

“Growth and Development of Trade Union Movement in Jalpaiguri District in Colonial India”

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Abstract

Jalpaiguri is a non-industrial district, though tea industry has been the backbone of Jalpaiguri's economy since the advent of the British. The tea industry lends dual support to the economy of Jalpaiguri. The industry fetches a large amount of labor locally at a low rate and the superior quality of tea is exported to the neighboring region even abroad. A large number of workers were dependent on work in the tea garden. But their economic condition was not well. They were always deprived by their proprietors and their obedient follower. This accounts for so many protest movements under the leadership of the leftists in the district before independence of India. The Communists played an active role against the exploitations to protect the interests of workers. They always try to keep unity and understanding with the Democratic Party in all countries of the world. The major focus of this work is on the nationalist politics at various levels and also on the complex connections and interactions between it and mass movements at the base level and also the process and extent of transformation of nationalist politics into a left politics involving workers mobilization.

Introduction

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Background of trade Union in India

The growth of trade unions in India started way back in 1850 when the economic conditions of labor was poor, the industry was dominated by Capitalism, and the industrialists were more concerned about the productivity. It emerged in India, basically as a reaction to the state interventionist or state pluralism model.

A trade union or labour union was an organization of workers who had bonded together to achieve common goals in key areas such as wages, hours, and working conditions, forming a cartel of labor. The workers movements started in an organized way only after the end of the First World War.

Before the War there were strikes and agitations mostly sporadic, spontaneous, lacking long term objectives, devoid of class consciousness, and based on local and immediate grievances. The worsening economic condition of the workers due to the economic crisis that followed the war, the socialist revolution in Russia, the Non-cooperation and Khilafat movement in the country formed the background in which All India Trade Union Congress [A.I.T.U.C.] was born in 1920 mainly due to the efforts of leaders like N.M. Joshi, Lala Lajpat Rai and Joseph Baptista.

In the second half of the 1920s there was a consolidation of left ideological forces in the country. There developed a left wing leadership even within the trade union movement. In 1928, the left wing including the communists succeeded in acquiring dominant position inside the A.I.T.U.C. Before the elections for the provincial government in 1937 the Congress had promised to take steps for settling the labour disputes and securing rights to form union and go on strike. The civil liberties had increased under the Congress government. It reflected in the phenomenal rise in the trade unions. There were some charges of undemocratic and capitalistic legislations like Bombay Trade Dispute Act and there were cases of banning labour meetings and imprisonment of labour leaders. When the Second World War started in 1939 the working class of Bombay was amongst the first in the world to hold anti-war strike in which 90,000 workers participated.

With the Nazi attack on the Soviet Union in 1941, the communists argued that the character of the War had changed from imperialist war to people's war. They were of the view that the working class should now support the allied powers and dissociate themselves from the Quit India Movement of 1942. Many of the leftist group who supported the 1942 movement, like C.S.P., R.S.P. and the Forward Bloc, had been practitioners of this pattern of agitation.¹

Background of trade Union in the District

The first workers organization of the district came into existence in December 1938. The year 1939 witnessed the beginning of the worker movement in Jalpaiguri. The Bengal Dooars Railway Workers Union, which had been established in late 1938 as a branch of the Bengal and Assam Railroad Workers Union, was busy organizing the railway workers and giving expression to their grievances and demands. From time to time, meetings were held and demands placed before the railway authority. In a meeting held at Domohani on 19 June, Birendra Nath Das Gupta, General Secretary of the Union and Amrita Lal Mukherjee, the Organizing Secretary, called upon the workers and employees to organize themselves for realizing their demands.²

In another meeting held at Domohani on 13 August 1939, the Branch Council of the Union discussed the demands for monthly salary and sick leave for the loco shop workers, good quarters for all the workers and employees, full time allowance for work on deputation etc. and resolved to observe 21 September as the All India Railway Workers Day.³ With the outbreak of the War curbs were put on the activities of the union.

In January 1940 Amrita Lal who was also associated with the Rangpur unit of the CPI was accused of attempts to stir up discontent among the workers of the Eastern Bengal and Bengal Dooars Railway and a warning under Rule 26 of the December of India Rules was served on him.⁴ Later on a scheme was drawn up to deal with any strikes in the BD Railway.

A new and highly significant dimension was the popular movement in Jalpaiguri district. It was the beginning and rapid spread of trade union as well as nationalist and leftist political activities among the Dooars plantation labourers. Prior to mid-1946, these labourers had not been organized in a trade union and on the whole remained untouched by the national movement. But several developments during the war and urgent post-war years converged to bring about a critical change in the life-situation of the labourers. The sort of exploitation and repression to which the labourers had been subjected under the plantation system has been indicated earlier.

In the War years, the extent of exploitation greatly increased. There was a sharp rise in the cost of living which was not offset by the meager concessions made. An official enquiry made in 1946 revealed that between 1939 and 1945 while the cost of living had gone up by at least 200% in the Dooars plantation area since 1939, the labourers total earning including concessions had only doubled. The planters, however, made a lot of money.⁵

The labourers suffered from irregular and insufficient supply and had access to only very bad quality of rice, impure mustard oil, and scarcity of Kerosene oil and short supply of sugar. Cloth shortage was so acute that in the Annual Report for 1945 the ITPA Secretary had to state that 'a large number of female labourers were compelled to use Hessians to cover themselves up due to want of cloth'.⁶ The end of the War did not bring any improvement. On the contrary, there was a worsening.

Thus in his Report for the year 1946 the Chairman of the DPA representing the European planters interests said that the past year should go down in the history of our Association as the year of shortage.⁷ Wheat and wheat products partly substituted rice, while the labourers were used to taking rice. The annual cloth quota was reduced from 20 yds. per capita to 10 yds.⁸ Obviously enough, the problems were more acute than these had been when the War came to an end a year earlier.

At the same time, the labourers' sensitivity of deprivation and exploitation must have been accentuated by other developments. As the Indian Tea Association Chairman in his address before the DPA's 1946 Annual meeting observed that the war has stimulated new demands and new standard of living for labour.⁹

Role of Communist in the Development of the Trade Union Movement

The Communists had played an active role in the development of the Trade Union Movement in this District. From the beginning of the first decade of 1941, CPI tried to organize the worker actively. In 1946, the district election was held. The victory of Ratan Lal Brahman from the workers-centre of Darjeeling helped the Communists of Jalpaiguri district for the development of their activities. The employees of Domohoni Railway Workers Union in Jalpaiguri district, who were influenced by the Communists, had tried to form an organization with the help of the tea garden workers and peasants. The labours of Domohoni railways like point's man, Gunman and others general railway workers had also tried to form a Union for the purpose of propagate the success of their movement amongst workers. They came from Ranchi and Chhotnagpur region of Bihar. They spoke in Coli language. They loved their community peoples too much. In this way, the Communists of Jalpaiguri tried to form an Organization amongst tea garden workers with the help of the rail way workers of Domohoni.

Deb Prasad Ghosh (Patal Babu), who was attached to the branch of Domohoni Railway Union, always tried to keep relation with the workers. Bimal Das Gupta, Parimal Mitra who was the leaders of Trade Union; and Jadu Nath Singha, Lal Bahadur Chhetri, Budhan, Man Singha, Guhi, Mahaveer, who was the rail way workers of Domohoni, played an active role to organize the workers.¹⁰ They had done this type of work secretly in the darkness of night for avoid the eyes of their masters and his battalion. It was prohibited- party leaders could not enter in the residential area of the tea garden workers. As that region was a part of property of the tea gardens proprietors. So the conference was held either at the nearest railway station or the residing area of Gagman's for the formation of the Workers Union. In these, a widespread of response was received from the workers. The workers of Hai Hai tea garden of Jalpaiguri played an active role to form their Organization. Some other tea garden workers were also following them to formation of their organization. In course of discussion we can mention some workers name like Farguram Oroan, Jagannath Oroan, Larens, Sukh Deu headed by.¹¹

They tried to organize their co-workers. The representatives of 30 tea garden workers meet at Mal region and formed a District Tea Garden Workers Union in the month of June-July, 1946.¹² It was the first organization of the Dooars tea garden workers. Ratan Lal Brahman was the Chairman and D.P. Ghosh was the General Secretary of this organization. After the formation of this organization, a high degree of energy and inspiration emerged amongst them and a procession of near about 2000 workers was flow out at the Mal Road. They demanded to increase the labour cost, distribution of ration regularly, distribution of good quality rice, wheat and others necessary goods amongst the workers and arrange the healthy treatment, suitable residential area etc.

A serious promptness had been found in the activities of the tea garden workers of TOTO PARA in the district.¹³ In this time, the production of tea was extremely decreased for the cause of economic slumped. As a result, the proprietors decreased the labour cost and broke out the workers. In this situation, they realized that, they needed a workers union in their own interest. In this circumstance, the political leaders tried to form a workers union in Dooars region in the decade of 1940.

Extensive of the Trade Union Movement

The workers unrest and agitation became very powerful in 1946-1947. The words 'unrest' and 'agitation' of the Dooars tea garden workers has already been pointed out repeatedly in the detective files and in the secret political reports of the Government. Workers unrest, strike tendency to discontinue work unitedly increased day by day in the tea gardens of Dumchi para, Banarhat, Naya Sili, and G.T. of Jalpaiguri. The prime object of their movement was to protest against inequality in salary. A flow of tebhaga movement was attached with the tea garden workers movement of Mal-Meteli region in the beginning of 1947. As a result, the workers movement broke out in an epidemic form.

The messages of nationalist movement and the movement against imperialism were popularized out amongst the tea garden workers and peasants through the Communist. The Congress Socialists like Ghanashyam Mishra tried to organize the workers of Bagrakot and its neighbor's tea gardens of Jalpaiguri district. The proprietor of tea gardens always tried to create dissension amongst the leaders of Trade Union wrecked the unity of workers. They also tried to create dissension in trade union movement with the help of the leaders of Gorkha League.¹⁴ But they failed to restrain the workers unrest. Rather, workers movement took place in some tea gardens in 1947, where no such incident (workers movement) occurred before 1946. Strike, riots and disturbances and attacks on tea garden managers was moved continuously.

The workers of some tea gardens of Kumargram and Boksha Police Station and the peasants of Rajbangshi, Meches and Rabha tribes participated in Quit India Movement against British in 1942.¹⁵ But this movement did not indicate the continuity of protest. An incident of combined protest occurred in Dalgaon tea garden in September, 1945 and Rangamati tea garden in November, 1945. The workers of Dooars tea garden of Jalpaiguri district were inspired usefully through the Communist leader at the time of *Tebhaga* Movement in 1946. A number of Dooars tea garden workers participated in this movement.

The neighboring tea garden workers were highly inspired by this movement. At this time, the working power of the Communist Party and others leftist political organization [Congress Socialist Party (subsequent Socialist Party) and Revolutionary Communist Party (R.S.P)] and interfere of Bengal-Dooars Railway workers, under the Indian Communist Party, were attached for freedom of the tea garden workers. By the end of 1946, one part of the Congress Leaders of Alipur Duar was attached with these types of desire.¹⁶ But it was very tough to organize the tea industry workers. The dependent Indian workers were deprived by the English.

They were illiterate and were detached from the out-side world. The Indian criminal law was motionless in the tea garden. They were arrested by the English Managers without any notification. The *Hapta Bahar* system was active in the tea gardens. Under this system, the family members of the tea garden workers were emitted in Jungle within 24 hours by the managers. It was unimaginable fact in the other industries.¹⁷ By this time, the workers organization was formed in Tunbari, Redbank, Daina, Deb Para, Dalgoun, Laxmi Para tea gardens of Dooars.

In the first half of 1947, a workers organization was established in Dengua Bari tea garden near Jalpaiguri town under the leadership of Komred Subodh Sen, Shachin Das Gupta headed by. At first the Communists of Jalpaiguri tried to reach a message of hostility of imperialism and nationalism amongst the tea garden workers.¹⁸ As a result, the workers movement spread from one site to another of Dooars tea garden. In this time the tea garden workers participated in *tebhaga* movement under the leadership of Communists.¹⁹ They expected that, the cost of work and additional salaries would increase. But their expectation was not fulfilled. As a result, workers unrest began spontaneously.²⁰ Their demand was reforms of rationing systems, to increase the quantity of rice, distribution of cloths regularly, different facilities for the women's workers and adopt a necessary action against *Babu's* of Jalpaiguri town. The agitation was intense in Mal Bazar region from 27 January to 23 February in 1947.

The houses of *Babu's* were attacked by the aggressors. Khagendra Nath Das Gupta, the legislator of Jalpaiguri District Congress showed a brief description that how the *Babu's* runaway from the Mal Bazar tea gardens and sheltered at Jalpaiguri town with their family for attain salvation from the agitators of the tea gardens.²¹ The proprietor of the tea gardens of Jalpaiguri tried to control the workers aggression strictly. They didn't permit the workers to gather at the place of a market. They always tried to maintain communication with the tea garden Managers. They represented the Government to enforce the Law of 144 and send the body of armed police to control the workers agitation. On the other hand they tried to understand the attitude of the workers. The proprietors of the tea gardens also took help from the Catholic missionaries to control the Communists.²² In this situation, the Communist leaders tried to regulate the workers. They wanted to avoid a clash directly.

The Communist leaders were regretted to the tea garden Managers with written for aggravate of the workers aggression. They promised that the peaceful environment would be maintained in the tea gardens if they (Managers, Babu's headed by) came back to their tea gardens. At this time the Communists give attention to set up an organization in favour of contesting candidates of the C.P.I. in a by-election of reserved seat in Jalpaiguri district. As a result the organization of the communist party became strong, though they were defeated in that by-election. Most of the demands of the peasants were accepted by the *zamindars* of Jalpaiguri. The cost of work increased at the time of *tebhaga* movement.

At this time, the importance of communists on peasants and workers increased. In these situations, the proprietors of the tea gardens tried to control the workers movement and to diminish the Communists impact from the tea garden workers.²³ On the other hand, the Socialist Party of Jalpaiguri Subdivision (Sadar) formed a Union with near about 25,000 tea garden workers. The Revolutionary Socialist Party (R.S.P.) played an active role in Kalchini tea garden of Alipur Duar.²⁴ The 'Dooars Tea Garden Workers Union' was formed under the leadership of R.S.P. before independence which was registered after the independence (1948) of India.

Importance of the Movement

The existence of a strong and recognized trade union is a pre-requisite to tea industrial peace. Decisions taken through the process of collective bargaining and negotiations between employer and unions are more influential.

Trade unions play an important role and are helpful in effective communication between the workers and the management. The proprietors of tea gardens were afraid to see the mood of militant and strengthening of the workers movement. The Congress leaders of this District also alarmed as the tea planters.

Two tea planters association and the District Congress came to an understanding in July-September, 1947 for control of the workers movement. A special meeting of the Executive Committee of the Indian Tea Planters Association held on August 2, 1947. The meeting considered the letter dated the 25 July from the Jalpaiguri District Congress Committee where in the Congress informed the Association of its desire to organize Trade Union amongst tea garden labourers. The Congress in its letter made it clear that as designing parties were exploiting the labourers for purposes other than for real benefit of the labourers, it intended to establish Trade Union which would be run on proper Trade Union lines. The meeting also considered the report of an informal discussion held on 25 July, 1947 between the representatives of the D.P.A., the Congress and the Association on the subject- the meeting decided to advise member bodies to give every possible help and assistance to the Congress.²⁵

The response of the tea planters and the British Officials to the situation prevailing in the Dooars plantation area and also elsewhere was essentially four-fold. One response, an adroit one, was to admit the genuineness of some of the grievances and redress these. Thus, in one official report it was noted that the Rajshahi Divisional Commissioner emphasizes that the whole problem of the tea garden labour required the careful attention of the Labour Commissioner.²⁶ In conformity with this approach of at least partly conciliating their conditions but to considerable chagrin of structure, interim increases in wages and allowances were made.²⁷

Conclusion

In the face of continuing labour agitation and disturbances and increased activities on the part of the Communists, the planters, both Europeans and Indians, on the one hand and the district Congress leaders on the other were devising plans to help each other.

This once more brought out some of the limitations and the contradictions within the national movement in Jalpaiguri district. Leftist parties and other groups have also become involved with the labor movement. In the 1940 decade, the labor movement gained momentum. In this year, a workers union was formed in Dooars region. Workers created unions because groups have more bargaining power than individuals. When large groups of employees make joint decisions, employers are forced to listen to their concerns. For example, if all the workers in a factory stopped working at the same time, it would be difficult to keep the company operating.

The Indian independence movement was a mass-based movement that encompassed various sections of the society at the time. It also underwent a process of constant ideological evolution. Although the basic ideology of the movement was anti-colonial, it was supported by a vision of independent capitalist economic development coupled with a secular, democratic, republican and civil-libertarian political structure. After the 1930s, the movement took on a strong socialist orientation, due to the increasing influence of left wing elements in the Indian National Congress as well as the rise and growth of the Communist Party of India.²⁸ The workers movement in Jalpaiguri district led mainly by the Communists continued to make progress.²⁹

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