few articles on tea garden labourers published in the proceedings volume of the North East India History Association and the North East India Council for Social Science Research, history of the working class struggle in Assam has practically remained an unexplored area of research. And the field of study of non-plantation workers' movement in the province has remained totally barren. Nevertheless, the importance of the Oil workers' strike of 1939 and the multi-dimensional problems associated with it prompted the author to study this neglected area of research.

The backward and underdeveloped nature of the colonial Indian economy was a serious obstacle in the way of formation of labour organisations. The workers in India were a heterogeneous and multilingual ethnic group that lacked homogeneity and class solidarity in newly developing industrial centres and these groups could not be easily organised. They lacked legal safeguards. Another hindrance on their way to organise themselves was the backward and underdeveloped nature of the Indian economy—the product of British capitalism. Moreover, India was predominantly an agricultural country. Industrialisation was still in an infant stage. Some importance was given to small and cottage industries. Work in factories involved the labourers in jobs of periodic nature; and most of them were therefore employed only for a short period. All these factors were accompanied by the fact that the labourers and a large segment of working class population

lacked education and were ignorant of the strength of unity, which was one factor that enabled the British to rule over and exploit India for almost two hundred years.¹ The working class in India inherited with them various superstitious habits and customs. "There was no opportunity for these men to get out of casteism, racialism and religious superstitions of Indian social life and the harmful influence of medieval ideas. They were born as Indian working class remaining deeply imbued with the obscurantist ideas and backward trends. This had gravely harmful and far reaching effects on the organisation and movement of the Indian working class".²

Further, the young Indian trade union movement had to face highly organised employers from the outset, mostly British. It has been suggested that "surplus labour" was another important factor which prevented the growth of trade union movement in India. The enormous supply of working hands was the cause "that the workers were out of work, or the pay was so extremely low that they were continually compelled to live a life of hunger and deprivation.... The Indian working class was permanently threatened to be pushed back by some of their unemployed starving comrades".³ The Indian working class was a largely incoherent group and the effective unification of the trade unions was a difficult task which took a considerable time. Under normal conditions the level of workmen's consciousness increased in proportion to the advancement of workers' struggle against capitalist exploitation. However, in a colony, the features of capitalist exploitation is added with colonial exploitation too, which stands in the way of the workers' fight for economic concessions that retards the growth of their class consciousness. "A colonial regime means the open dictatorship of imperialism in its crudest form, implying thereby that in a colony the oppression of the working class grows immeasurably assuming the most ugly and monstrous character".⁴

Successful economic struggle is admittedly one of the main factors determining the conditions for the sale of labour power and the degree of capitalist exploitation. Further this struggle puts a limit on the otherwise boundless quest for profit to which capital is impelled by competition. In independent countries of the west the industrial wage earners sold their labour-power at the price which gravitated more or less towards its value or at least towards the cost of means of subsistence physically

needed by a worker. But in colonial India, rightly observes Sukomal Sen, “while on the one hand, low cultural standard, lack of elementary education, heterogeneity in its composition and decay in getting organised greatly hampered the successful economic struggle of the working class, intensification of exploitation on the other hand, rose up to such an extent that sale of labour power by the workers at a fraction of its real value became the general rule”.⁵

The genesis of labour movement in India could be found in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, though the first quarter of the twentieth century saw the birth of the trade unions as we understand today. Sorabjee Shapurjee Bengalee started a movement as early as 1875 in Bombay to change the appalling condition of the industrial workers, particularly for women and children. The foundation of organised labour movement was, however, laid by Narayan Meghajee Lokhandey, who in 1884 organised an agitation to redress the workers’ grievances and made a representation to the Factory Commission. He initiated a mass movement of the workers of Bombay which compelled the mill owners to declare a weekly holiday to its workers.⁶ Though the Indian workers were unable to champion their own cause, educated philanthropist and social workers like Lokhandey, Shapurjee, P.C. Mazumdar, Sasipada Banerjee felt the necessity to help the workers to redress their grievances. They were the first among the Indian intelligentsia to champion the cause of labour. It was mainly at their initiative that the government appointed the first Factory Labour Commission in 1890 which led to the passing of the Factory Act of 1891. In the development of trade unionism in India, the role of the intellectuals had been tremendous. “...they verbalized, supplied theories and slogans for it.... made it conscious of itself and in so doing changed its meaning”.⁷

It was only after the end of the First World War that the Indian working class realised the full possibilities of the weapon of strike as a means for obtaining concessions—higher wages, bonus and improvement of working conditions. Though the workers’ organisations were coming up in the increasing number during 1900-1914, they were characterised by a philanthropic orientation under the middle class leadership. “On the other hand, there were occasional outbursts of working class militancy in spontaneous strikes, riots and forms of protest which were primitive, unorganised and atomistic (often characterised as industrial

crime by the authorities). However, the extension of the struggle and the growth of a number of organisations laid the foundation for building up of modern trade unions and properly organised trade union movements".⁸ The period saw the formative stage of the organised working class movement in India.

The period intervening between the two World Wars constituted an eventful phase of the working class movement in India. The World War and the developments in Russia during 1917 onwards brought noticeable changes in the working class consciousness which gave a swing to the working class movement. It was a period of developing consciousness and organisation of trade unions of the working class. Their movement now assumed a highly significant role in national political perspective. World War I and the Russian Revolution were a turning point in the history of both international and national labour struggle which made the workers more alert about their rights. These also resulted in making the working class conscious which in turn led to the formation of trade unions in increasing numbers. The economic drainage of the country during and immediately after the war imposed a heavy burden of misery on the working proletariat. Taxation increased considerably and wages could not keep pace with the enormous rise in prices. This was a period of intense labour unrest in the industrial centres like Bombay, Ahmedabad, Kanpur, Madras, Calcutta, Sholapur, and that prepared the ground for the creation of a central trade union body to provide the workers effective guidelines. These developments led to the birth of All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) in 1920. While trade unions in pre-independent India were never affiliated to any political party, they enjoyed their support.⁹ Though during the first few years, the top leadership of AITUC remained in the hands of the moderate elements in the Indian National Congress (INC), during 1926-29 the leftist influence on the workers were clearly visible. Gradually, the leftists succeeded in establishing themselves as the 'most trusted friends' of the Indian working class. "The storm of working class movement that swept the different industrial centres of India during 1928-29 resulted in the rise of a left-oriented leadership spearheaded by the communists. Tested in the crusible militant struggle, the communists of India rose as the most trusted and beloved leaders of the Indian working class. The protracted struggles that burst forth

in different parts of the country imparted the communists an invaluable schooling in the art of militant trade unionism".¹⁰

One noticeable feature of the Indian labour movement was that it was mainly confined to the organised industries like factories, plantations, transports, and mines. There was no movement of the labour force in the primary sector and small industries which faced the worst form of exploitation.¹¹ It was perhaps a historical inevitability that the labour movement in India originated in the plantations, the earliest capitalist enterprise in India. It developed as an unorganised and spontaneous protest; plantation workers could not organise themselves into unions because of their abject condition of virtual serfdom. In India, the first labour organisations were formed by the workers of the railways and textile industries. It extended to dock workers, seamen, post and telegraph lower grade staff, municipal workers, factory workers, taxi drivers, workers of oil companies. Even among the clerks and other white collar proletariat, who got themselves unionised between the two World Wars.

In the context of these developments in the colonial Indian economy as a whole, we have to scan the developments in the province of Assam. Till the first quarter of the twentieth century, Assam had no industry worth the name except tea, coal and petroleum. Due to a number of factors, the developments of this province in the industrial field was going on in snail's pace, in spite of the fact that Assam had very good natural resource base and potentialities for industrial growth. Tea, coal and petroleum, in the true sense of the term, were not manufacturing industries. By 1926, a match factory was established at Dhubri which was the first manufacturing industry of the province in the modern sense. These industries, however, engaged labourers, who were the main wage-earning population of the province in the beginning of the twentieth century. The majority of this population were immigrant labourers with a predominantly rural background. With a relatively few landless cultivators, people of Assam were strongly attached to their lands even when their holdings were tiny and uneconomical. Temperamentally, they were reluctant to serve as subservient factory workers. That explains the numerical preponderance of the immigrant population in the plantation, and, among the non-plantation wage-earning force of Assam. Though Assam constituted only 3.2 per cent of the

total factory workers of India in 1939,¹² about 83 per cent of these labourers came from outside the State.*

Compared to other states of India, Assam came under British rule quite late. East India Company being a profit making body was apprehensive of entering this region without having sufficient knowledge of its potentialities. Naturally, the benefits which came as an offshoot of the East India Company's rule like education and improvement of communication, did not percolate to the Assamese society. People of the province lacked entrepreneur. Assam was essentially a self-supporting village economy based on agriculture. Its economic potentialities were, therefore, waiting to be tapped by the East India Company and other foreign entrepreneurs. The prospect of trade and commerce in the Assam Valley with which some Bengal-based European mercantile concerns had maintained trade connections since the eighteenth century drew particular attention of the East India Company during the war against the Burmese. Discovery of tea, coal and oil around that period added incentives to the East India Company's policy of promotion of commerce in the province.¹³ Circumstances were not favourable for the growth and accumulation of local capital which was a definite hindrance towards industrialisation. While natural resources were available in Assam in abundance, other factors of production viz., labour and capital were not easily available. Inadequate training facilities resulted in the dearth of technically qualified personnel. Assam had a restricted market. Further, during the Ahom rule, for several centuries Assam

* As per N. Das, Assam constituted a total percentage of 3.2 factory workers in 1938, 2.4 in 1945, 2.5 in 1948 and 1949 respectively, of the total factory workers in India.

Territorial distribution of the Factory workers in the year 1939 in percentage.

<i>STATES</i>	<i>PERCENTAGE</i>
Ajmer	0.8
Assam	3.2
Bihar	5.9
Bombay	28.6
Delhi	1.1
Madhya Pradesh	4.0
Madras	12.1
Orissa	0.3
Punjab	1.4
Uttar Pradesh	9.8
West Bengal	32.8

followed a policy of virtual aloofness in matters of trade and her connection with Indian mainstream market was confined to border trade with Bengal. All these explain the relative backwardness of the province in the industrial sector. Plantations, which started growing as an industry quite steadily since mid-nineteenth century under British capital, engaged the Lion's share of the working force. These immigrant plantation labourers were the main wage-earning population of the province. Next to plantations, it was oil industry that engaged maximum labourers. The condition of the plantation labourers needs to be scanned. The pathetic and inhuman condition in which the tea garden labourers spent their days is now well known. "*The coolies* were in a state of quasi-slavery, no state of recognised slavery could be worse".¹⁴ The exploitation of these *coolies* by the Planters excelled even the legendary slave owners. These exploited plantation workers were the first to raise their voice against the authorities and the history of the working class movement in the state started with the struggle and sacrifice of the tea garden labourers. Way back in 1848, the labour of the Assam Company struck work and gheraoed the Superintendent's office to realise three months' arrear of their wages and they succeeded to get an assurance from the management for regular payment of wages in future.¹⁵ This struggle of the plantation workers continued in the face of heavy odds throughout the nineteenth century and more vigorously from the first quarter of the twentieth century. Their determined struggle was mainly responsible for the creation of a sense of class consciousness among the other wage-earning population which began to emerge slowly and gradually in Assam in the first quarter of the twentieth century. But remaining far away from the modern industrial centres, they were very slow to imbibe the outlook and attitude of the modern proletariat. In India, the foreign capitalists—particularly planters and oil monopolies—were enjoying the support of the entire state machinery. Assam, characterised by slow growth of industrialisation and the resultant lack of an organised labour force, experienced since the termination of the First World War 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 also bounced considerably. This led to widespread discontent among the plantation and other wage-earning labour who fettered with problems both financial and otherwise, started to organise themselves.

“Industrial unrest is the only one phase of general unrest which has prevailed since the close of the War in every country of the world.... The increase in the cost of foodstuffs, cloth and other necessities of life has followed by the rise in the wages of all classes of labour but the rise in wages has not at all times and in all industries kept pace with the increase in prices The labour situation has not been uninfluenced by the great political development of the last few years” observed the Commission on Industrial unrest in Bengal in 1921.¹⁶ In Assam also it was after the War labour movement began to take momentum. “In Bengal, Bihar and Assam, extensive industrial strike 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.”¹⁷ 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.¹⁸

The Indian National Congress did not effectively take up the socio-economic issues of the working class till the termination of the First World War. In contravention of the Congress programme, the Fifth Surma Valley Political Conference (19-20 September, 1920) passed a long resolution which gave a direct call to the tea garden labourers to non-cooperate with their European employers.¹⁹ The resolutions made a deep impression on the plantation labour of the valley. After the formation of the All India Trade Union Congress in 1920 it was expected that this body would take up the cause of the Assam plantation labour as it aimed to promote Trade Union activities in the regions where it had not penetrated.²⁰ But this did not transpire immediately. The Commission, appointed by the Government of Assam to look after the cause of labour unrest (1921), recommended that in the absence of trade unions, labour grievances should not be ignored, rather it should be given best attention by the authorities concerned.²¹ This recommendation, however, had no practical significance.

Though AITUC did not take up the cause of working class population in Assam, in isolated cases local Congressmen tried to

mobilise labour and began to put pressure on the alien management. Following the resolutions passed in the Surma Valley Political Conference,* in Assam the tea garden labourers began to organise themselves in support of their legitimate demands. There followed a number of strikes in different tea gardens in Assam and in some cases the workers were successful in fulfilling their demands. Encouraged by the struggle of the plantation workers, a spirit of self-consciousness was infused among the other wage-earning population of the province. The non-cooperation movement (1921-22) that followed gave the workers a new strength. "Gandhiji's creed entered there. Gandhiji's name worked like a balm to the tortured souls of the poor *coolies* and the workers".²² In the absence of a trade union (the province had no registered trade union till mid-thirties), labourers in the province took up their cause spontaneously. The struggle was on. In spite of all these developments Assam's politicians and the middle class elite, by and large, remained aloof from the working class movement unlike Bengal, Bombay or Nagpur. "More serious and increasing plight of the workers among the *Bhadrolok* class post dates World War I".²³ In isolated cases some Congressmen like Omeo Kumar Das, Nabin Chandra Bardoloi, Hem Chandra Barman and Kedar Nath Goswami wrote occasional articles in periodicals supporting the cause of labour. The visit of Arthur Parcell and Hallsworth, two British trade union leaders to Assam in 1927, and Indian labour leaders like Hare Krishna Sahu from Madras, Swami Jita Nanda and others about the same time immensely inspired the workers. Jawaharlal Nehru's visit to Assam in 1937 and his pro-labour radical speeches also gave a boost to the labour movement in the province.

* The Fifth Surma Valley Political Conference (19-20 Sept., 1920), presided over by Md. Abdul Karim under the Congress banner, decided to refuse to serve under European Planters and Merchants and proposed "Gradual withdrawal of those who are already in service" *Assam Legislative Council Proceedings*, Shillong, 1921, Vol. I, pp. 881-84. What Congressmen meant by gradual withdrawal from service was not resignation or strike in the manner of normal labour strikes and therefore very few Congressmen tried to act in this spirit. Mention may be made of an attempt made by Abdul Matin Chowdhury (1895-1948) a young lawyer and Congressman, to form a Khansama Union at Shillong with an aid of causing inconvenience to the resident Europeans. The Government took exception to his activities and externed him from Khasi and Jaintia Hills district and thus ended the earliest attempt in Assam to form a trade union.

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