

Socio-Economic And Historical Overview Of The Labour Movements In Colonial Assam (India) Post-World War I

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ABSTRACT

Labour movement had its origin in England with the emergence of industrialization and capitalism. The industrial revolution has impoverished the British peasantry, which forced them to migrate to the industrial centers in search of work. The competition of jobs depressed the wage rates and provided ultimate power to the employers. As a result workers of different field realized the fact that they could not withstand the power of the employer alone and have to bargain collectively. It resulted in widespread protest and formation of trade unions. The period between the two World Wars constitute an eventful phase in the history of organized labour movements in India as well as Assam. A wave of organized labour movements started in both plantation and non-plantation sectors in Assam. These labour strikes were influenced by different political ideologies and received political as well as national support from the worker sections of the country and abroad.

Keywords: All India Trade Union Congress; Brahmaputra Valley; British India; Industrialization; Trade Union; World War

Objective of the Study:

The main objectives of the paper are to find out-

- The history of the organized labour movement especially in plantation sector in the British Indian Province of Assam after the World War I.
- The hidden facts of the labour movements.
- The main features of the labour movements.
- The influence of Trade Unions of India and abroad on the labour movements of Assam.

Methodology:

The present study is based on secondary data. Books, journals, e-journals, government reports, etc. were searched from the internet using the terms “Labour movements in India”, “Labour movements in Assam”, “Trade union

in India”, etc. The relevant literature were sorted and used for the present study.

Introduction

The concept of labour movement has come with the development of modern factory system. The Industrial Revolution in England created a congenial atmosphere for the growth of the labour movement and gradually Trade Union movement. With the development of Tea Industry, Railway, Steam navigation, Telegraph, etc. in the third decade of the 19th century, labour classes emerged in India as well as in Assam. During the interim period of the two great World Wars (1919-1939) a sense of class consciousness emerged amongst the wage-earning labourers of Assam who were infused mainly by the socialist and communist groups. These labourers were mainly infused by socialist ideology and gradually they established themselves as a strong organizational power. As a result independent

class organization came into being to focus and resist exploitation of the labourers. The successful movement of Mahatma Gandhi in Champaran, Kheda and Ahmadabad inspired them to organize movements against the exploitation of the employers.

Although Assam was annexed to the British Empire in 1826, the British had made several detailed surveys starting from 1778 about the resources of the region. Robert Bruce, an agent of the East India Company, along with his brother C.A. Bruce, discovered in Assam wild tea plant with the help of a Singpho Chief in 1823; and the colonial government found the Province of Assam the most suitable region to start the commercial cultivation of tea. In 1837, the East India Company initiated the commercial plantation of tea in upper Assam valley and gradually it spread to all over Assam. Tea plantations were highly labour-intensive but the indigenous Assamese people were unwilling to work in the tea gardens because of the available lands to supply enough food grains. It is in this context the other colonial states provided a patronage and the migration of the black tribal people i.e. the Adivasis started from the famine-affected areas including Jharkhand, Chotanagpur, Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. The European planters treated inhumanly to these labourers and deprived them from minimum legitimate rights and privileges of livelihood. The gardens were almost like 'Social Prisons' for the immigrant tribes who were kept isolated from the rest of the society. The tea garden management opened liquor shops in each nearby garden so that the addicted labourers would not remind the inhuman treatment of the employer, never saved their wages and spent it in the addiction.

Major Organized Labour Movements in Assam

The history of the Labour movement in Assam can be traced after the First World War. The economic depression created by the First World War to Indian economy also left deep impact on the tea industries of Assam. After the First World War, the rising prices of all the essential commodities affected the wage-earning population of Assam. The wage-earning labour classes of Assam comprised primarily the

immigrant labourers who worked mainly in the tea gardens already fettered with financial and other wants ever since the beginning of the tea industry. These problems were further aggravated after the First World War when there was simultaneously rise in the prices of all commodities of daily use. Between 1913 and 1920, the prices of essential commodities increased from 33% to 50%, yet in the tea gardens the rate of wages remained unchanged for a quarter of a century rather decreased during this period. In Dibrugarh, for instance, the average income of a labourers in 1911-12 inclusive of rice benefit was 10 rupees 10 anas 9 paise. This was reduced to Rs. 10 rupees 8 anas 1 paise in 1918-19.¹ In October 1920, the average monthly cash wages earned were only Rs. 5 per man (excluding rice benefit), Rs. 4 per women, and Rs. 2 to Rs. 3 per child labour. Under these circumstances dissatisfaction grew amongst the garden labourers. The price rise in the same period affected the wage-earners of other sectors like Oil, Coal, Railway and other industries. The workers of Dibru-Sadiya Railways struck work in July, 1920 demanding an increase in their wages. The ten days continuous strike virtually paralyzed the entire railways. This compelled the authorities to grant an increase of 30% to 35% in all wages below rupees one hundred.² It can be considered a successful strike in the history of labour movement in Assam. The substantial rise in the railway worker's wages through a strike naturally inspired the aggrieved tea workers of Doomdoma, Monabari and Kathanibari tea gardens to follow a similar course.³ But all these unorganized movements subdued with iron hand by the local administration with the help of the management of the tea gardens. Usually immigrant labourers of the tea industry fought to redress their grievances only at the individual garden level, and that too in a helplessly unorganized way. Ignorant and poor immigrant tea labourers badly needed guidance in their fight for legitimate rights against their reactionary European employers.

The Non-cooperation Movement (1921-22) for the first time gave scope to the Surma Valley tea labourers to organize themselves for their legitimate demands. After coming in to contact with Congress volunteers, the tea garden labourers were encouraged to protest against the exploitation as well as atrocities of

the owners of the gardens. From 2nd May, 1921, the tea garden labourers of the Chargola and Longai valleys of Karimganj Sub-division struck work in demand of increase in their wages.⁴ During this period, the labourers of 13 gardens tried to return to their native provinces. According to Assam Legislative Assembly Proceedings, 7,000 labourers left the gardens during this exodus and two gardens of Chargola valley had lost their entire labour force. The management were forced to apprehend the seriousness of the situation and agreed to 6 annas and 4 annas increase for men and women respectively per day.⁵ Though this belated realization of the employers did not help in improving the situation the economic hardships forced the deserted labourers to return to their gardens.

The repercussions of the Chargola exodus were felt in Brahmaputra valley as well. The visit of Mahatma Gandhi to Assam in August, 1921 greatly inspired the workers to organize protest against exploitation. In 1921-24, the tea labourers of Sibsagar, Lakhimpur, Nowgong and Darrang districts organized continuous movements to increase their wages, and in demand of good quality ration and clothes, etc. On 20th March, 1921, the labourers of Helem Tea Garden of Darang district assembled before the estate office, handed over their tools and refused to work. They even assaulted two garden managers who tried to pacify them.⁶ The labourers of the Kacharigaon Tea Estate in Darrang district struck work in October, 1921 and about one thousand strikers proceeded toward Tezpur town to lodge their complaint to the district authorities. However, the Deputy Commissioner cooperated with the civil authorities, and persuaded the labourers to return peacefully to their work. In June, 1924, as many as 150 women tea labourers of Barbari Tea Estate came to Dibrugarh to lodge their complaint to the district authority.⁷ The idea of exclusive participation of women in anti-management demonstration received its cue from the Non-cooperation Movement of 1921-22. In June 1927, there have been a series of strikes for higher wages in several tea gardens in the Lakhimpur district. During August-September, 1924, as many as 2,500 labourers deserted the tea gardens in Sibsagar and Lakhimpur districts in protest against low wages. But due to the absence of labour organization and lack of cooperation among the

labourers of different tea gardens these demonstrations were unsuccessful in either getting an increased rate of wages or changing the inhuman conditions of labourers.

Formation of Trade Union and its Impact on Labour Movement of Assam

The period 1918-1921 was an epoch making period in the history of the Indian Labour Movement. Since its inception the Indian National Congress ignored the problems of the working class. The labour leaders and organizers all over India felt the necessity of organizing a central body to guide the labour movement. In 1920, they formed the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC)⁸. An initiative was taken in 1924 in the official level to give a legal status to AITUC. In a resolution, the Indian Legislative Assembly recommended the Governor General in Council in March, 1924, to initiate a legislation for the registration and protection of trade union. As a result, the Indian British Government passed the 'Indian Trade Union Act' on 25th March, 1926.⁹

After enforcement of the Indian Trade Union Act, the process of organizing labour union began in Assam. In 1927, after enforcement of this Act, Purcell, a member of the British Parliament, and Hallsworth, leader of co-operative movement came to India as fraternal delegates to attend the session of the AITUC held in Kanpur.¹⁰ In course of their stay in India, they also visited Assam to investigate the conditions of labourers. Omeokumar Das accompanied them in their visit to a number of labour inhabited areas. On 15 December, 1927, they visited several tea gardens of Jokai Tea Company and many other tea gardens. Purcell observed that this 'horrible conditions' of labourers in Assam was a man-made condition. On 16th December, 1927, they investigated conditions of labourers in the Margherita Coal Mines, held meeting with the Dibru-Sadiya railway workers and Digboi oil mines. On 22nd December, 1927, they addressed a public meeting at Guwahati in the Curzon Hall, where Purcell asked the audience to organize the working class in Assam and to start continuous agitation for their legal rights, 'organize and organize, agitate and agitate and do not fear for the consequence.'¹¹

After the return of the British delegates from Assam, fresh agitation of the labourers in different tea gardens of Assam started from 1926 to 1929. But due to the intervention of police force these agitations failed to secure any result favourable for the labourers. In 1928, in the non-plantation sector Dibru-Sadiya Railways workers started seventeen days strike for the revision of their wages which forced the management to declare 15% to 25% increase in the wages of different categories of labourers. It can be considered as the successful strike in the history of labour movement in Assam. The success of this strike influenced the neighbouring tea gardens workers and a similar wave of strike occurred in the different tea gardens of Lakhimpur district of upper Assam. In 1928, the workers of Dhubri Match Factory went on strike due to the gradual decrease of

their wages, but they were forced to go back unconditionally to their work.

Side by side attempts were made by labour organizers to unionize the garden labourers. A committee was formed in 1938 in the Surma Valley to organize the garden labourers in Sylhet and Cachar districts. Similar attempt was made by the Chotonagpuri Association in the Assam Valley districts to organize and form trade unions.¹² The determined opposition came from the planters in the both the valleys to frustrate these efforts. But the dedicated efforts of the Congress leader Omeokumar Das and other educated person in the province led to the formation of some trade unions which were registered in 1939 under the Indian Trade Union Act, 1926, as detailed below:

Table 1: List of Labour unions of Assam registered in 1939.

Sl. No.	Name of Unions	Registered on
1	Upper Assam Tea Co. Labour Union, Dibrugarh	27-04-1939
2	Rajmai Tea Co. Labour Union, Dibrugarh	27-04-1939
3	Sylhet Cachar Chah Bagan Majdoor Union, Sylhet	27-04-1939
4	Makum Tea Co. Labour Union, Margherita	30-05-1939

Impact of the Socialist and Leftist Parties on Labour Movements in Assam

The birth of Communist Party of India (CPI) in 1925 also greatly helped to unionize the labourers. Its strategy, besides the immediate political end, was also “to gain control of the working classes by organizing them in unions, teaching them the principles of communism, inciting them to strikes in order to educate them, teach them solidarity.”¹³ It helped to organize the ignorant labourers in the country and encouraged to organize labour strikes in India through the year 1929. This alarmed the Government of India as it apprehended a massive labour unrest which led the Government to pass the Trade Dispute Act, 1929, which curtailed the rights of the labourers to strikes.¹⁴ The Government also declared the CPI and all Trade Unions under in control as illegal in 1934. Due to the increase and frequent labour agitation the leftist ideology gradually spread in Assam.

Meanwhile socialist and communist ideas greatly influenced many young congressmen, including Jawaharlal Nehru.¹⁵

After the collapse of the Civil Disobedience movement, Congress Socialist Party was formed in 1934. Thereafter, the communists and socialists made systematic efforts to propagate the cause of the labourers and their effects were felt in Assam as well. In December, 1937, Jawaharlal Nehru visited Assam and his talk in the tea and oil areas on the subject of capitalist exploitation created a good background.¹⁶ Further, the visit of eminent socialists like Subhas Chandra Bose, M.N. Roy and labour organizers like Jalaluddin Hashemy, Chowka Singha and Dinkan Mehta also gave added impetus to the labour movements in Assam. During this period, the labourers of non-plantation sector also started organized movements.

In 1935-36, the workers of the Dhuburi Match Factory started strike under the Bengal Trade Union leader Bipin Chandra and forced the management to accept their demand of increasing wages and accidental compensation. On 14th December 1936, the workers again went on strikes, but this time the management was very adamant to concede their demands. In 1938-39, the situation of labour unrest was

serious in the British owned Assam Railways and Trading Company (ARTCo) that owned an industrial complex including tea gardens in the Eastern part of upper Assam valley. The ARTCo Workers' Union was registered on 29th March, 1939 and called for a general strike comprising with the Dibru-Sadiya Railways and four tea gardens in and around the towns of Margherita and Ledo. The strike soon spread to many tea gardens. Workers of the Ledo Tea Estate organized a march towards Tinsukia protesting against alleged stoppage of water supply by the company. The Indian Tea Association was forced to take emergency measures to tackle the situation, setting up a definite procedure and emergency committee to deal with strikes. It envisaged the launching of enquiry into labour grievances, the declaration of lockout if the strike was found to be baseless and the initiation of publicity offensives against such strike. This strike influenced the plantation labourers of Surma Valley. On 30th September 1938, the workers of five tea gardens of Cachar went on strike involving two thousand workers. Due to the labour unrest in both the valleys, the provincial Government led by Gopinath Bordoloi set up the Tea Garden Labour Unrest Enquiry Committee in May 1939, which however became defunct due to the planters non-cooperation. In 1938-1939, ten thousand Assam Oil Company workers went on strike with 12 demands. including increase in wages, 44 hours of work in a week, etc. But the Government subdued this agitation by using force. In a direct clash ensued between some strikers and Assam Rifles three labourers were killed and many were injured. Although the strike got a heavy political attention from the provincial and National Government, it cannot be considered a successful organized labour movement before the World War II. The Bordoloi Government immediately ordered a judicial probe into the matter but the findings of this committee was not appreciable for the working class. But due to the declaration of World War II, the area i.e. Digboi was declared as a 'protected area' under the defense of Indian Rules.¹⁷ This forced the termination of a bold organized labour movement in the small oil town of Assam.

Conclusion

With the growth of large-scale industries in Assam, a distinct class known as the working

class emerged. After the growth of Tea Industry, gradually other industries also developed in the province with a view to exploit the resources to fulfill the colonial interest of the British. But the colonial Government always deprived the workers associated with these industries from minimum legitimate rights and privileges. The low wages, unhealthy working and living conditions, etc. led them to organize and to take action for the upliftment of economic condition and to secure minimum privileges as human being. As a result, labourers were forced to take the path of protest in the form of movement and gradually trade union organizations were formed.

During the interim period of the two great World Wars, the labour classes essentially fought on economic ground and not directly against the British rule. The economic depression that took place after the First World War not only affected the wages of the labourers but also led to rise in the prices of daily necessities. Stagnation or decreased wages during this period deteriorated the condition of labourers of different sectors, and led to great hardship for livelihood which forced them to organized movement for minimum necessities of day to day life. In the initial period of the labour movements, the political leaders completely ignored the problems of the labour classes. The pre-world war workers' strike in Assam particularly in the plantation sector, due to the lack of adequate leadership and organization to guide the labour movements, failed to achieve its goal. Though in the absence of well organization they were not able to get success but these have some significant features.

After the formation of AITUC and emergence of Socialist and Communist parties on the scene, the labour movements in Assam got a new dimension. With their ideology they came forward to guide the labour movements. But a noticeable feature of labour struggles during this period in Assam was the absence of local leadership. The reason for the outside leadership in the labour movement in Assam was that the workers were not yet in a position to handle the organized trade union activities. At the same time most of the employers were foreign capitalists and had very close link with the Government, the movements were anti-imperialist as well. It was clearly visible almost

in all the strikes of the period under study, in most cases official bureaucracy, police and the district administration joined hands with the management to crush the labour movements.

The worker sections during this period greatly influenced by the Socialist and Communist ideologies. Communist and Socialist leaders of India, under the cover of Congress, became active in 1938 in probing grievances of the workers of oil field, tea gardens, etc. After the analysis of the nature of organized labour movements in Assam, it is observed that all the movements occurred in the same industries as well as same ends and demands. It can also be observed that the entire world faced a great economic crisis during the period between the two World Wars, and the impacts were also felt in all the industrial sectors of Assam. So, the labour movements of Assam can be regarded as an impact of the worldwide economic crisis.

Thus, the whole discourse of Labour Movements in Assam discussed in this present article provides a strong historical background for further study. It can also cater us a number of issues and facts along with some avenues of research relating to worker's movements and trade union movements.

Conflict of Interest: None declared.

Funding source: The present study has not been funded by any organization.

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