CHAPTER - VIII
POLITICAL RIPPLES AND
THE ASSEMBLY DEBATES ON DIGBOI STRIKE

The Assam Government, a Congress coalition ministry headed by Premier Gopinath Bordoloi, faced criticism from many quarters, including a section of his own party men for inapt handling of the AOC workers' strike. This also provided an weapon in the hands of the opponents of Bardoloi and Congress coalition ministry which they did not fail to utilise. In fact the strike generated lot of political controversies and for the first time a non-official adjournment motion was moved in the floor of Assam Assembly to discuss the labour strike. At all India level also, the central Congress leadership, under popular pressure, had to take up the issue in spite of the fact that no well drawn policy was chalked out by Indian National Congress to deal such issues.

The Labour Union expected the Government to play a more vital and assertive role which unfortunately the Bardoloi ministry failed to play. In spite of the formation of AITUC, the Congress policy in the capital labour-confrontation was not well-defined. That was reflected in the directionless handling of the AOC workers' strike by the Bardoloi ministry. The unfortunate firing incident and absolutely biased magisterial enquiry, the Company’s attitude not to accept the Conciliation Board initially, withdrawal of some directive to the police by the ministry, the provincial governments failure to prevent new recruits, its failure to pressurize the central Congress leadership, its failure to counteract the stubborn attitude of the Company - all these have been interpreted as the Government's failure to handle the strike. This made a section of the public and the working
class in general critical of the Government.1

The District Congress Committees in some areas, however, were sympathetic to the workers' cause. On 20 April 1939 the meeting of the Gauhati District Congress Committee, which was held under the Presidentship of Bhubaneswar Barua strongly condemned the firing and urged upon the Provincial Congress Working Committee to appoint a non-Government enquiry committee. Dibrugarh District Congress Committee and Dhubri District Committee also took similar resolutions.2

On being specifically asked in a public meeting on 24 April, 1939, as to what was the policy of the Assam Congress - Coalition Ministry, Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, the Finance Minister, said that the policy of ministry was same as that of the Indian National Congress. He promised that he would ask the Working Committee of the APCC to define clearly the policy the Congress would like to adopt in the labour movement. However, that policy was never defined.3

The President of the APCC Hem Chandra Barua, Bishnu Ram Medhi, Omeo Kumar Das, Siddhinath Sarmah, Beliram Das, Sankar Chandra Baruah, Krishnanath Sarmah and Lakheswar Barua issued a joint statement urging the Government to appoint a special tribunal to enquire the firing incident at Digboi. They urged that the District administration should understand that the Congress United Front minority is capable to administer the province properly but the bureaucrats are public servants. They emphasized the need of transferring the District officials to restore the confidence of the workers and the public on the District administration.4

1. Teenidiniya Asamiya, 28 April 1939
2. Teenidiniya Asamiya, 2 May 1939
3. Amrita Bazar Patrika, 9 May 1939
4. Advance, 11th May, 1939
The Assam ministry, did not take up the issue seriously initially, but it could not remain indifferent on the issue for a long time. A few members of the Legislative Assembly, namely, Baidyanath Mukherjee, Ram Nath Das, A.K. Chanda, Debeswar Sarma, Siddhinath Sarma, Bisnu Ram Medhi and Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed began to monitor the situation arising from the Digboi strike from time to time.

Unfortunately, there existed a difference of opinion between two groups of Congress men in the province over the issue. Congressmen belonging to the Parliamentary group had difference of opinion on this issue with the executive heads of the Provincial Congress Committee. That difference came to the surface for the first time when the provincial Congress Committee demanded the withdrawal of military from Digboi after the firing. Gopinath Bardoloi, the Premier, hold the view that the suggestion was impractical and impossible. This caused widespread dissatisfaction among the rank and file of the Congress in the Province. Infact, immediately after the firing incident on 19, April, Hem Barua, Preident APCC and Bishnu Ram Medhi, MLC requested Bardoloi to remove army from Digboi, which Bardoloi refused to do. Since then, a section of the Congressmen demanded that Bardoloi should resign for his inability “to remove the army who deliberately kills innocent people by firing.” The Premier finding himself in deep trouble, had reportedly tendered his resignation in the meeting of the Executive Council of the Assembly Congress party at Shillong though the resignation was not accepted. This news was, flashed in all the nationalist and imperialist press putting the ministry in an embarrassing situation. The Congress President, Rajendra Prasad had to issue statement that these reports were baseless. Similar statements were also issued by

5. Advance. 11 May, 1939 and 17 May, 1939.
6. Ibid. 25 May, 1939.
7. News item circulated through Associated Press and published in all national news papers
Siddhinath Sarma, the General Secretary of Assam Pradesh Congress Committee.\textsuperscript{8} Kuladhar Chaliha, MLA (Central) issued statement to the effect that, “Assam Cabinet is as solid as ever”.\textsuperscript{9}

Even a communication from the Governor of Assam to Lord Linlighgow, the Viceroy of India stated "...... It is reported that Bardoloi offered his resignation and that the Parliamentary Board then withdrew their request, while Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, is said to have threatened that he’d leave Congress Party and join Muslim League if any leader other than Bardoloi were elected".\textsuperscript{10}

Bardoloi’s reported resignation created an embarrassing situation for the Congress leadership also. However, the matter was clarified by Bardoloi himself. In a telegram to Sardar Ballavbhai Patel, Vice-Chairman of the Congress Party, Bardoloi informed that the news of his reported resignation was baseless.

In the face of mounting pressure from different quarters to defend the workers one side and the systematic campaign carried by the imperialist press against the Government on the other side for being partisan to the workers, the ministry tried to keep a balance. The press statement of B.N. Mukherjee, MLA, a prominent member of the Congress coalition ministry in Assam deserves attention. “The country has rarely been so agitated as over the tragic happening at Digboi. On the one hand, there is the public demand that Government should show their hands and proceed without delay to bring all miscreants to book. On the other hand, there is an outcry in a certain

\textsuperscript{8} The Statesman, 11 May, 1939

\textsuperscript{9} Amrita Bazar Patrika, 14 May 1939, and 3 July, 1939; also Advance, 9, 12 15 June, 1939

\textsuperscript{10} MSS. Eur.F 125, Linlithgow correspondence, OIOC, London.
section of the Press against the Government’s partisanship towards workers. It is a pity that the Government pronouncements have not been so far as clear and unambiguous as the situation called for. Reading between the lines, one can almost feel that those who are charged with executing it. If this is not a misreading of the situation, it is not understood why Government should not take the public into their confidence and let them know how they have penalised or intend to penalise infractions of duty on the part of their subordinates. ....... Such charges as of criminality on the part of the Government have not yet met with any serious challenge. Such grievances against Government as of inaction and weakness remained unremedied. A popular Government cannot afford to ignore public opinion. Added to the situation at Digboi is the Labour unrest in Cachar which is also crying for an immediate solution. It is the time that the Government made a bold assertion of their policy and laid all public agitation at rest”.

Honouring the sentiments of different District Committees of Congress, F.A. Ahmed, the Finance Minister, took initiative to work out a solution to the impasse. A meeting was arranged between the AOC management and the representatives of the Workers’ Union which was attended by Ahmed. Ram Nath Das, the Minister of Health and Labour Welfare, Dimbeswar Sarmah and Baidyanath Mukherjee also attended the meeting. The Assam Oil Company management was represented by PDM Lingeman while the Labour Union delegation comprised of Jagannath Upadhaya- Labour Union President, Jadunath Bhuyan- Secretary, Maulavi Badiur Rehman, Working Committee Member and Sudhindra Pramanik. The discussions continued for six hours but no decision could be taken to settle the issue. It has been alleged later by the workers that while the Congressmen, including two ministers could not be assertive though Lingeman did not budge an inch from his stand.

12. Teenidiniya Asamiya, 2 May, 1939.
Capitalising the situation, Syed Saddullah, Bardoloi's opponent and ex-Premier of Assam issued the following statement: "From reports published in the Press it appears that the Congress Coalition in Assam is faced with a grave crisis. The Premier is reported to have already submitted his resignation from the executive of the Congress Assembly Party, which the Provincial Congress Committee is taking into consideration. It is not easy to speculate what the decision of the party will be. But if the resignation is acted upon, it will lead to a difficult constitutional situation in Assam."13

The Statesman, the mouthpiece of the capitalists, published a long statement of Sadullah, Bardoloi's arch political rival. It read (extracts): "Various reasons have been suggested for the sudden attitude on the part of the Assam Premier. His illness has been suggested as one of the reasons. The obstruction of the covenanted officers in carrying out the Congress program of the ministry in the Province is hinted as another reason.

"The failure of the Assam Ministry to remove the military from the strike affected areas of Digboi - a course recommended by the generality of Congress members of Assam has been suggested as a third reason.

"None of these suggestions, however, can carry conviction to those who are fully acquainted with the political situation in Assam.

"My reading of the situation is quite otherwise. It is my firm conviction that if

13. The Statesman, 29th April, 1939
the Assam Premier is forced to resign, it will be mainly due to the stage of things which the left-wing section of the Congress has created in Assam. The ministry are not altogether free from blame in the matter, for some of them at least gave the left-wings a very long rope since the formation of the Coalition ministry.

"The strikes of laborers at Digboi and in some of the European-owned tea gardens in Cachar and elsewhere, and the peasant's unrest generally in Sylhet District and particularly in Bhatipara in Sunamganj sub-division are but manifestations of the ways in which the so-called socialists and communists are carrying out their objectives."14

Accusing Bardoloi of making absurd promises and lacking experience and responsibility of running the government, Sadulla observed in The Statesman. "A spirit of lawlessness has been let loose, which has shaken even the military and all well-wishers of society must show a determination to enforce law and order. The irresponsible and irreconcilables have raised a hue and cry against any such move.

"If the Assam Premier finds himself between two fires, he has to thank himself for it. One may feel pity for him. But he should have known that the assumption of the responsibility of running a government is not the same thing as roping in the leftists with absurd promises."15

It will not be out of place to mention that initially an attempt was made by some quarters to alienate the muslim workers of the Company by branding the strike as a

15. Ibid
congress sponsored strike. About 5000 persons belonging to the Muslim community met under Moulavi M. Ahmed Chowdhury who stated that 4000 out of 10,000 striking workers of Digboi were Muslims. They urged the Provincial as well as Central Muslim League leadership to extend all possible help to them. At one stage they wanted the intervention of Md. Ali Zinna. The labour Union, handled the matter with utmost caution. Mulim League, as an organisation, however, never got seriously involved in the issue. 16

The Government had to face some problem from within too. Amrita Bazar Patrika reported that the personnel belonging to the imperial service many a time deliberately delayed to execute orders, issued by Bardoloi or his ministers. They were aware of the difference between the Governor's views and the Government's stand on the Digboi issue and ICS officers were more keen to oblige to the dictates of the Governor rather than the Government. This created administrative complications and the matter was also reported to the Governor by the Council of Ministers. 17

The Muslim League however tried to gain political advantage out of the prevailing situation elsewhere. Some of their members even tried to secure reservation for the Muslims in the tea estate jobs, as a price of their opposition to Bardoloi ministry. Maulavi Asrafuddin Chowdhury, MLC and a member of the League wrote a letter to the Chairman of the Surma Valley Tea Association which is self-explanatory: "As Vice President of the Muslim League, I'd like to draw your attention to the fact that after what has happened at Digboi - you cannot remain aloof from the ground realities. The stand and attitude of the Muslim members of the Legislative Council must have

16. Please refer to Chapter V above for further details on how the labour union tackled the issue.
17. Amrita Bazar Patrika, 9 May, 1939
received your appreciation..... We do hope that in future the Tea planters of Sylhet would consult with us in relation to appointment of workers in the tea gardens. Sixty five percent of the population of Sylhet are Muslims but very rarely you'd find a Muslim workers in the tea garden.”

Many national newspapers including Advance and Ananda Bazar Patrika severely criticised this opportunistic stand of the Muslim League.

Meanwhile, the failure of the Assam Government to tackle the situation, caused by the strike, created widespread anxiety. M.N. Roy wrote a letter to the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee, requesting it to take stern action in that respect. On the request of the representatives of the Assam Oil Company Labour Union, present in Calcutta, an emergency resolution was submitted to the B.P.C.C and the draft resolution that BPCC was considering, was more or less, based on the line of suggestions made by Roy. But the resolution, that actually passed, deviated from the original which was disappointing to Roy. As alleged by Roy, “the original resolutions were amended which demanded inter alia resignation of Congressmen in the Assam ministry if they failed to give the minimum protection to the workers, and further creation of a general constitutional crisis by the threat of Congress ministries in all the province to resign in support of their colleagues in Assam”.18

This sort of spirited reaction was, however, missing on the part of the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee. At the organisational level APCC failed to pressurize

18. Amrita Bazar Patrika, 3 July 1939
the central leadership to take up the issue which was only expected. The Labour Union was also disillusioned at the timid role of APCC and the Bardoloi ministry. Their frustration has been reflected in a number of statements issued by the Union from time to time (See Appendix). On the other hand, the Bengal Pradesh Congress Committee, where the socialists were dominating championed the cause of the Digboi workers and it was BPCC who pressured the AICC and the Congress Working Committee members to take a bold stand in favor of the workers. That is why we notice that the workers union began to keep a good liaison with BPCC executives instead of banking on APCC. This is an unfortunate reflection of the fact that because of the docile attitude of the local Congressmen, the workers’ psychological dependence on the BPCC leaders as well as Bengal press increased gradually with the passage of time. The role that BPCC played in mobilising public opinion in support of Digboi workers and their strongly worded resolution and the pressure they put on the AICC - all this compelled the AICC to take up the issue seriously. On occasions Gopinath Bardoloi also consulted BPCC leaders on the issue. On several occasions he met Subhash Bose, Bidhan Chandra Roy and even M.N. Roy to consult and take suggestions on Digboi strike.19

Meanwhile a Tripartite meeting of the Government, the Labour Union and the AOC management was convened by the Government on 12 May at Shillong where an unsuccessful attempt was made to hammer out a solution. The Government put forward the following proposals:

(A) All workers who were on the rolls of the Company on 3 April, 1939 (the day of commencement of the strike) would be reinstated in their respective jobs.

19. See the editorial comments in Ananda Bazar Patrika, Amrita Bazar Patrika and Advance, 1-10 July, 1939.
Five workers of the refining department who were dismissed and whose dismissal became the direct cause of the strike, would be reinstalled on temporary basis.

A neutral person, if possible a High Court Judge would be appointed as a Conciliation Board by the Government.

Both the AOC Management and the Striking Workers should accept the verdict of the Conciliation Board.20

(The Workers' Union however agreed to accept these terms subject to acceptance of these terms by the Company). However, this effort of the Government could not succeed because of the flat refusal by the Company of these proposals. The Government failed to persuade the Company to change its adamant stand. This failure of the Government gave the opportunity in the hands of its opponents, particularly to Sadullah who utilised this issue for political gain. He emphasized on a number of occasions that this failure of Bardoloi was “nothing but his inability to settle a crisis”. "Bardoloi failed to persuade nor pressurise either parties". repeatedly proclaimed Sadullah generating a heated political debate.21

The All India Congress Committee had its annual session at Bombay in the last week of June, 1939 where the Congress Working Committee brought forwarded a resolution on the Digboi workers' strike. The Resolution was moved by Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy.22

Commenting the Resolution to the acceptance of the Working Committee, Dr. Roy dealt exhaustively on the events that led to the strike at Digboi and subsequent

20. Teenidiniya Asamiya, 16 May, 1939.
22. Proceedings of All India Congress Committee, Bombay session, 1939, NMIL.
happenings. The strike, he said, had raised issues of national importance. The Assam Oil Company was part of a powerful oil combine operating elsewhere. Soon after the strike broke out the Company expected the Assam Government to render them such assistance as would end the strike and also to recruit fresh labour. Having failed in this attempt they approached the Congress President, Dr. Rajendra Prasad, through the Assam Government to intervene and settle the dispute; but the Company was not prepared to accept Dr. Prasad’s advice.

In the third instance, Dr. Roy continued, the Company would not agree to a minimum demand, namely that the dispute should be submitted to a conciliation board whose recommendations they should strive to implement. Instead, it was argued that the Company possessed the right to engage men as they pleased and would not surrender this right. Unfortunately, there was no legislation in Assam at present just as they have in Bombay, by which the decisions of the Conciliation Board in a labour dispute were binding on the parties concerned.23

Dr. Roy further said that at present British and other foreign concerns in India, especially in the Congress provinces, felt that their liberties had been curtailed, also that they were not getting the same facilities as they used to under the old Governments. Analysing the Congress policy, Dr. Roy wished that these foreign concerns carrying on business in India realised at least now that governments in India were getting more and more under popular control.

He added that it was necessary for the AICC to reiterate the policy of the Congress in relation to the large scale key industries in India, according to the

---

23. Ibid.
Karachi Resolution, namely that there should be state ownership and control of key industries of the country. Concluding, he congratulated the workers at Digboi on their “bold stand”, and hoped that better counsels would prevail with the Company authorities and the strike would be soon ended. He also hoped that the Assam Government would set up a committee to investigate the whole episode.24

Seconding the resolution, Raghur Das gave further details of the strike situation and the condition of the strikers and appealed to the Committee to pass the resolution.

R.K. Sidhwa moved an amendment suggesting the addition of the words “Congratulating the strikers on their brave stand and condemning the attempts to break the strike”. He emphasized the need for the Provincial Government to exert its influence to bring about a settlement, and if the Company failed to come to terms, to tell them plainly that the Government would use its influence against the renewal of the Company’s lease when it would expire in 1942. He also suggested a boycott of the products of the Burmah Oil Company if the Digboi Oil Company failed to come to terms with the strikers.

Bhupendranath Sanyal moved another amendment suggesting that the resolution should insist that the Company take back the strikers and also omit reference to the President in the resolution and instead, bring in the name of the AICC. Sanyal suggested that Congress Ministers could force a settlement by threatening an all-India crisis as they had done in the case of the Rajkot issue. If the Rajkot dispute was fit enough for such an all-India crisis, Sanyal maintained, the issues involved in the

24. AICC Proceedings, op. cit.
Digboi strike justified a crisis more. Such a crisis, he added, would incidentally bring about a renewal of the struggle with British imperialism which was at present breaking opponents the ministry, in their over-jealousness to play the role of opposition, have allowed themselves to be carried over by the most vehement unifying propaganda of The Statesman against the strikers and by openly siding with the foreign capitalist vested interests that have the blackest record in the country regarding their labour policy involving the worst form of exploitation, slavery and repression. The British policy have gone against the best interests of the lacs of Hindu and Muslim toilers of the Province and of the long exploited people of this far land, Sanyal stressed. These vehement attacks though unsubstantiated by facts have placed the ministry in a defensive position and in their anxiety to establish their strict neutrality both the Premier and the Finance Minister have unwittingly made certain remarks against the attitude of the Union regarding certain matters and the inadvisability of the strike, although the Premier was good enough to emphasize on the points that the Company did give provocation to the workers and “the Company also defaulted in a manner which made it impossible for government to bring the parties together”. The Premier, Sanyal felt, was not justified in concluding that “the Union was not correct in inaugurating the strike so early “although” the Company had also given provocation for the commencement of the strike by their dismissal”. His silence even after The Statesman wrote that “the Assam Government is not a Government at all but a predatory junta”, has exposed the lack of confidence of the Ministry. The Statesman wrote, “We hope for its own sake that the Congress High Command will send it packing at once. There are no alternatives except action by the citizens. If the Governor calls for the resignation of these revolutionaries masquerading as ministers, it is certain that the Indian Congress cannot range itself on their side”. Sanyal referred to this and observed that it was unfortunate that the Indian National Congress, in the face of such
criticism also, failed to give any official contradiction or protest against such report."

Interestingly, the reaction of the Viceroy and the Governor of Assam about the developments in AICC has been quite cool initially and possibly they did not give much importance to the CWC meetings, though they kept an eye over the developments. Viceroy Linlithgow wrote "I think the latest reports ..... indicating that the intervention of the Congress High Command may not be disastrous. I hope very much indeed that this be the case." 26

On 20 July, Dr. B. C. Roy threatened that if the Assam Oil Company refuses to abide by the decision of the Conciliation Board as suggested by the All India Congress Committee, efforts will be made to refuse renewal of the Company’s lease which were supposed to terminate in 1941.27 However, no concerted effort was taken up in this regard nor the matter was pursued. This was unfortunate. The Governor also became conscious and concerned over the developments which can be ascertained from the fact that he wrote in his diary, "My own police officers were showing signs of getting rattled especially when the Chief Minister, Gopinath Bordoloi insisted on a judicial enquiry". On another occasion he wrote, “The ministers had the ear of the Congress President, and 'High Command' who were watching closely to see if any constitutional advantage could be gained by over jealousy on my part".28 These were indications of the fact that the Governor gradually gave importance to the developments in relation to Digboi in AICC Session at Bombay. This further substantiated the fact that had AICC been taking some more rigid and practical stand on the issue and the provincial

25. AICC Proceedings, op. cit.
government handled the whole affair in a more professional way - the AOC management had to soften its stand. Unfortunately that did not happen.

The issue generated much debate in the Assam Assembly. For the first time in the history of the Assembly, the labour movement was debated at length. Two Adjournment motions were placed on the House, one by H. Emblen and the other by Maulavi Abdul Hai. H. Emblen raised the adjournment motion “for the purpose of discussing a definite matter of urgent public importance to wit, the labour unrest prevailing in certain districts of the province of Assam due to political agitation regarding which the Government is taking no action”. This motion was, however, disallowed by the Speaker. The second motion was accepted for discussion. This was the first full fledged debate on a labour dispute in the floor of the Assam Assembly, in which a number of members both from the treasury and the opposition benches participated.

Thus we see that the Digboi strike became an issue of much public interest. The proceedings of the Assembly on the issue is a reflection of the same. The AICC failed to play its desired role. AICC resolutions were never given effect to. It failed to provide desired leadership and to pressurize the AOC management which the striking workers were so anxiously expecting from the Congress. However, it was mainly the Socialist segment of the Congress and the left nationalists who came forward to champion the workers cause in true context. The role of the Congress leadership not only disappointed the workers, even its leaders like Sudhindra Pramanik became absolutely frustrated, which has been reflected in some of his public statements.

30. Ibid.