

Match Factory Workers of Assam : Some Reflections on Their Early Movement (During 1928-37)

Dipankar Banerjee

Till the first quarter of the present century Assam had no industry worth the name, except oil and plantation. Plantation, was, however, not a manufacturing industry in the true sense of the term, as a major portion of the Tea industry is agriculture based. One of the early manufacturing industries which started in Assam during 1920s was the Match Industry. Since its very inception, the match factory workers had to face highly organised employers, mostly Swedish. This essay attempts to look into some aspects of the struggle of the match factory workers in Dhubri which compelled them to go on strike thrice within twelve years of its establishment.

Assam Match Company (AMCO), a subsidiary of the Western India match Company and a Swedish venture, was established in 1925 at Dhubri, the head quarter town of Goalpara district in Assam.

Before the first World War, demand for match in India market was met by imports from foreign countries, mainly Japan and Sweden. During and immediately after the first World War the import of matches from Sweden increased considerably. Considering the fact that India would have a good market for matches, the Swedish Match Co., a pioneer match manufacturing company of world, established match manufacturing factories at Calcutta, Bombay (Ambarnath), Madras, Bairelly and Dhubri between 1923 and 1929. While all the factories (except Dhubri) became the part of Western India Match Company Ltd., the Dhubri factory was commissioned as Assam Match Company in 1925 with an issued capital of £28,000.

When the factory was established in 1925, the total manpower employed in the factory was about 500. Most of these workers were unskilled. In the district of (undivided) Goalpara there were relatively few landless cultivators and the people were strongly attached to their lands even if their holdings were tiny. It was on that account that recruitment of labour for the Dhubri factory posed a problem to the company. The unskilled labourers who constituted the majority of

the total men power employed, had to be collected from interior villages in lieu of 'Dadan' (a sort of cash award for joining the factory)².

The match industry required three categories of labour: skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled. While the unskilled labourers were collected locally, the semi-skilled labour had to be brought from Bihar and Bengal. Persons included in this category were fitters, cleaners, stakers etc. Skilled workers included draughtsmen, electrician etc. and they were entirely recruited from outside. A look at the rolls of the semi-skilled and skilled workers of the factory shows that most of these workers came from Bihar and Bengal³.

The company was making large profits and paid high dividends to its share holders; but the wages it paid to the labourers was low. Not only that, wage reduction became a regular feature of the company (see table -1). Even the deputy Commissioner of Goalpara admitted these facts in his confidential report to the Government⁴. The ordinary workers had a seven - day week, they did not receive any compensation for accidents nor were they entitled to any extra pay for over-time work⁵. Protesting against this unfavourable working condition, the workers of the company went on a strike from November 2, 1928, demanding increase of pay, better working conditions etc.⁶ Their charter of demands consisted (a) the period of working hours should be from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. on all week-days 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 Muslim workers should be provided with a plot of land within the factory premises for offering their prayers; (g) revision of wages.

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 expressed its sympathy with the workers of the factory. The strikers were financially assisted

by the daughter of a Goalpara Zaminder who is said to have taken an active interest in the strike⁸. The cause of Match Factory workers was also taken up by local Congressmen and social workers.

Table - 1

Wages of Ordinary Unskilled Workers of Assam Match Company, Dhubri (1926-1928)

Year	Wages per week
1926	Rs. 2 Anna 6 and Paisa 2,
1927	Rs. 2 Anna 3
1928	Rs. 1 Anna 15 and Paisa 2

Sources: (a) Weekly pay statement of AMCO

(b) Records kept with Sri Bepin Ch. Chakraborty.

The Raja of Gauripur (Assam), one of the Provincial Directors of the Company, and Mr. R.N.Choudhury were appointed arbitrators to settle the matter amicably between the parties but they failed to come to any settlement. 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 evening¹⁰.

Though the strike failed, its importance was immense because it was the first labour unrest which had manifested in the district.

In 1934-35, when AMCO's sister concern WIMCO, Calcutta was shifted from Narikeldanga to Dakshineswar, some of its skilled workers were transferred from Calcutta to Dhubri factory. Bengal was then convulsed in trade union activities and these workers who came from Calcutta to Dhubri had faith in the ideologies of the Bengal Labour Party. These workers took note of the labour dissatisfaction at AMCO and they informed Bengal Labour Party, to utilise this opportunity to mobilise

trade union movement in Assam where the trade union movement was in the formative stage. The Bengal Labour Party decided to send its Asstt. Secretary, Mr. Bepin Chandra Chakraborty, a veteran trade unionist and an active member of All India Labour Association, to organise the workers of Assam Match factory, Dhubri.*

Immediately after his arrival, Shri Chakraborty set on the task was the formation of a trade union of the workers of the factory. He persuaded the labourers to combine to gather and within a very short time formed the Bengal-Assam Match Factory Workers' Union in December 1935 and applied for its registration to the Registrar of Trade Unions, Shillong, Assam under the Trade Union Act, 1926¹². In the meantime the grievances of the workers reached its peak along with retrenchment which was going on unrestrained, the company decided to implement from January 1936 a severe wage-cut. It is difficult to ascertain the exact number of retrenchment, as the number given in the Company's Statement, Govt. records and strike committee claims are contradictory. However, all reports are unanimous in respect of retrenchment of the workers of "caseboard" dept. of the factory where by September 1936,¹³ as many as 13 workers were sacked by the Management.

Table -II

LABOUR WAGE IN ASSAM MATCH COMPANY IN 1935

Category of Labour	Wage
1. Ordinary Labour (Un-skilled labour)	9, 1/2 Anna per day
2. Semi-skilled labour	Rs.30/- to 36/-p.m.
3. Skilled labour	Rs.45/- to Rs.100/-p.m.

Sources:(a) Records in possession of Shri Bepin Chandra Chakraborty.

(b) My interview with Mr. Moni Kanta Das, the Store Keeper of AMCO who was beaten up by during the AMCO strike. He is an octogenarian and resides at Dhubri. Some official papers are there in his personal possession.

The workers and neither any security of life, nor insurance against accidents nor any prospect of further improvement.

The Union⁴ formulated an eighteen point charter of demands which included no wage-cut, weekly holiday for the workers, dearness allowance, increase of pay of all categories of workers, security of services and recognition of Union. They carried on negotiation with the company but failed to secure any concession. The Union then decided to go on a strike against the "Company's zooloom". Accordingly, nearly 400 workers of the factory went on a strike from the morning of 6 January, 1936. The strikers comprised of all section of workers including sanitary and security staff. The supervisory staff, who did not join the strike in the beginning, joined it from the sixth day⁵. Only a few of the clerical staff took side with the management.

The strike continued for about eight weeks and was total. The production of the factory came to a standstill. The management initially tried to threaten the workers with the possibility of terminating of their services and tried to recruit labour from the neighbouring areas⁶. Shri Chakravarty and a band of active striking employees of the factory physically prevented the new recruits from joining and thus thwarted the company's attempt⁷ to resume production with the help of new recruits.

The strike led to stoppage of production for more than two months and naturally the company faced a severe crisis. This compelled the management to come to terms. The management invited the union executive which responded to the call. The main terms for settlement which the union leaders placed before the management consisted inter-alia, (i) re-introduction of the rate of wages paid under Mr. Gumming; (ii) No victimisation of striking employees; (iii) reinstatement of all employees to their respective posts held at the time of the strike; (iv) recognition of the Union etc⁸. After two days of discussions, the management conceded to all the demands of the workers except the one on no-victimisation for participating in the strike.

This was the first recorded triumph of the industrial workers in the district of undivided Goalpara. The workers were emboldened for future action due to the success in this strike.

Mr. Chakravarty now became a person of great concern to the AMCO management, local police and the Government. The police now kept close watch on his activities and movements and at one time was at the point of externing him from Assam. "Were his presence in Dhubri prevented, a great deal of stamina of the local labour party would disappear", reported Dhubri Police to the Home Secretary¹⁹. The Superintendent of Police of the Goalpara District opined that through Bepin Chandra Chakravarty "Communist influences are working under the cloak of Bengal Labour Party"²⁰. Mr. Chakravarty organised for the first time in Assam, a huge May-Day rally at Dhubri Idgah field in 1936.²¹

In June 1936, the workers of the Western India Match Company, Ambarnath (a sister concern of AMCO) resorted to strike. Their colleagues in the Dhubri counterpart expressed their solidarity with the striking workers and extended whole hearted support and even declared their willingness to go on a sympathetic strike in support of the Ambarnath factory workers if demands of those workers were not fulfilled²². But things turned for the worse when five workers of AMCO were dismissed from service in November, 1936. The management declared that the workers were sacked on account of their high handed activities while the workers contended that they were sacked due to their involvement in trade union activities. This dismissal of five workers was the immediate cause of the strike that followed. The strike started on 14 December, 1936²³.

Unlike the earlier strike, when the Company conceded to most of the demands of the workers, this time the management was very much adamant. The management declared a lock-out in the factory which continued till the end of April, 1937²⁴.

The strike was peaceful till March, 1937 but later the workers became violent. A number of

cases of assault of officials took place since mid-March. A number of workers were arrested and three of them were given six months' rigorous imprisonment on the ground of "being members of illegal union" and for physically assaulting those who did not join the strike²⁴.

In April the management served notice on those striking employees who were on monthly wage that their services would be terminated, from the first of May as the factory would continue to be closed for an indefinite period²⁶. Things were going from bad to worse. The vested circle tried to foment disturbance and discontent. A section of the clerical and supervisory staff who did not participate in the strike started fomenting communal and racial feelings. They were perhaps backed by the management. Without any visible proof, the Commissioner reported to the Government in December 1936 that "...One of the aims of the Calcutta agitators, who are largely at the bottom of the trouble, is to capture the Assam match market for the Mohammedan match manufacturers of Calcutta"²⁷.

Meanwhile, Chakravarty started a fast unto death from 25 July protesting against the adamant attitude of the company, repression on the strikers and inaction of the Government to settle the issue²⁸. Chakravarty, however, gave up his fasting on the eleventh day, the 4th August, on being assured by the important Congress leaders of the state (Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, Siddhinath Sarma, Bishnu Ram Medhi etc.) that the AMCO-strike would be taken up at the forth-coming session of the Assam Assembly²⁹.

Popular support towards the striking workers was increasing gradually throughout Assam. A Public meeting was held at Curzon Hall, Gauhati on 9 July (under the Presidentship of Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed) at the initiative of local Congress leaders and important citizens to focus their attention on the issue. They condemned the AMCO management for a prolonged lock-out and requested the Government to take steps for an early solution of the issue. It further urged the members of the Assam Legislative Assembly to take steps for electing a non-official committee with a view to enquire into the cause of the strike and trying to bring about reasonable settlement between the authori-

ties and labourers³⁰. This was followed by a visit of Mr. Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed to Dhubri.

The Sadulla Ministry came under severe criticism due to its failure to bring about a solution of the strike. Along with the public, local press (as reflected in the views of Asamiya) also became critical about the labour policy of the Sadulla Government³¹.

An adjournment motion was moved in the Assembly for the purpose of discussing the affairs connected with labour movement of AMCO by Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed which was supported by Abdul Matin Chowdhury and Arun Kumar Chanda (Congress members of the Assamby). The motion was hotly debated but was defeated by a narrow margin of four votes (47-51)³². But the Sadulla Ministry now agreed to form a Conciliation Board to look into the matters of AMCO. The Board consisted of five members with Mr. Cautilie, the Commissioner of the Assam Valley as its President. (Other members of the Board were Mr. Fakhruddin Ali MLA, Omeo Kumar Das, MLA, Badruddin Ahmed, MLA and Mr. Paroda MLA, Mr Ataur Rehman, the Deputy Commissioner of Goalpara was appointed the Secretary of the Board). The board heard both the sides but its³³ decision went in favour of the management by 3-2 votes.

The workers' high hopes of getting a favourable decision from the Conciliation Board were shattered. They fought for nearly one year to achieve their goal but now frustration crept in. Fighting against heavy odds for nearly a year, now they had no alternative but to submit. In the meantime the factory started functioning and through a skeleton service (with the help of skilled and semi-skilled labourers brought from outside) production was resumed in September. In October-November most of the strikers approached the management for re-appointment. The management, after careful consideration and screening, reappointed most of the workers except those activists who took lead in the strike among whom were included Mr. Bankulal Mukherjee, the Secretary of the Action Committee of the Union³⁴.

Though the strikers did not succeed, the importance of the strike cannot be over estimated. Fristly, it was the first organised trade union movement of the district

(undivided Goalpara). Secondly, the most positive aspect of this strike was that it exhibited the labours' solidarity and unity for collective bargaining which in itself was an achievement from the point of view of maturing labour consciousness. Thirdly, for the first time labour received serious attention of the political parties of the state. Lastly, it encouraged other wage-earning and exploited labour of the locality to organise and exert their rights in near future.

Notes and References:

1. **"Live and let live AMCO and WIMCO in India"** a booklet published WIMCO Ltd. (Bombay, undated).
- 2.(a) Official records of AMCO, Dhubri. (I consulted some original documents after securing due permission from AMCO management during 1982-83).
- (b) My interview with Sri Bepin Chandra Chakravarty, a trade union activist of Bengal and one of the Asst. Secretaries of the Bengal Labour Party who later became a leader of Assam Match Company Workers' strike. An octogenarian, Shri Chakravarty is settled at Dhubri at present. He is associated with the publication of a bi-lingual bi-weekly News. paper "Gana Chabuk" published from Dhubri. Some important documents relating to the Match factory workers' movement are in the possession of Sri Chakravarty.
- 3.(a) Ibid:
- (b) **Report of the Board of Conciliation upon the dispute in the Dhubri factory of the Assam Match Company.** Shillong, November, 1989. page 1, Para I.
- 4.(a) Home Political File (FR), No.36-1, Second half, December, 1928.
- (b) Weekly pay statement of AMCO.
- 5.(a) Memorandum of the Strike Committee, submitted to the Conciliation Board later in 1937 (headed by Cautilie) See file No. 316, Gen. Branch, March 38, Govt of Assam.
- (b) My interview, vide f. n.2 (b) above.

- 6.(a) **Asamiya**, October-November issues 1928.
 (b) Guha, Amalendu, **Planter Raj to Swaraj, Freedom struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826-1947**, New Delhi, 1977, p.188.
- 7.(a) **Amrita Bazar Patrika**, 9 November, 1928.
 (b) A copy of the charter of demands in the possession of Sri Bepin Chandra Chakravarty, (Similar demands were also raised by the workers of Western India March Co. a Sister concern of AMCO).
8. Home Political File (FR), No.1/1928, D.O.No.16, November 1928.
9. **Amrita Bazar Patrika**, 9 November, 1928, p.3.
- 10.(a) **Ibid.**, 14 November, 1928.
 (b) Home Political File (FR), No.1/1928, Nov.1928.
- 11.(a) Assam Police Abstract of Intelligience (Goalpara, Assam) No. 106. Feb. 1937, (Relevant portions).
 (b) Police Dept. Spl. Branch, Govt. of Assam, confidential Report of Godfrey to Gumming, No. 481-C, 28 November, 1936.
 (c) Guha f.n. 6(b) above, pp.189.
 I have gone through the original resolution of the meeting of the Bengal labour Party in which the decision of deputing Bepin Ch. Chakravarty to Assam was adopted (Resolution No. 3 of Bengal Labour Party's meeting dated 26 Aug. 1935). For further details see **Bharate Sramik Andoloner Itihas** by Bepin Bhakravarty in Gana-Chabuk (bi-weekly published from Dhubri), Oct-December, 1986 issued.
12. Home Political File (FR), No. 18-1-36 (Second half, January 1936).
- 13.(a) **Report of the Conciliation Board**, vide f.n.3(b) above, Page 2.
 (b) Same pamphlets in possession of Sri Bepin Ch. Chakravarty.
14. The Union had the following office bearers.
 President - Md. Abdur Rehman
 Secretary- Banbhasa Shiekh
 Asstt. Secy.-Md. Abdul Zalil Khandakar
 Vice-President- Hanif Khan
 Treasurer- Deokumar Raut.

- 15.(a) Home Political File (FR), No. 1/37 (Second half),
January, 1936.
- (b) **Report of the Board of Conciliation**, vide f.n. 3(b).
16. Ibid.
17. **Amrita Bazar Patrika**, 14 January, 1936.
* Gumming was the ex-Manager of the Company.
- 18.(a) Ibid.
- (b) **Report of the Board of Conciliation**, vide f.n.3(b).
- 19.(a) Home Political File (Special Branch), No.E.2(17),
36, D.O. No. 481C, Godfrey to Gumming, 26
November, 1936, Assam Secretariat, Political
Department.
- (b) Home Political File (FR), No.18/5/36, First
half, May, 1936.
- (c) Bhuyan A.C. edited, **Political History of Assam**
vide II, Govt. of Assam, Guwahati, 1979, p.262.
20. Ibid
21. Ibid
- 22.(a) **Amrita Bazar Patrika**, 21 June, 1936.
- (b) My interview, vide f.n. 2(b) above. Copy of
the resolution for 'Sympathetic Strike' is the
possession of Shri Chakravarty.
- 23.(a) Home Political File (FR), No.18/8/36, First
half, August, 1936.
- (b) Home Political File (ER), No.18/12/36, Second
half, December, 1936.
- (c) **Assam Administrative Report for the year 1937-38**,
Shillong, 1939, p. 183.
24. **Ibid.**
- 25.(a) **Ibid** and (b) **Asamiya** (Assamese weekly), Guwahati,
18 Aug. 1937.
26. Home Political File (FR), No. 18/4/37, First
half, April, 1937.
- 27.(a) **Assam Administrative Report for the year 1937-38**,
Shillong, 1938.
- (b) My interview with Sri Bepin Ch. Chakrabarty,
vide f.n. 2(b) above.
28. Home political File (FR), No. 18/8/37, First
half, Aug., 1937.
- 29.(a) Ibid
- (b) **Amrita Bazar Patrika**, Aug. 2, 1937 & Aug.
4, 1937 issues.

- 30.(a) **ibid.**
(b) **Asamiya**, July 17, 1937.
31. **Asamiya**, July 17, 1937.- Aug. 1937 issues.
32. **Assam Legislative Assembly Proceedings** (1937), Shillong, 1938.
- 33(a) **ibid**
(b) Home Political File No.18/9/37, Second half, Sept. 1937.
- 34.(a) Home Political File No.18/10/37, First half, October 1937.
(b) My interview with Bepin Ch. Chakrabarty, vide f.n. 2 above.