CHAPTER-1

INTRODUCTION

The curious phenomenon in the world politics after 1990-91 has so far seemed to have diminished the importance of the Labour History or the history of the working class struggles. Infact, in the Western Europe, it has been termed as the ‘end of Labour History.’\(^1\) The solid foundation displayed by the magnitudes of the *Manifesto* and its revolutionary appeal has been demurred as much as pessimism as unauthentic also.\(^2\) The abandonment of the philosophy of Marx in the practical politics of the globalised world has so far brought a new kind of development in the field of knowledge and the disinterest of the intellectuals sometimes has created new ideological paradigm in the study of the social and political movements and for instance, the rise of post-modernism has so far tried to analyse the problems of this world without taking any help from the grand narratives. But the historians of the Marxist circle as well as the philosophers have still been maintaining a deep trust in the simple but crucial analytical tool that the struggle between labour and capital still does occur though in different variations and that those struggles may not always take

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2. Gareth Stedman Jones has summed the inner truth of the *Communist Manifesto* even after the demise of the Soviet Union and decline in the leftist politics: ‘Will it become one of a very small number of political texts-Plato’s *Republic*, Machiavelli’s *Prince*, Hobbe’s *Leviathan*, Rousseau’s *Social Contract* may be others-that even centuries after their original composition still retain power to shock? Or will it, like the Communist movement it once inspired, shrink in importance until it is little more than an object of curiosity for specialists in the history of political thought? To this question, there is one simple answer. The Manifesto will remain a classic, if only because of its brief but still quite unsurpassed depiction of modern capitalism. Marx was the first to evoke the seemingly limitless powers of the modern economy and its truly global reach. .... In short, the Manifesto sketches a vision of reality that, at the start of a new millennium and against a background of endless chattering about globalization and deregulation, looks as powerful and contemporary picture of our own world as might have appeared to those reading it in 1848.’ Gareth Stedman Jones: *Introduction* in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels: *The Communist Manifesto* (London-2002), p. 5
a concrete form of a class struggle in its deterministic language of frictions.\(^3\) There are some specific reasons for which the charm of the October Revolution and the Leninist type of movement attracted the vast number of the revolutionaries.\(^4\)

The optimism of Lenin which confounded itself after the victory of the October Revolution in Russia spoke a lot about the possibility of a revolutionary upsurge in the war (First World War) affected world. Lenin's swift turn was not concentrated in the 'occident' but in the 'orient'. The optimistic depiction of the revolution in half starved colonial orient was highly an implausible task for the revolutionary leaders and the bourgeois leaders of the national movements were not always in conformity with the Communist principles and above all, the colonial state became ever more cautious to put down any 'antisystemic' uprisings which could pose as a challenge to the whole capitalistic system.

In the colonial countries like India, the task was doubly difficult where the national liberation movement under the bourgeois leadership of the premier nationalist party, namely, the Indian National Congress and under the brilliant leadership of Mahatma Gandhi had been waging a non violent struggle against the colonial British rule. In India, it had become crystal clear that the proletarinisation of the illiterates and poverty struck population could not be materialised without the consent of the bourgeois leadership.

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\(^3\) Should we still cling to the incontrovertible truth of the Marxist philosophy in the midst of the victorious journey of the global capitalism? For the unbelievers in the bourgeois ideology and its post modernist trend, it still would be possible to believe optimistically in Marxism and in a world where there would be no domination and hence no terror. In this context, it reminds us of the famous French Marxist philosopher, Louis Althusser, who has written after seeing the rise of post modernism in the intellectual circle: 'I am an optimist, believing that Marxist thought will survive through thick and thin even if it assumes different forms—which is inevitable in a world undergoing profound change. It will survive for another powerful reason: the feebleness of current theoretical thinking is such that the mere reappearance of those elementary but necessary ingredients of authentic thought—rigour, coherence, and clarity—will at a certain point, contrasts markedly with prevailing intellectual attitudes that all those who are bewildered by what has happened are bound to struck by them.' Louis Althusser: *The Future Lasts Forever* (edited by Olivier Corpet and Yann Moulier Boutang-translated by Richard Veasey) (New York -1993), p. 223

\(^4\) Eric Hobsbawm has beautifully explained the total effects of the October Revolution after comparing it with the French Revolution: 'For, if the ideas of the French revolution have, as is now evident, outlasted Bolshevism, the practical consequences of 1917 were far greater and more lasting than those of 1789. The October revolution produced by far the most formidable organized revolutionary movement in modern history. Its global expansion has no parallel since the conquests of Islam in its first century.'

Due to the peculiar characteristics of the colonial socio-economic formation, it has become difficult to use mechanically the rhetoric of the class struggle in the study of the workers struggles. The proper bourgeois development of the economy never occurred in India and it was rather haphazard and deeply woven up with the poverty of the bulk of the population. The starting of the colonial rule and the commercialization of the economy did not led to the growth of an autonomous bourgeois class which could have initiated the programme of the industrial progress. But the class which grew up under the impetus of the colonial system was to a great extent imbued with the feudalistic manipulative tendencies. And the colonial state also, never did take any progressive steps to evaporate the stagnation of the economy. Due to the lack of state support which was undoubtedly a necessary catalyst to open up a new vista in the world of industrialism in the first phase of its development, the colonial Indian economy failed to match up its lacunas in comparison with other developed but independent Occident economies. Eric Hobsbawm has put this point succinctly, when he compared the evolutionary rise of capitalism in England with the decline of the same capitalistic growth in the colonial economies like India at the same time and he starts with a question:

How far this picture of progressive replacement of feudalism by capitalism applies to regions outside the ‘heartland’ of capitalist development? Only to a small extent. There are admittedly certain signs of comparable development under the impetus of the development of the world market after the 16th century, perhaps in the encouragement of the textile manufactures in India. But these are more than offset by the opposite tendency, namely that which turned the other areas that came into contact with and under the influence of the European powers into dependent economies and colonies of the West .... Capitalism, while no doubt providing the historic conditions for economic transformation everywhere, infact made it more difficult than before for the countries which did not belong to the original nucleus of capitalist development or its immediate neighbours.5

The failure of the proletarianisation of the masses and the failure of exterminating the capitalistic oppressions from the society has so far created a new

5 Eric Hobsbawm: From Feudalism to Capitalism in Rodney Hilton (ed.): The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism (Delhi-1996), Pp. 163-164
alternative discourse to look with reevaluation all the great historical events of the country. At the same time, the orthodox Marxist intellectuals have still clung to a theoretical line where the independent struggles of the exploited sections were denied due to lack of any vanguard party influenced methods of struggle.

Another significant approach which has been made by some sociologists that the term ‘working class’ has much irrelevance in today’s mechanical-capitalistic society and economy. Now sociologists have given more stress in the income differentiation between the workers and a growth of new batches of workers in the corporate sectors, where the differences between the workers and the capitalists have seemed to be less real:

The polarisation thesis or the thesis of increasing antagonism between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, which was the fulcrum of the Marxian approach to class, appeared to be increasingly at odds with the reality of industrial societies as they moved from the 19th to the 20th century.  

Harry Braverman has also discussed the debate about the “New Working Class” and in his classic text; he emphatically retains the old category about the working class notwithstanding the current technological progress. But, in the context of the tea plantation labourers and their response to the capitalist exploitations; we have used the concept working class thus retaining the old term and then to study labourers protests as a whole and a study of their process of emergence as a class.

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6 Andre Betillie: Marxism and Class Analysis (Delhi-2007), p. 286 and also Classes and Communities in EPW, Vol. XIII No II
7 Braverman writes in his classic text: 'For purposes of clarity, however, I should note at the start that although I will be describing the immense changes in the shape of the working class during the past century, I cannot accept the arbitrary conception of a “new working class” that has been developed by some writers during the last decade. According to this conception, the “new working class” embraces those occupations which serve as the repositions for specialized knowledge in production and administration. ....The “new working class” is those “educated labor”, better paid, somewhat privileged, etc. Manual labor, according to its definition, is “old working class” regardless of the actual movement of occupations and the increase of various categories of labor of this sort. .... If one must choose a process date back to the last decades of the nineteenth century-indicate that it is the class as a whole that must be studied rather than an arbitrarily chosen part of it.'
Harry Braverman: Labor and Monopoly Capital (Kharagpur-2006/New York-1974), Pp. 17-18
There still remain some theoretical ambiguities regarding the exact nature of the labourers struggle. Now, the problem has become more acute after the efforts made by some historians to paint the labourers consciousness as devoid of pure proletarianised class conflict. The peasant characteristics of the Indian working class have been held responsible for the breakdown of the workers solidarity and lack of their united actions against the capitalist system. If the majority of the tea garden labourers were landless labourers and according to Eric Wolf those who had lost their peasant identity and hence they did not enjoy the right of ‘autonomous decisions’ regarding the process of cultivation. In colonial India the landless labourers became the victims of the capitalist ventures and the recruiters preferred those labourers and they recruited by giving them (tea garden labourers), an artificial hope of granting land for cultivation. Dharma Kumar writes: ‘It is clear enough that there has been a large group landless labour throughout the twentieth century, and they are among the poorest and most depressed sections of Indian society....’ The position which has seemed to be complicated is that the peasants were denied of any vocabulary of class consciousness since the writings of Marx. So in order to attain the phase of consciousness, the peasantry must have to get the help from the external agencies. In the nineteenth century India, the peasant uprisings became the most endemic feature.

The tribal rebellions in the early part of the nineteenth century in Bengal presidency to a great extent created confusion among the government articles but with a stern

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8 It will be more meaningful here to define the term peasant and Eric Wolf defines it thus: ‘Population that are existentially involved in cultivation and make autonomous decisions regarding the process of cultivation. The category is thus made to cover tenants and sharecroppers as well as owner-operators as long as they are in position to make the relevant decisions on how their crops are grown. It does not, however include fishermen or landless labourers.’

9 Kumar also writes that during the 1890s, large scale emigration of labourers took place from the Madras Presidency and from the Ganjam districts it was ‘in considerable numbers’ and most of them were landless labourers. Famine forced the agricultural labourers to migrate and ‘in 1896-7, there were 1,044 registered migrants to Assam, in 1898, 269, in 1899, 197...’
Dharma Kumar: Land and Caste in South India (Delhi-1992), p. 133

10 Marx writes abut the peasantry (basically the small land holders): ‘In so far as millions of families live under economic conditions of existence that separate their mode of life, their interests and their culture from those of other classes, and put them in hostile opposition to the latter, they form a class. In so far there is merely a local interconnection among these small-holding peasants, and the identity of their interests begets no community, no national bond, and no political organization among them, they do not form a class. They are consequently incapable of enforcing their class interests in their own name, whether through a parliament or through a convention.’
repressive policy they did able to suppress those revolts. In Assam, also, the riots (1860-94) of the Assamese agriculturists against the inhuman and high taxation policy followed by the colonial administration in the post Mutiny period gave a good lesson to the colonialists. The role of the 'Raij Mels'\textsuperscript{11} in spreading the message of revolt and the discussions and congregations of the vast number of people for a common cause almost frightened the colonial administration. But, some historians have denied terming the nineteenth century peasant unrest as the full form of political rebellions; by citing the lack of consciousness among the rebels.\textsuperscript{12}

The debate around the issue of actual submission of the peasants/peasant like labourers autonomous kind of rebellious tendencies to the discipline of a bourgeois leadership led nationalist struggle or to the communist leadership has been a much discussed phenomenon in the labour historiography of India. No doubt, Gramsci's somewhat controversial but brilliant analysis of the 'spontaneity' of the subaltern classes has prompted the historians of the subaltern studies to denounce the role of the external leadership in the workers protests.\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{11} Those Raij Mels were especially organised 'by the people for the purpose of resisting impositions of new taxes or enhancement of the land revenue, matters that affected the people's purse and tended to impoverish them.'

K.N. Dutta: \textit{Landmarks of the Freedom Struggle in Assam} (Guwahati-1998), p. 28

\textsuperscript{12} Sunil Sen, for instance writes in the very beginning of his work thus: 'The nineteenth century witnessed the long series of tribal rebellions, which could be related to the disintegration of the tribal system. These struggles, reflecting ethnic solidarity, were essentially spontaneous and politically unconscious; the struggles were localised and rapidly collapsed in the face of government repression, although huge numbers were involved in them. It would be fatuous to over estimate the positive contribution of the tribal rebellions which could not establish links with the nationalist forces and hardly undermined the colonial system.'

Sen also rejects the view of the historians like Ranajit Guha in respect of the autonomous nature of revolts where spontaneity with certain aims and programmes involved.


\textsuperscript{13} Gramsci's explanation has much inspired the historians who have observed the phenomenon of the workers and peasants protests as a spontaneous growth of consciousness among those oppressed groups: 'The term "spontaneity" can be variously defined, for the phenomenon to which it refers is many-sided. ... it may be said that spontaneity is (therefore) characteristic of the "history of the subaltern classes", and indeed of their most marginal and peripheral elements; these have not achieved any consciousness of the class "for itself" and consequently it never occurs to them that their history might have some possible importance, that there might be some value in leaving documentary evidence of it.' About the term "spontaneous" he says: "Spontaneous" in the sense that they are not the result of any systematic educational activity in the part of an already conscious leading group, but have been formed through everyday experience illuminated by "common sense", i.e. by the traditional popular conception of the world- what is imaginatively called "instinct", although it is too is in fact a primitive and elementary historical acquisition.'

The need of a political education for the labouring masses to unite them against a common cause have been also much emphasised. The views of the “spontaneity” of the illiterate masses as explained by Gramsci and later in the writings of the Subaltern Studies have been rejected by the orthodox Marxist historians and for instance, Sunil Sen has explained:

A recurrent theme in his writings (Gramsci) during 1930-34 is that the labouring masses must be provided with consciousness. Gramsci pointed out that spontaneous movements of the subaltern classes would be utilised by the reactionary rightist forces. Few “Subaltern” historians seem to know that Gramsci advocated the spread of education among the labouring classes. Gramsci writes: “It is essential to convince the workers and peasants that it is in their own interest to submit to the permanent discipline of education.” It seems that the “Subaltern” historians in their search for consciousness as well as “the thoughts, feelings and aspirations of the subordinated” seem to worship spontaneity while ignoring the immense complexity of a particular situation.14

One of the chief claims of the subaltern historiography against the elitist biasness regarding the labouring masses struggles is that the organisation, aims of those struggles had a ‘more or less political’ nature.15

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15 Ranajit Guha most eloquently with a clear demarcation from other orthodox Marxist historians has used the word ‘insurgency’ in describing the subalterns’ resistance (in the context of Assam the plantation workers protests from their day-to-day experiences with the capitalists has a great resemblance with the Gramsci’s notion of the subaltern resistance) of the colonial period asserts: “To acknowledge the peasant as the maker of his rebellion is to attribute, ... a consciousness to him. Hence, the word ‘insurgency’ has been used in the title and text as the name of that consciousness which informs the activity of the rural masses known as jacquerie, revolt, uprising etc....This amounts of course to a rejection of the idea of such activity as purely spontaneous an idea that is elitist as well as erroneous. It is elitist because it makes the mobilization of the peasantry altogether contingent on the intervention of charismatic leaders, advanced political organizations or upper classes. Consequently bourgeois nationalist historiography has to wait until the rise of Mahatma Gandhi and the Congress party to explain the peasant movements of the colonial period so that all major peasant movements of the colonial period so that all major events of this genre upto the end of the First World War may then be treated as the pre-history of the Freedom Movement.”

Ranajit Guha: Elementary Aspects of Peasants Insurgency in Colonial India (Delhi-1999). p. 4
The chief reason of explaining the aspects of the peasantry and their rebelliousness in the context of the present study is that it has a deep correlation with the workers restiveness at the point of indiscretion against the expropriators. There was no doubt about the fact that the labourers of the plantations too experienced the burden of the capitalist atrocities upon their livelihood and the labourers resisted violently against those conducts of the capitalists. But those violent protests were not turned itself into serial outbursts in all of the tea estates of Assam. It became evident only in some specific gardens at some specific moments. Usually, the causes of those protests were maltreatments or assault on the labourers or the low wages or insufficient food or clothes. Another point which has come up in the discussion of the working class struggle in the colonial context is that the evolution of the capitalist development never did occur in India and that due to the pre-capitalist character of the socio-economic setup, it did not seem to unleash any kind of revolutionary situation unlike the civilised nations of the world.

In the colonial economy of India, the unevenness and underdeveloped state of the economic progress, which were in great contrast to the development of England, the first industrialised country all over the world, significantly did not led to the radical abolition of the feudal or medieval characteristics of the economy. Infact, in the provinces like Assam, the preponderance which the tea cultivation got from the colonial bureaucrats and the expatriate business groups only emboldened the imitation of the pre-capitalist characteristics in the labour relations. The lack of superintendence and inspiration from the colonial state officials singularly affected the fate of the depressed workers who had already faced the cruel reality (before they came to Assam) in their own home states due to the excessive land revenue burden or landlessness. The selection of specific areas for labour supply (unlike the Irish workers who had been migrating to the industrial zone of England in the nineteenth century) and their deployment in the tea plantations did not create any socio-

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16 B.B. Chaudhury in the context of the agrarian protests of the colonial period has explained that the protests did not turn itself in to movements with certain achievable goals. 'Rural protest did not necessarily invariably develop into 'movements', definable as organised collective actions towards achieving some goals, which are distinguishable from stray outbursts of violence, or expressions of fury, usually quickly spent up.'

political differences between the indigenous and the migrant workers, because both were facing the hard realities in their economic aspects. Here in Assam, the name was given to the tea plantation workers as ‘aborigine’ in their origin.17

Another very important point which we will have to take into account was the possibility of a revolutionary situation in the post industrial revolution phase. It was thought that the revolution would be possible only in the most civilised country of the world and it was also assumed that the other civilised countries would also be affected from the wind of the revolutionary atmosphere. The use of the words like ‘civilized’ or ‘semi barbarian’ in Marx’s writings especially in the Communist Manifesto drew a clear demarcation that the civilised nations which meant those countries (England, Germany, France and USA) had already come into the orbit of the modern industrialisation would be the first nations to get the impact of the proletarian led revolution.18

Although the predictions of Marx overwhelmingly influenced the bulk of the working class population in the European countries; chiefly in England and

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17 The intellectual caricature of the identity of the population (basically tribals) living in the Chotanagpur plateau had embedded itself in the later colonial policies towards the labourers imported from those areas. K. Ghosh elaborates thus: ‘In 1868, the Asiatic Society of Bengal planned an ethnological exhibition of the different tribes and races of India. With a view to offering ethnologists and other scholars an opportunity to study these different races in actual life, the exhibition was supposed to bring down a couple of ‘specimens’ of each race from all over British India. The planners of the exhibition were not intent on gathering the most reliable and meticulously collected data but the exhibition itself was going to be a picture of colonial order and efficiency with exhibited themselves being employed as labourers at the exhibition: “On the Western border land (of Bengal), in the Chota-Nagpur commissionership and the borders of Cuttack, we have what I can only describe as a perfect congeries of aboriginal tribes, Moondales and Bhoomiges and Sontals: Bhooyas and Khonds and other yet unclassed. They are all within easy reach of Calcutta... An exhibition of Aboriginal would be the easiest thing in the world. And as they are excellent labourers, they might be utilized as coolies to put in order tea Exhibition grounds at certain times, while at others they take their seats for the instruction of the public’. N.-2- Proceedings of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1868; p. 29, emphasis added; Quoted by K. Ghosh: A Market for Aboriginality: Primitivism and Race Classification in the Indentured Labour Market of Colonial India, in Sub. Sr- X (Delhi-1999), Pp. 8-9

18 Marx wrote: ‘Large-scale industry, already by creating the world market has so linked up all the peoples of the earth, and especially the civilised peoples that each people is dependent on what happens to another. Further in all civilised countries large scale industry has so leveled social development that in all this countries the bourgeoisie and the proletariat have become the two decisive classes of society and the struggle between them two main struggle of the day. In each of these countries it will develop more quickly or more slowly according to whether the country has a more developed industry, more wealth and a more considerable mess of productive forces. It will therefore be slowest and most difficult to carry out in Germany, quickest and easiest in England.’ K. Marx and F. Engels: Manifesto of the Communist Party (Calcutta-1991), Pp. 80-81
France and also in America during the periods of 1848-1896 but 'yet labour unrest in these countries (England and America) showed no propensity whatsoever to turn into political revolution.' But the immense hopes over the prospect of the emancipation of the workers through a great revolution never did actually come into fruition and there were several reasons as given by scholars. Ralph Miliband has brilliantly summarised those reasons very clearly:

Many different reasons have been advanced from within Marxism to account for the disappointments and defeats which soon came to mock the high hopes of 1917 and after. These reasons have to do with the unexpected capacity of capitalism to take the strain of economic dislocation and slump, the equally unexpected capacity of conservative forces to defend their regimes by ideological manipulation and when necessary, by physical repression, with Fascism and Nazism as the most extreme forms of that defense, and also the capacity of capitalism to respond to crisis and pressure with cautious and piecemeal reforms dressed up in a rhetoric of wholesale renewal-for instance the New Deal in the United States. And Marxists also pointed to the role of social democratic leaders as, in a effect, the defenders of capitalism and agents of social stabilization-although Communists ceased to make as much of this in the thirties, when the Comintern adopted the Popular Front Strategy as they had done earlier.

The failure of the prospect of revolution in advanced capitalist countries meant that the revolution would be occurred in semi-civilised or in colonial countries. But, again

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19 Giovanni Arrighi has very brilliantly analysed and briefly divided the periodisation of the labour struggles since 1848 into three periods: 'Between 1848 and 1896 market capitalism and bourgeois society, as analysed by Marx, reached their apogee. The modern labour movement was born in this period and immediately became the central antisystemic force. After a protracted struggle against rival doctrines, Marxism became the dominant ideology of the movement. In the period 1896 to 1948 market capitalism and bourgeois society as theorized by Marx entered a prolonged and ultimately fatal crisis. The labour movement reached its apogee as the central antisystemic force and Marxism consolidated and extended its hegemony over antisystemic movements. However, new divisions appeared within and among antisystemic movements and Marxism itself was split apart into a revolutionary and a reformist wing. After 1948 corporate or managerial capitalism emerged from the ashes of market capitalism as the dominant world economic structure.' Quoted in Giovanni Arrighi: Marxist Century- American Century: The Making and Remaking of the World Labour Movement in Samir Amin, et.al: Transforming the Revolution (Delhi-2006), p. 59

a controversy has come out that the selection of Marx's analysis regarding the characteristics of the English economy and the features of the working class worked in the factories and the mines was not viable in the context of the colonial and pre-capitalist economies like India. But, Marx's selection of England as his chief point of discussion of the nature of capitalism in its practical effects was altogether different.\(^{21}\)

Marx's point was also very clear why he decided to choose England and he also praised the efforts made by the English factory inspectors to bring into light the actual situation prevailed within the factories. Marx never tired of speaking about the maturity of the capitalist productive relation in England where the factory inspectors' records provided the preliminary and primary sources for Marx's analysis. At the same time, Marx critically compared the existing capitalist development in Germany and he has explained:

Where capitalist production is fully naturalised among the Germans (for instance in the factories proper) the condition of things is much worse than in England, because the counterpoise of the Factory Acts is wanting. In all other spheres, we like all the rest of Continental Western Europe, suffer not only from the development of capitalist production, but also from the incompleteness of that development. Alongside of modern evils, a whole series of inherited evils oppress as arising from the passive survival of antiquated modes of production, with their inevitable train of social and political anachronisms..... The social statistics of Germany and the rest of Continental Western Europe are, in comparison with those of England, wretchedly compiled....if it was possible to find for this purpose men as competent as free from partisanship and respect of persons as are the English factory inspectors, her medical reporters on public health, her commissioners of inquiry into the exploitation of women and children, into housing and food.\(^{22}\)

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\(^{21}\) Marx has explained the cause of the selection of England: 'The physicist either observes physical phenomena where they occur in their most typical form and most free from disturbing influence or wherever possible he makes experiments under conditions that assure the occurrence of the phenomenon in its normality. In this work (Capital-I), I have to examine the capitalist mode of production and the conditions of production and exchange corresponding to that mode. Up to the present time, their classic ground is England. That is the reason why England is used as the chief illustration in the development of my theoretical ideas.'


\(^{22}\) *Ibid.*
According to some historians (Dipesh Chakrabarty), in India the factory workers were largely pre-capitalist in their relationship with other social elements. The government of India also began to take interest in labour affairs only due to the political development both at the international level and at the national. The enquiry committees which were formed in the post First World War period had laid a great thrust of making a detailed enquiry into the living conditions of the workers, when the rapid growth of strikes compelled the colonial state to look into the labour affairs. But it was quite evident that in some particular commercial productions like the tea plantation sector, the system of inspection was just non-existent and with the abolition of indentured labour and the repeal of the provisions of act VI of 1901; 'the District Officers as Inspectors of Labour have less legal power than before and any instructions they issue have generally only the force of advice.'

Because of the lack of inspection in the tea estates, in respect of providing necessary emoluments to the labourers, there was no such marked improvement. For example about the sickness insurance and maternity benefits, for the tea garden labourers the Royal Commission on Labour gave their opinions regarding the two aspects thus:

Sickness Insurance: This government were recently asked by the Government of India to advise on the International Labour Convention and they can only say now what they said in reply to the Government of India in March last. No compulsory sickness insurance scheme would be practicable in Assam at present. The tea and mining industries already provide free for their employees all the benefits that could be obtained by any compulsory insurance to which the employees must contributed would be greatly resented by the labour force, the labour employed in these industries is illiterate and excitable. The labourers would not understand the merits of such insurance. They would certainly regard this contribution levied from them as an impost by their employers and their resentment might lead to serious trouble and violence....The Government of Assam see no chance of

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23 Ironically, in colonial India, it was only after the end of the First World War that the conditions of the Indian working class became an object of knowledge for the Government of India. D. Chakrabarty: Conditions for Knowledge of Working Class Conditions: Employers, Government and the Jute Workers of Calcutta, 1890-1940 in Sub. St.-II (Delhi-1996), p. 265

24 Royal Commission on Labour in India (Assam part- Vol.-VI, part-1) (London-1930), p. 10
success in Assam for any compulsory sickness insurance scheme on a contributory basis, until the spread of education and general uplift of the labour population have changed the conditions now prevailing.

Maternity benefits: This Government agreed with the Government of India that the scheme outlined in the convention was unsuitable for India and that the introduction of any compulsory benefit scheme was impracticable. Moreover, any such scheme could be applied only to organized industries and in such industries in Assam maternity benefits were already conceded by employers.25

The unanimous view of the enquiry committees or the commission; though they sustained a liberal attitude to the better upliftment of the workers conditions but they came to the point that in view of the illiteracy and the easily excitable character of the labourers it would be impossible to implement the given clauses (of the welfare measures) as compared with the English or European standard.

Interestingly, every major enquiry committee after the First World War had a clear result of the efforts of the workers struggles.26 Another reason which prompted the Government to look in to the workers conditions was the 'vision of a burgeoning industrial growth in India.'27

Another significant point of discussion for the labour historians of India is that the notion of class and class-consciousness could not occur in India because of the preponderance of the pre-capitalist feature of the colonial economy. It is also true that the notion of the practical concept of working class has come under

\[\text{\[25\] Ibid., p. 11}
\[\text{\[26\] Assam Labour Enquiry Committee (henceforth ALEC)-1906, Pp. 1-4, Assam Labour Enquiry Committee (henceforth ALEC)- 1921-22, Pp. 1-3}
\[\text{\[27\] 'The government's concern for a steady betterment of the condition of labour was sustained and awaited by a recently acquired vision of a burgeoning industrial growth in India. The war had left the government in a 'developmentalist mood' from which sprang the arguments regarding the working-class conditions.'}
scrutiny after the 1950s, due to the de Stalinsation of the social sciences.\textsuperscript{28} It has been also explain that the prospect of a class conflict was more difficult in the Third World:

...the mass of the working population is of peasant character and the main ‘relations of production’ in these countries tend to be between landlord and peasant in multitude of different patterns and connections. But this also means that class conflicts in these economies occur on a very different basis and assume a different form from those encountered in advanced capitalist countries. This does not mean that Marxist ‘guidelines’ are inoperative in the analysis of them conflicts. But it does very strongly emphasize the danger of a simple transposition of the Marxist mode of analysis of advanced capitalist societies to countries whose capitalism is of a very different nature.\textsuperscript{29}

The distinctive feature of the economy of India and its industrial workers during the British period as the indicator of gaining the maturity of class consciousness among the workers has been severely criticised by some historians. R. Chandavarkar has brilliantly put this point thus:

... if economic development determined the character of the social struggle, then for some economic backwardness made the notion of a working class in India unthinkable. By its very nature, the labour force, seemingly shaped by a low level of industrialisation could not be expected to develop a class consciousness or a socialist politics. So if the Indian working classes constituted either the antecedents of western society or a special and unique case, its history was unlikely to release materials for thinking about class formation and class consciousness more generally. Most crucially, this teleology imposed upon the

\textsuperscript{28} For instance, Miliband writes: ‘How genuine and basic the problem is of identifying the exact meaning which is to be attached to the Marxist concept of working class may first of all be gauged from the fact that, for Marx, the very notion of it as a class is in some degree contingent: it is only by fulfilling certain conditions that the working class may properly be said to have become a class.’

\textsuperscript{29} Miliband: \textit{Op. Cit.}, p. 23.

\textit{Ibid.}, p. 31
working classes an arbitrary and misleadingly narrow definition as an industrial labour force.\(^\text{30}\)

Chandavarkar in another context says:

The history of capitalism and of the working class in India could most fruitfully be investigated not as an exception - neither as a case of 'pre-capitalist' development nor as a product of a peculiar and unique 'Indian culture' - but firmly in relation to what are deemed to be the 'rules' or expectations of sociological discourse. An old, persistent and frequently re-activated 'orientalist' tradition has long encouraged historians to deem Indian society an exception to every rule of social (and historical) explanation. In no aspect of the study of Indian society has this assumption of exceptionalism been more resolutely embedded and more subtly manifested than the investigation of the working classes.\(^\text{31}\)

Chandavarkar and later, Subho Basu's contentions are that the rural connections of the factory workers rather strengthened the bargaining power of the workers vis-à-vis with the factory owners.\(^\text{32}\) Although, the views of the historians like Chandavarkar has directly concerned itself with the urban factory workers, but nonetheless, other sectors like the tea plantations could not be an exception and in the early years of the plantations in Assam, the migrant workers maintained a close touch with their ancestral villages through their recruiting agents.

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\(^{31}\) Chandavarkar writes: '.... the history of the working classes can only be grasped fully in the light of the powerful connections, which were established in the process of their social formation, between factory proletarians, casual workers, rural migrants, agrarian labour, artisan, 'tribals' and dalits. The Indian working class was largely composed of rural migrants who retained close connections with their village base'


\(^{32}\) Subho Basu in a fine monograph on the jute workers of Calcutta also have come to the same conclusion and he writes: '...that rural social ties constituted a powerful base for urban workers to maintain their existence in an overcrowding and uncertain labour market marked by low wages. Rural ties did not act as a hindrance to the development of industrial action of urban labour. On the contrary as in Bombay, rural social ties enabled workers in Calcutta to intensity their resistance against colonial rulers'.

No doubt, the urban factory workers showed a firm restiveness in respect of maintaining the tempo of the strikes in spite of the divisive measures adopted by the capitalists to create dissensions among the ranks of the workers and, the striking workers sometimes maintained an outstanding maturity of consciousness, sustaining deep physical coercions (e.g. the strike in Bombay which continued for sixth months- March 1928- October 1928). That is why, the notion of community consciousness which generally ‘denies’ to the ‘workers the agency of making their own history’, has been criticised by the historians. Subho Basu has criticised the thesis put forward by Dipesh Chakrabarty:

Chakrabarty portrays workers’ politics as a mere reflection of the politics of privileged classes. The rich complexities of labour politics in his writings are often bulldozed into readymade conceptual constructions that echoed the old colonial notions about ‘pre-capitalist’ peasant mentalities of Indian industrial labour.  

But in contrast in the tea plantations, the workers protests did not last long and the repressive tactics followed by the tea planters as well as the colonial state induced the workers to come back to their work places very soon. In fact, the notion of the ‘class’ and seeing the Indian situation, it can be summarised that it was dependent upon the contingent factors and obviously, the colonial rule and its effects largely determined the politics in the labour field.

Whatever the gravity of the discussion about the failures or the specific characteristics of the working class and its struggle in colonial India, one thing was

35 Amiya Kumar Bagchi writes about the effects of dualism in the labour historiography: ‘The historiography of labour has not been able to escape the influence of this dualism which lies at the ideological and structural foundation of modern capitalism. Some historians (and economists) have regarded workers as just bodies who respond to changes in wages and behave like inanimate machines once they enter the workplace. Other social scientist regarded them as not fully deserving the name of ‘workers’ because they failed to respond only as ‘economic’ men/women to economic stimuli and seemed to have other preoccupations as well’. Bagchi has also noticed: ‘...dualistic phenomena in labour markets are often subordinate to overarching structures of other kinds—such as imperialism, or the operation of a racially-governed system.’ A. K. Bagchi: Capital and Labour Redefined/Chapter: Dualism and Dialectics in the Historiography of Labour (Delhi-2002), Pp. 202-203.
certain that the overwhelming dominance of the colonial state acted as a great bulwark against the unity of the workers for a united cause. The expatriate business class with the great support from the colonial state ruthlessly used the coercive powers to halt the tenacity of the dispossessed workers struggles. The recruited workers were generally coming from such areas where a situation of landlessness emerged in the 19th century. Obviously, they retained former peasant characteristics even in the midst of factory discipline but we cannot say straightforwardly out of this label 'peasant' and make the assertion that their peasant characteristics acted as a deterrent in evolving the criteria of a developed working class. Above all, what mattered most in colonial India was the system of labour recruitment deploying intermediaries to work out their plan of recruitment of cheap labour ignoring the local labourers because the locals generally demanded higher wages and so the planters always preferred cheap workers:

In the case of both inland and overseas migration, the selection of an immigrant workforce in preference to local labour requires special attention. The expressed deficiencies of available labour must be judged alongside the perceived advantages of employing an immigrant work force...Colonial histories are strikingly uniform in depicting to indentured migration as a response to severe labour shortage following the abolition of slavery with freed slaves refusing plantation labour and deserting en masse from estates .... In many respects indenture and tribal migration represented in reality the implementation of a strategy designed to secure cheap and steady labour to suit the production requirements of capitalists.36

The workers were resilient and their conspicuous peasant identity submerged itself in the melting pot of the capitalist-commercial production. The plantation labourers did not remain agricultural labourers and we can gauge it from the hindsight of the cursory inspection system which arose after the 1920s. Though they were not designated as the factory workers and efforts made by the expatriate capitalists to denounce them merely as agricultural labourers, the planters were hiding

in reality only the spectre of gradual growth of the workers dissatisfactions against the tea planters. The Indian working class particularly the plantation workers perhaps would the first who had been continuously waging a violent struggle against the capitalist class (tea planters) since the formative stage of the industry. No doubt, the struggle took different forms of protest and the colonial oppressive state machinery always took drastic steps to put down any probable occurrence of violence in their 'close Preserve'. The records available since 1880s have shown that the labourers did make their protests against the misbehaviors of the managers or his subordinates and in consequence harsh punishments were given to the convicts and most of those convicts were the labourers. The Government of India also started to give attention to the deterioration of the relationship between the labourers and the management. In his letter to the Secretary to the Government of India (Department of Revenue and Agriculture, Dated, 2nd August 1904) F.J. Monahan, who was the secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam wrote:

I am directed to submit the following reply to your letter no.1784-85-1, of 2nd October 1903, in regard to the occurrence of labour difficulties and disturbances upon the gardens of this province.... In the opinion of the Deputy Commissioner of four of these districts (Sibsagar, Nowgong, Sylhet and Cachar) no change for the worse has been evident during recent years. On the other hand, the Deputy Commissioners of Lakimpur and Darrang consider that there is more friction between Managers and their labour forces than there used to be.... It is true that the number of cases still remains small in proportion to the number of labourer and this explains the fact that the increase in criminal litigation should have unnoticed by several officers of experience. But the information, which Mr. Fuller (J.B. Fuller the Chief Commissioner of Assam) has collected during the past two years, has led him to the belief that open ruptures between Managers and their coolies would be of much more frequent occurrence were it not for two special causes. The first is the severity of the sentences that are imposed in cases in which tea garden coolies convicted of assault, unlawful assembly or rioting- cases which it has been the practice to deal with more rigorously than if they were between man and man.... The second of course which has tended to diminish recourse by
coolies to the criminal courts is the impression that the planting and the official communities are in close sympathy with one another.\footnote{37}

By the close of the nineteenth century, the plantation labourers acquired enough knowledge of dealing with their respective tea estates’ disciplines.

The question of freedom and the nature of the workers protests:

There are still controversies about the inhuman recruitment process and the treatments they got both on transit and after their arrival at their workplace. The labourers immediately signed in a contract after their arrival in their specific workplaces but they did not mean that they received their sufficient emoluments after the contract signed and there was great prevalence of unfree status in the capitalist production relations because they were not given freedom always to leave their workplace according to the own wish of the labourers. But that was not an uncommon feature in capitalism and it has been explained regarding the free or unfree status of a worker under the capitalist manufacturers:

The fact that a labourer is under contract—whether formal or informal, oral or written—does \textit{not} tell us whether he is free or unfree. There are contracts which signify bondage and contracts which state the terms of free agreement arrived at freely. In effect, the contract is merely one form of acknowledgement of whatever relationship exists between the employer and the employee. A free labourer who enters into a contract to work for a stipulated period of time for a certain employer does not thereby surrender his freedom; he is merely exercising it in a particular fashion. The crucial question is whether he can leave unconditionally at the end of the specified period. If so, will he be in a position to negotiate again with the same employer or to open negotiations with other employers on a basis of unimpaired bargaining power? If so will not be able to quit after completing the period of the

\footnote{37} F.J. Monahan, Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam to the Secretary to the Government of India. Department of Revenue and Agriculture, 1904 in Enquiry into the Causes of Frictions between the Planters and their Coolies on the Tea Gardens of Assam. 1904 August. Assam Secretariat. General Department. Revenue- A. Nos. 77-117 ASA
contract, there is a reasonable inference that his lack of full freedom is a continuing state, which already existed before the agreement was entered into. Similarly, if the emoluments provided in the contract are markedly less than the going local rates, there is again a strong suspicion that the relationship is not a free one. On the other hand, a contract freely entered into can serve to protect the labourer as well as employer.\textsuperscript{38}

There are still disagreements among the historians about the exact position enjoyed by the indentured labourers in the plantation settlements (e.g. Fiji or Mauritius):

Humanitarians saw in the 'coolie' trade: the rising spectre of a new slavery. Planters contended that Indian indenture was a viable and 'free' alternative to coerced labour and that its adoption and subsequent expansion were urgent solutions to economic crisis and social upheaval.\textsuperscript{39}

The contentions of earlier historians like Hugh Tinker have been largely termed ahistorical. The books written by the historians such as Hugh Tinker brought a great transformation about the ideas of slavery in indentured relations\textsuperscript{40} and the book of Tinker has influenced a large group of historians those who are interested in the study of the workers conditions in the plantations.\textsuperscript{41}

The question of slavery has been an integral subject in respect of the loss of the workers freedom and where an ingenious system was being followed in

\textsuperscript{38} Daniel and Alice Thomer: \textit{Land and Labour in India}, (Delhi-2005), p. 36

\textsuperscript{39} Marina Carter: \textit{Servants, Sirdars, Settlers} (Delhi-1995), p.1

\textsuperscript{40} Tinker followed Lord John Russell, who voiced fears that indenture might simply be 'a new system of slavery', in dubbing this a neo-slave migration. Like the nineteenth century humanitarians he has stressed the role of kidnapping and fraud in overseas labour mobilisation. \textit{Ibid.}, The name of the book which has influenced the historians concerning the debate around the issue of the slavery in the plantations is Hugh Tinker: \textit{A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Indentured Labour Abroad, 1834-1920} (London-1974)

\textsuperscript{41} Brij V. Lal also writes about the influence of the book written by Tinker: 'I read it (A new system absolvant) in the final year of my undergraduate degree at university. That book with its catchy memorable title, emotionally appealing but intellectually suspect, set the tone of the new historiography.' Brij V. Lal: \textit{On the Other Side of Midnight} (Delhi-2000), p. 4
putting some poor manual workers to the service of the elites (even since the ancient and medieval period). Aristotle’s favourable words about the need of slavery in an ideal Greek society were very typical indeed:

That one should command and another obey is both necessary and expedient. Indeed some things are so divided right from birth, some to rule, some to be ruled. .... The case made of slaves hardly differs at all from that of tame animals: they both help with their bodies to supply our essential needs. It is, then, nature’s purpose to make the bodies of freemen to differ form those of slaves, the latter strong enough to be used for necessary tasks, the former erect and useless for that kind of work but well suited for the life of a citizen of a state....

About the duties of a perfect master over his slaves he said:

All such fields of knowledge are the business of slaves, whereas a master knowledge consists in knowing how to pact his slaves to use; for it is not in his acquiring of slaves but in his use of them that he is a master. But the use of slaves is not a form of knowledge that has any great importance or dignity, since it consists in knowing how to direct slaves to do the tasks which they ought to know how to do.42

Rousseau’s sarcastic opinion regarding the views of Aristotle in his classic text ‘The Social Contract’ was very significant and where he denounced the conceptions of Aristotle towards slavery. In the very start of his classic text, Rousseau explained: ‘Man was born free, and he is everywhere in chains. Those who think themselves the masters of others are indeed greater slaves than they.’43 Although, in

43 Regarding the views of Aristotle; Rousseau wrote: ‘...Aristotle ... said that man were not at all equal by nature, since some were born for slavery and others born to be masters. Aristotle was right; but he mistook the effect for the cause. Anyone born in slavery is born for slavery- nothing is more certain. Slaves, in their bondage, lose everything, even the desire to be free. They love their servitude even as the companions of Ulysses love their life as brutes. But if there are slaves by nature, it is only because there has been slavery against nature.’
the context of the tea plantations, the exact form of slavery was not in existence but it was almost certain that the recruited labourers had to sacrifice their freedom in favour of the progress of the capitalist production in the tea estates. No doubt, so, there was growing up dissatisfaction against the indentured labour system in the plantations.44

The significant point in the choice of place for work was also important and it was very interesting that the name of Assam did not attract the labourers to migrate and in most cases they preferred the places like Mauritius:

The Native agricultural population of Behar have an extreme horror of the climate of Bengal, particularly the North-Eastern Districts and Assam, and I do not think the Assam and Sylhet. Tea Companies will ever succeed in securing Coolies, Natives of these districts, unless they pay them very handsomely, so as to enable them to return home after an absence of a few years with a competency. The climate is bad they think, and not adapted to their constitutions, therefore they prefer a certainty in a good climate to an uncertainty in a bad climate, or, in other words, they prefer emigrating to the Mauritius and elsewhere, to serving in the Assam and Sylhet jungles.45

The Commissioner of the Chotanagpur largely ascribed the emigration from the area because of 'drought induced poverty, rack-renting and the lures of recruiters.'46

The leaving of their birth places though tormented and sacked their emotional fibre but it also freed themselves from the age long caste rigidities and for the lower castes, the Chamars, it opened a new life although under a coercive capitalist farming system. Brij V. Lal, who is himself, coming from an indentured (Fiji) family origin has explained:

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45 Magistrate of Patna E.F. Lantour to G.F. Lockburn, 31st January 1862, Bengal Emigration proceedings 15/77; Cited in *Ibid.*, f. n. 68, p. 43
47 'The chamars are a widespread and numerically important part of the population of North India. Their traditional occupation is skinning, tanning, and working in leather; however, only a small number of this extensive caste derives its income from the traditional occupation, and the great majority make their living as agricultural labourers....' Bernard S. Cohn: *An Anthropologist among the Historians and other Essays* (Delhi-2001), p. 284
For many immigrants, indenture, for all its hardships, still represented an improvement over their condition in India. This was particularly so for the lower castes which were permanently consigned to the fringes of rural Indian society as untouchables, tenants-at-will and landless labourers with little hope of betterment in this life - or the next. The routine of relentless work on the plantations was nothing new to them. .... For them, the levelling tendencies of the plantation system must have heralded a welcome change from an oppressive past and promised a future in which they and their children had a chance. Others who were victims of famines, floods, and droughts or of rapacious landlords, welcomed the peace and security that the new environment offered them.48

It has been also emphasised that the economic benefit of family migration was specifically preferred for the plantations and female labour was specifically required.49

There is no doubt about the fact that the most of the labourers had a horrible past already they left behind at their home districts and they were even excluded of the process of "Sanskritization".50

Since the ancient period of the Indian history some subjugated tribes of India were termed as the ‘barbarians’ or ‘wild’51 and the victorious tribes did not feel any urge to study the culture of the barbarians or the wild. In the ancient Greece

50 ‘Sanskritization is the process by which a ‘low’ Hindu caste, or tribal or other group, changes its customs, ritual, ideology and way of life in the direction of high, and frequently "twice-born" caste’. And about the origin of that memorable term which was used by Prof. M.N. Srinivas, he himself has written: ‘Sanskritization as a term appears for the first time in my Coorg book (Religion and Society among the Coorgs of Southern India, Oxford-1952) but the seeds of the idea probably go back to my master’s degree thesis, Marriage and Family in Mysore, published in 1942 and now fortunately, out of Print’.
M.N. Srinivas: Social Change in Modern India (Delhi:2003), p.6
51 Romila Thapar has explained: ‘The word most frequently used in Sanskrit to describe the barbarian is mleccha. .....From the early centuries A.D. onwards the adjectival use of mleccha become quite frequent. .....Having established a distinction in language, a demarcation was also made with regard to territory. Those areas where a mleccha bhāsā (language) was spoken came to be regarded as the mlecchadesa or country of the mleccha...... The central Asian complex of the Vindhya and Satpura ranges with the rivers Narmada, Tapti and Wainganga cutting through them and the plateau areas of Chotanagpur and Chhatisgarh to the east has formed throughout Indian history an ideal seating for the tribal peoples.’
also, the Greeks regarded the other subjugated peoples as ‘barbarians’ (e.g. Persians and Egyptians).\textsuperscript{52} In India, the authoritarian structure of the society turned itself into a hierarchical form.\textsuperscript{53}

It has been also observed that in case of the indentured labourers, ‘Religion became both an instrument of survival as well as a tool of resistance.’\textsuperscript{54} The impact of the religious ideas became a powerful motivating force behind the resistance of the indentured workers and they thought out that the charm of their ancient religious practices could remove the ills from their present livelihood and in that context religion acted as the intermediary between the individuals and the civilization. Sigmund Freud has brilliantly analysed the impact of religion and its charm upon the uneducated populations and Freud has very categorically stated regarding the danger from the ‘uneducated and oppressed’ towards the civilisation:

Civilization has little to fear from educated people and brainworkers. In them the replacement of religious motives for civilization behaviour by other, secular motives would proceed unobtrusively, moreover such people are to a large extent themselves vehicles of civilization. But it is another matter with the great mass of the uneducated and oppressed, who have every reason for being enemies of civilization. So long as they do not discover that people no longer believe in God, all is well.\textsuperscript{55}

\begin{itemize}
\item Sigmund Freud : \textit{Civilization, Society and Religion (The Future of an Illusion-1927)}, (Translating Under the General editorship of James Strachey) (London-1991), p.221 Even Freud’s analysis of religion and the concept of civilization almost has resembled the analysis made by Marx and so, eminent psychoanalyst, Sudhir Kakar has rightly observed : ‘Freud is pure Marx when he talks of civilization being imposed on a resisting majority by a minority which understood how to obtain possession of the means to power and coercion (p-6) or when he talks of the economic basis of civilization with its problems in acquisition and distribution of wealth, before discussing civilizations ‘mental assets’ or ‘psychical inventory’ of which religions is such an important part in reconciling men to their lot.’
\item Sudhir Kakar: \textit{Mad and Divine} (Delhi-2008), Pp. 135-136
\end{itemize}

\begin{itemize}
\item Plato : \textit{The Republic} (Translated with an Introduction by Desmond Lee), (London -2003), Translators Introduction, p. li
\item ‘Indian society has been basically authoritarian in structure and attitude society was hieraschical and each individual had his specified place in the hierarchy. Whatever may have been the case in very early time, this hierarchical structure soon became rigid.’
\item Humayun Kabir: \textit{Lessons of Indian History} (Mohini Lectures 1961, Gauhati University), Pp. 18-19
\item Lal: \textit{Op.cit.}, p.8
\end{itemize}
The significance of religion and the spiritual gurus in the labour struggles of Assam (primarily in the tea plantations) was another significant feature. Religion than in that context acted as the harbinger of a new resistance movement against the alien tea plantation authority; where the spiritual or religious gurus also emphatically tried to generate the latent consciousness (though in a archaic fashion) and the spirt of the oppressed workers living in the tea plantations. In several instances (e.g. Chargola exodus) the spiritual gurus tried to infuse into the workers minds the consciousness about the inequalities of the labour system. On the other hand, Gandhi was also regarded as one of the spiritual gurus by the poor labourers but his spirituality was more differentiated because of his political mastery to challenge the authority of the alien power.

But the spiritual gurus were not successful always in diverting the people’s dissatisfaction and in some instances people were not ready to accept the advice given by the gurus.56 The tradition of the healing capacities of the gurus was also important in the Eastern tradition and it was thought that only a spiritual guru could eradicate pain and distress from one’s life:

In theory eastern spiritual traditions generally view their healing function, both of mind and of body, as incidental to and as a by- product of their main task: The purifications of the mind, the removal of its distortions and illusions- its ignorance- in Buddhist terms.57

In some instances (e.g. early 1920s strike wave), the spread of rumours played a great part in encouraging the workers who were already in resistance to leave their work places or to continue their resistance against the authority. Sometimes, the rumour of the collapse of authority also inspired the labouring masses to make a

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56 For instance, when the peasants of the Chauri Chaura almost decided to take the ultimate step of making the march towards the police station then the spiritual guru failed to deter the anguishd peasants. The local 'eccentric (ramtajogi) itinerant preacher’s advice that the ‘Dumri activists were (spiritually) not yet fit to face guns and cannons’ elicited a similar retort : this ‘detective Pandit should be seized by the ear and turned out.’ Testimony of Shikari, CCRII p.9; Cited in Shahid Amin: Event, Metaphor, Memory (Delhi-2006), p. 74.

57 Kakar: Ibid, p. 102
violent kind of resistance. In truth, during the time of the revolt or insurgencies, the rumours played a great but confusing role:

The discursive figure of rumour produces an infectious ambivalence, an ‘abyssal overlapping’, of too much meaning and a certain meaninglessness. The semiotic condition of uncertainty and panic is generated when an old and familiar symbol ...develops an unfamiliar social significance as sign through a transformation of the temporality of its representation.\(^5^8\)

During the subaltern classes struggles the rumours could trigger a new kind of powerful force against the opposite party and it has been explained:

It is precisely in this role of the trigger and mobilizer that rumour becomes a necessary instrument of rebel transmission. The necessity derives of course from the cultural conditions in which it operates. For the want of literacy in a pre-capitalist society makes its subaltern population depend almost exclusively on visual and non-graphic verbal signals for communication among themselves, and between these too again rather more on the latter because of the relatively greater degree of its versatility and comprehensibility. But it is also by virtue of its character as a type of speech that rumour serves as the 'natural' and indeed indispensable vehicle of insurgency.\(^5^9\)

A good assessment has been provided by Veena Das, where she has discussed the importance of the rumours:

...the essential grammatical feature (in Wittgenstein’s sense) of what we call rumour is that it is conceived to spread. Thus while images of contagion and infection are used to represent rumour in elite discourse, this is not simply a matter of noncomprehension, on the part of elites, of subaltern form of communication: it also speaks to the transformation of language, namely, that

\(^{58}\) Homi Bhaba: *The Location of Culture* (London-2007), p.289, also in Veena Das: *Life and words* (Delhi-2007), Pp. 118-119

instead of a medium of communication, language becomes communicable, infectious, causing things to happen almost as if they had happened in nature.\textsuperscript{60}

But so far, the subalterns started their protests without any bourgeois interventions and the trade union culture also did not make a great presence among the subalterns like the plantation labourers due to the strict surveillance of the colonial state as well as the late entry of the trade unions in mobilising the workers of the tea estates and when the trade unions tried to mobilise, then almost the unions like the INTUC started to work as a government agency.

\textbf{Trade unions and the labour movement}

It has been emphasised that the trade unionism could better function in only in a liberal parliamentary democracy and infact Marx and Engels thought that the trade unions should play a dual role in the proliferation of the class consciousness among the workers: ‘They (Marx and Engels) believed that trade unions were the natural and indispensable product of the permanent struggle of labour against capital over all aspect of the work situation; and they also wanted it to be instruments in the political battle that had to be waged for the victory of labour over capital.\textsuperscript{61} Marx largely also wrote about the trade unions from the experience of English trade unionism and Miliband has analysed (quoting from Marx) the position of Marx: ‘Too exclusively bent upon the local and immediate struggles with capital’, ‘...the trade union have not yet fully understood their power of acting against the system of wage slavery itself'; and he urged that ‘apart from their original purposes, they must now learn to act deliberately as organizing centers of the working class in the broad interest of its complete emancipation. They must aid every social and political movement tending in that direction.’\textsuperscript{62}

But there was a very central and preliminary difference with the later Marxist emphasis on the role of the trade unions vis-à-vis with the vanguard party,

\textsuperscript{60} Das: \textit{Op.cit., Life and Words}, p.119
\textsuperscript{61} Miliband: \textit{Op.cit.}, p. 137
namely the Communist Party. The reason of giving importance to the trade unions in the labour movement by Marx was the positive assessment of the English ‘Unions Struggles’ and three arguments were developed. Revolutionary Marxist thought about the emergence of the trade unions and their role in the working class struggles, took its shape only after the October Revolution and Lenin’s insight into the positive role of the trade unions. In the “Theses on the Trade Union Movement, Factory Committees and the Communist International’ it was emphasised;

The Trade Unions created by the working class during capitalism’s period of peaceful development were workers’ organizations for the struggle to raise the price of labour power on the labour market and improve its conditions of employment. Revolutionary Marxists strove to draw the unions along with the political party of the proletariat, the Social Democracy, into a common struggle for socialism.

In order to give representation to the workers’ interests, the role of the outsiders became more important. In the process of emergence of the workers’ own selfhood and consciousness, Marx and Engels never did give any particular importance to the role of the ‘outsiders’ and both recognised the fact that the ‘labouring masses’ should organize their own strategies for the battle against the capitalist expropriators and that, that consciousness must be come from their own class. Marx’s views were totally different from the Post-Leninist phenomenon of the

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63 For a good explanation of Lenin’s position regarding the trade unions in a vanguard party ruled state, see- Maurice Dobb: *Soviet Economic Development since 1917* (Delhi-1995), Pp. 452-454
64 Marx’s writings though depicted a rosy picture for the future of the working class struggles; seeing the successful adventures made by the labour force of the 19th century England, but that positive depiction of the revolution in England did not continue after 1870s. Gareth S. Jones writes that ‘after 1870, as the relations between classes in Western Europe grew more placid, Marx (but not Engels) seems to have switched his hopes to Russian populists and the possibility of a revolution that would begin in the East.’
65 First, Unions were natural product of Capitalist industry; workers were forced to combine as a defence against wage cutting and labour dispensing machine. Second, Unions were not (as claimed by Proudhon and later by Lasalle) ineffectual economically; they would prevent employers reducing the price of labour power below its value. But they would not raise wages above this level, and even their defensive power was eroded by the concentration of capital and recurrent economic crisis. Hence, third, the limited efficacy of defensive economic actions forced workers to organize increasingly on a class-wide basis, to raise political demands and ultimately to engage in revolutionary class struggles.
Tom Bottomore (ed.): *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought* (New Delhi -2000), Pp. 538-539
extreme rigidity which was imposed upon the role of a vanguard party of the workers (mainly the Communist Party). Miliband has explained the standpoint of Marx and Engels:

In a circular letter to the leadership of the German Social Democratic Workers Party, written in 1879, they angrily rejected any flirtation with the idea that 'the working class is incapable of liberating itself by its own efforts' and that 'for this purpose it must first accept the leadership of "educated and propertied" bourgeois, who also have "opportunity and time" to acquaint themselves with what is good for the workers.' They reminded the leaders of the party that 'when the International was formed, we expressly formulated the battle cry- the emancipation of the working class must be the work of the working class itself' and that 'we cannot ally ourselves, therefore with people who openly declare that the workers are too uneducated to free themselves and must first be liberated from above by philanthropic big bourgeois and petty bourgeois.'

But, in the context of the labour movement in India, the outsiders or the 'surrogate' leadership's role was important and so Sabyasachi Bhattacharya has aptly explained:

Outsider leadership, i.e. the leadership of labour organisations by persons of non-working class origin and social status was a characteristic feature of Colonial South Asia. Likewise, the discourse of labour history in South Asia was initially developed by such surrogate spokesmen, representing labour and assuming an adversarial role as advocates on their behalf in the struggle of labour against capital and the colonial state.

But, what played or determined the politics in colonial India even in the labour movement was the greater force of the nationalism and the bourgeois nationalist leadership almost engulfed the field.

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68 Sabyasachi Bhattacharya: *Paradigms in the Historical Approach to Labour Studies* in *Workshop Reading Material* (V.V. Giri National Labour Institute, NOIDA-2005), p. 2
Nationalism and the working class struggles:

In the history of the working class movement in the colonial India, the unavoidable link between the struggle of the bourgeoisie led national movement against the British colonial rule and the struggle for the emancipation of the working class has still been a very debatable issue so far the interests of the workers concerned.

The idea of Swaraj particularly had a great impact upon the workers or peasants protests. The concept and implication of ‘Swaraj’ upon the protests led by the workers or peasants was quite different from the bourgeois notion of ‘Swaraj’ and their struggle. Gyan Pandey writes about the notion of Swaraj:

What did the demand for Swaraj in fact signify? Is the idea of liberation from colonial to be equated with the narrow vision of the eviction of the white man from India? It is doubtful if a single one of the more important Congress leaders had a notion of Swaraj that was restricted to the simple physical eviction of the British from Indian soil. ....The appeal to need for national unity in the pursuance of this goal is plainly rhetorical. It needs to be re-phrased in terms of an appeal for a particular kind of alliance, seen as being necessary for the furtherance of the anti-imperialist struggle. It should be evident that the nature of the Swaraj that eventuated from this struggle would depend very much on the nature of the alliance (the ‘unity’) that was forged. From this point of view, the Congress’ insistence in 1921-2 on a unified front of landlords as well as peasants and others, was a statement in favour of the statusquo as and against any radical change in the social set-up when the British finally handed over the reins of power.69

It was doubtful whether the practical aspects of the formula of Swaraj had any advantage for the poor workers and the peasants. The spread of the rumour of the collapse of British rule in India (in the early 1920s) almost brought also the poor workers to the mainstream of the nationalist struggle. But, the bourgeois leadership was always conscious of controlling the spirit of the labourers and for instance, in the

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Darrang district (during the 1920-22 strike wave), when about thousand labourers made out a possession aiming the DC court, because of the arrest of fifty labourers, then the some Congress members of the district committee came forward to help the Deputy Commissioner, lest the workers resistance would create a great hurdle in the Congress politics.  

It would not be quite difficult to assume that Gandhi’s Swaraj had not any practical healing touch to the painful experiences of the labourers at the hands of the capitalists. What the workers received in contrast, a candid refusal of their joining in the national movement by the elites because of the violence and illiteracy of the workers. Gandhi’s saintliness attracted, at the initial phase of the national movement a large bulk of labouring masses to participate in the national movement. In the battle for Swaraj, the indiscipline and violence of the subaltern crowd had no place for recognition and henceforth their legitimate struggles for getting some immediate benefits from their masters could not be able to evoke any response from the conscious bourgeois leadership of the INC; since also Gandhi’s unique method of Satyagraha categorically rejected any form of violence or revenge against the oppressors. It was also true that the colonial states overwhelmingly determined the tempo of the political mobilisation because of their maintenance of order for a smooth running of the administrative apparatus as well as the continuance of the colonial capitalist exploitations. Ranajit Guha has analysed thus:

In colonial India, where the rule of capital was still in the mode of production and the authority of the state structured as an autocracy that did not recognize any citizenship or rule of law, power simply stood for a series of inequalities between

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70 O.K. Das: *Jivan Smriti* (Guwahati-1983), Pp. 117-122
71 One of the historians (Anil Seal) of the so-called Cambridge School has named Gandhi in one of his articles a ‘patron-saint’. Anil Seal has written: ‘Charismatic saint or astute politician, social reformer and, in Edwin Montagu’s words, “Pure visionary” or the greatest force of conservatism, as G.D. Birla- described him: there remain questions not for recondite research but of vast contemporary importance.’ Anil Seal: *The Patron-Saint – Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi* in *India Today*, Millennium series 2000
72 To speak in the words of two American social scientists (Lloyd L. Rudolph and Susanne Rudolph): ‘Satyagraha compels adherence to its cause not by mobilizing superior numbers or force but by mobilizing a general recognition of the justice of its cause. Civil disobedience under certain circumstances compels those who rule to confront the choice of enforcing what they themselves may suspect is injustice or altering policy and practice; for Gandhi satyagraha was a means to awaken the best in an opponent. To resist, to retaliate or strike back if beaten, jailed or killed was at once to lack courage and to abandon the means to the common realization of justice.’ Lloyd L. Rudolph and Susanne Rudolph: *The Modernity of Tradition* (Delhi-1987), Pp. 83-84.
the rulers and the ruled as well as between classes, strata and individuals. ... What was acquired haphazardly by conquest developed in the course of this transition, into a carefully "regulated empire". Corresponding to that change, the exclusive reliance on the sword, too, gave way to an orderly control in which force 'without losing its primacy in the duplex system of (D)* had to learn to live with institutions and ideologies designed to generate consent. In other words, the idiom of conquest was replaced by the idiom of order.73

To smash the terrain of order, the bourgeois leadership evolved some new techniques of protest such as the Gandhian form of struggle, which culminated in 1947, the independence of the Country. Gandhi’s unique style of reasoning within the ambit of the non-violent form of struggle gave a new momentum to the national movement. Despite Jawaharlal Nehru’s socialistic rhetorical venom at the capitalist class, the pivot of the national movement’s main bourgeois characteristics never changed itself even after the repeated betrayals by the colonial state:

The Congress under Gandhi ... had an intricate and ingenious structure. It had a middle class or ‘petty bourgeois’ core, around which it gathered a wide variety of groups. It offered its hospitality to different views and interests, but it was home only for the middle classes. It provided a public forum for and sought to arbitrate between all Indians, but it had a definite structural, ideological and social bias that set limits to its national character and to the kind of consensus it evolved. Basically, it was wedded to the politics of accommodation and compromise, avoided extremes of all types, and sought to occupy the middle ground. It was concerned about the poor and informed by a spirit of social service. But it remained deeply fearful of their ‘extremism’ and propensity to violence, and did not actively involve them in, let alone allow them to, lead the movement for their liberation.74

73 ‘... These unequal relationship, in spite of the bewildering diversity of their form and character and their numerous permutations, may all be said to have derived from a general relations—that of Dominance (D) and Subordination (S). These two terms imply each other: it is not possible to think of D without S and vice versa.’
Ranajit Guha: Dominance Without Hegemony (Delhi-1998), p.20, p.25
74 Bhuik Parekh: The Marxist Discourse on Gandhi in Dwijendra Tripathi (ed.): Business and Politics in India (Delhi-1991), p. 217
The Marxist thesis (chiefly the CPI) was quite different from the above mentioned standpoint regarding the role of Gandhi in the national movement. R.P. Dutt brilliantly analysed that point (Perhaps a balanced view writing after thirty years of the publication of his classic text) in his preface to the 1970 edition of the classic, India Today:

The estimation of the parallel positive and negative features of his (Gandhi) role given in this book stands up on the whole to the test of subsequent historical research and discussion. The emphasis on his positive role in raising the whole level of the national movement and the Congress from its previous relatively narrower range to an all-national mass movement inspiring the most backward inactive masses with national consciousness and awakening them to struggle was important at a time when some left-wing critics tended to treat him in a one-sided dogmatic fashion as simply as an enemy of the popular movement, or even sometimes as a British agent. But the parallel emphasis on his negative role as the protector of landlord and propertied interests in the name of non-violence, his social conservatism, halting of every popular struggle he launched as soon as it took on a revolutionary character threatening propertied interests and imperialism, and overriding fear of a mass popular revolution was also essential at a time when many of his supporters tended – a tendency not entirely abandoned in some quarters even at the present – to present him in worshipping terms.... (But) at the time when this book was originally written, in the late thirties, the questions involved in this estimation of the role and politics of Gandhi, were highly polemical, and the treatment, while essentially accurate in fact, reflects this polemical character. To-day a quieter balanced appraisal of a great historical figure even though the analysis would still be essentially along the same lines, would be more appropriate also taking in to account the high level and nobility of his last phase .... 75

Gandhi’s opposition to the volatile nature of the poor workers and the peasants was not the total outcome of his indifference to the cause of the workers and peasants. He

was a conscious reader of the economic hardship faced by the poor people of India but his perceived notion of the ‘civilised’ world was quite different:

Gandhi was anxious to teach the Indians that ‘modern civilisation’ posed a greater threat to them than did colonialism. They appeared to him to take it for granted that modern civilisation was an unmixed blessing, and colonialism an unmixed evil, forgetting that colonialism itself was a product of modern civilisation.76

In another context, Gandhi wrote:

The British people appeared to me to be obsessed by commercial selfishness. The fault is not of men but of the system and the system is represented by the present civilisation which has produced its blasting effect as well on the people here as on India. India suffers additionally only in so far as it is exploited in the interest of foreign capitalists. The true remedy lies, in my humble opinion, in England discarding modern civilisation which is ensouled by this spirit of selfishness and materialism, is vain and purposeless and is a negation of the spirit of Christianity.77

Gandhi’s beliefs in the effects of the modern Western civilisation never diminished even in the heydays of the national movement. Gandhi regarded ‘modern ideologies, capitalism, socialism, communism as economically oriented ideologies and so those were products of modern civilisation.’ Bhiku Parekh has analysed the views of Gandhi about communism thus:

Like capitalism it was based on the materialist view of man and did not represent a new or higher civilization. It (communism) was really the twin of Capitalism and only claimed to offer more of the same. It also had other fatal defects. It represented a statist approach to social problems, treated men as mere resources to be exploited as the state deemed proper, and dried up all sources of initiative and energy in society.... By combining both the economic and political power in the hands of the state, communism posed a great danger to human freedom and

dignity... Since communism was base on the belief that anyone standing in the way of the desired goal could be justifiably eliminated, it sanctioned massive violence and had a deep anti-human orientation. Gandhi acknowledged that the communist society eliminated poverty, discouraged greed and ensured every citizen a right to work, but he was convinced that its moral deficiencies far outweighed its strengths.78

But another brilliant mind of India, Rabindranath Tagore had quite opposite view point about Gandhi’s concept of modern civilisation79 and Tagore himself changed his views about communism, after visiting Russia in the 1930s and he witnessed a new positive reality for the dispossessed poor Indians, during that visit.80 The most dangerous effect of the Gandhi’s use of the pristine ideological framework in the context of the mobilisation of the masses for the national movement was that ‘in one sense descent towards the old rancorous and atavistic form of India nationalism. ....It was open to everybody to accept Mahatma Gandhi in his own way. In the end Gandhism in politics and in practice came to stand for every little else but a congealed mass of atavistic aspirations and prejudices.’81

79 Sabysachi Bhattacharya has compiled and edited a wonderful collection of letters exchanged between the two giants of modern India. Bhattacharya writes: ‘The most remarkable thing about the intellectual exchange between Gandhi and Tagore is the high philosophical plane to which they elevated a political debate, and the extent to which each of them- one holding the highest degree of political power in the sub-continent and the other at the pinnacle of intellectual eminence - was willing to learn from the other.’ Sabysachi Bhattacharya (ed.): The Mahatma and the Poet (Delhi-2005), Introduction, p.21
Ashis Nandy, has also explained: ‘It should be (also) recognized that the two appreciated, and were fascinated by each other’s enterprise and between them they offered post-independence India a spectrum of choices in the matter of coping with India’s diverse past and linking them to her future.’ Ashis Nandy: The Illegitimacy of Nationalism (Delhi-2000), p.2
80 In a Telegram sent by the Russian intellectual Petrov to Tagore and where Petrov asked about the opinion of Tagore regarding Russia’s socio-economic changes after the October revolution and Tagore very briefly replied: ‘Your success is due to turning the tide of wealth from the individual to collective humanity. Our obstacles are social and political inanity, bigotry and illiteracy’. Robindranath Tagore: Russiar Chithi (Calcutta-2007), p.103
81 Nirad C. Chaudhuri in his famous autobiography has mentioned a good example of the atavistic form of perception which grew among the common people: ‘One day, early in 1921, I (Chaudhuri) had gone to bathe in a public tank at Kishoreganj. Among the crowd in the water was an old Brahmin, washing his sacred thread and muttering his mantras. A small group near him was discussing the new movements, and I joined in. suddenly the wizened old creature looked at me out of a pair of gleaming eyes and said in a voice that was piercing in its exultation and raucous in its fanaticism, “He’s come to re-establish Hinduism.”’ Nirad C. Chaudhuri: Autobiography of an Unknown Indian (Bombay-2008), Pp. 484-485
Gandhi’s political programme during the Non-Cooperation movement especially his programme of leaving educational institutions by the youths or the boycott of foreign cloth greatly irritated some of the noble minds of India like Rabindranath Tagore. About the school leaving programme Tagore wrote: ‘The great injury and injustice which had been done to those boys who were tempted away from their career before any real provision was made, could never be made good to them.’ Tagore also criticised the boycott of foreign cloth:

Consider the burning of cloth, heaped up before the very eyes of our motherland shivering and ashamed in her nakedness. What is the nature of the call to do this? Is it not another instance of a magical formula? ‘The question of using or refusing cloth of a particular manufacture belongs mainly to economic science. The discussion of the matter by our countrymen should have been in the language of economics. If the country has really come to such a habit of mind that precise thinking has become impossible for it, then our very first fight should be against such as fatal habit, to the temporary exclusion of all else if need be. Such a habit would clearly be the original sin from which all our ills are fleeing. But far from this, we take the course of confirming ourselves in it by relying on the magical formula that foreign cloth is ‘impure’. Thus economics is bundled out and a fictitious moral dictum dragged into its place!\(^\text{82}\)

It would be also wrong to say that Gandhi and other nationalist leaders were oblivious to the destructive phenomenon of colonialism in India. What they could not perceive the destructive effects of capitalist system of which colonialism was just another phase. Only a few of the nationalists could understand the colonialism’s interlink with the overall capitalist system. It was also true that since his starting of the political activities, Gandhi was quite familiar with the poverty of the people but not with the effects of capitalism.\(^\text{83}\)

\(^\text{82}\) Sabyasachi Bhattacharya (ed.): Op.cit, p.83
\(^\text{83}\) Gandhi during the strike in Ahmedabad where he played a prominent role to settle the strike when the workers were at loggerheads with the owners, described an interesting episode after witnessing a rush during the distribution of sweets among the labourers of Ahmedabad after a successful conclusion was made between the mill owners and the strikers: ‘The grinding poverty and starvation with which our country is afflicted is such that it drives more and more men every year into the ranks of beggars, whose desperate struggle for bread renders them insensible to all feelings of decency and self respect. And our philanthropists, instead of providing work for them and insisting on their work for bread, give them alms.’

Nationalism became an inefficient force and it had no clear cut answer to the subaltern militancy of the poor peasants or the workers. Gandhi had a great fear of the political radicalisation of the illiterate masses. Gandhi spoke about the disciplining both the satyagrahis and the ‘hooligans of India’. So, he had no message for the strikes\textsuperscript{84} of the labourers.\textsuperscript{85}

The question mark still looms large in the real picture of the nationalist struggle where despite the elitist negligence towards the struggles of the subalterns, there was no growth of an alternative force to reckon with equal powerful force against the nationalist bourgeois leadership. The ambivalence of the socialist parties was another major lacuna for which those parties even failed to act as the avant-garde of the workers and the peasants. But it was also true that the broad aspects of the national movement regarding its mass base, created a peculiar problem for the adherents of the socialist leaders because, ‘as revolutionary social movements broadened their base, they (socialists) had to talk more in terms of the “people” as whole rather than just the “working class” and this logically led them to sound more “nationalist”.’\textsuperscript{86} The late entry of the Communist leaders of Assam into the domain of labour politics in 1940s did not alter the situation much because of the overwhelming popularity of the Congress party much more influenced the trade union politics. But despite the popular base of the Congress, the enthusiasm of the workers towards the call of the Communist leaders was also important.\textsuperscript{87} Inspite of the various lacunas, the left force made great sacrifices and earned great sympathy from the educated youths.

\textsuperscript{84} ‘The relatively simple question “what is a strike” attracts complicated answers. No lexicon can conjure the images that the word ‘strike’ conjures in employers and workers alike’ Rajeev Dhavan: \textit{Arguments, Protests, Strikes and Free Speech: The Career and Prospect of the right to strike in India} in Social Scientist, Vol-34, no. 1-2, January-February 2006.

\textsuperscript{85} Gandhi wrote: ‘Non-violent non-co-operators can only succeed when they have succeeded in attaining control over the hooligans of India, in other words, when the latter also have learnt patriotically or religiously to refrain from their violent activities at least while the campaign for non-co-operation is going on.’ \textit{The Crime of Chauri Chaura} 16 February 1922, CWMG, XXII, p. 461; Quoted in Amin: \textit{Op. cit.}

\textsuperscript{86} Immanuel Wallerstein: \textit{Antisystemic Movements: History and Dilemmas} in Samir Amin, et al.: \textit{Transforming the Revolution} (Delhi-2006), p. 24

\textsuperscript{87} Police Intelligence Report- 1947 File No.- 69 (PHA- Record)
and the spirit of the Russian Revolution certainly created a great enthusiasm among the radical minds of India too.\textsuperscript{88}

In India, basically the nationalism grew out of the protest against racist policies of the imperial rule\textsuperscript{89} and hard socio economic discriminations followed in India by the colonial power. The colonial state and their agents in various sectors worked out a separate cultural identity for themselves and created a division among the ruled and rulers. In the tea plantations the authority of ‘Burra Sahibs’ was highly prejudicial not only to the material interests of the labourers but the labourers had to face various indignations at the hands of the Burra Sahibs.\textsuperscript{90}

The ruling class regarded the vast bulk of the labourers as primitives and uncivilised.\textsuperscript{91} The owners of the tea plantations also thought that in Assam, the poor labourers had continued a smooth running of their livelihood unlike the home districts of the labourers. Generally, the ruling class regarded the protests of the uncivilised workers as ‘loose and disorderedly sort’, riot is seen as spontaneous and ‘blind’; and important kinds of social protest become lost in the category of ‘crime’.

\textsuperscript{88} Eric Hobsbawm clearly says about the great appeal of the October Revolution among the revolutionaries of the world: ‘Each Communist Party was the child of the marriage of two ill-assorted partners, a national left and the October revolutions that marriage was based both on love and convenience. …It was the first proletarian revolution, the first regime in history to set about the construction of the socialist order, the proof both of the profundity of the contradictions of capitalism, which produced wars and slumps, and of the possibility- the certainty- that socialist revolution would succeed.’

Eric Hobsbawm: \textit{Revolutionaries} (London-1999), Pp. 3-4

\textsuperscript{89} Nemai Sadhan Bose very succinctly has analysed the impact of racism upon the educated Indians which contributed greatly to the growth of nationalistic feelings among the Indians.

Nemai Sadhan Bose: \textit{Racism, Struggle for Equality and Indian Nationalism} (Calcutta-1991)

\textsuperscript{90} Jyotiprasad Agarwala one of the foremost artists of Assam, depicted the lifestyle of a manager of one tea estate, where the manager used his power to bring the garden female workers for his enjoyment and whenever the jamadar sometimes failed to collect such girls then the manager rebuked him. Jyotiprasad Agarwala: \textit{His International Baby} (a drama in three acts) in Satyendranath Sarma (ed.): \textit{Complete Works of Jyotiprasad Agarwala} (Guwahati-1999), p. 769

In Assamese novels, also, the exploitations and the indignations, the tea plantations labourers had to face, has been depicted beautifully in the works such as Rasna Barua’s \textit{Seuji Patar Kahini} (Nalbari-2002) and Uma Sarma’s \textit{Ejak Mamuh Ekhen Aranya} (Guwahati-1995) Mulk Raj Anand’s novel ‘Coolie’ though is not directly concerned with the story of the plight of the tea garden labourers but the psychological world of the Munoo (the chief character of the novel) is not different from the gardens labourers. Mulk Raj Anand: \textit{Coolie} (Delhi-1993)

\textsuperscript{91} But Levi Straus in an important work has analysed how the primitives had their own language to understand the nature: ‘… these people whom we usually consider as completely subservient to the need of not starving of continuing able just to subsist in very harsh material conditions are perfectly capable of disinterested thinking; that is, they are moved by a need or a desire to understand the world around them its nature and their society.’

The protests of the poor workers were nothing but a significant step in their progressive evolution of their class consciousness:

Classes do not exist as separate entities, look around, find an enemy class, and then start to struggle. On the country, people find themselves in a society structured in determined ways (civically, but no exclusively, in productive relations), they experience exploitation (or the need to maintain power over those whom they exploit), they identify points of antagonistic interest, they commence to struggle around these issues and in the process of struggling they discover themselves as classes, they come to know this discovery as class-consciousness. Class and class consciousness are always the last, not the first stage in the real historical process.92

The class-consciousness of the poor illiterate workers had its own base and it would not be genuine to study the nature of their protest through the prism of the elites. The nationalists almost sacrificed the interests of the subalterns in lieu of maintaining the ‘unity’ among the different classes because of the anti-colonial struggle. But the results for the poor Indians have not been beneficial since the unity which was forged by neglecting all the socio-economic differences among the different classes.93 The extreme importance on the maintenance of discipline in a people’s struggle pushed the bourgeois nationalist leadership to exclude every popular consciousness based in violence as irresponsible and, so, violent protests were not welcomed at all:

What worried the Congress high command most about initiative of this (subaltern militancy) kind was its refusal to be left out of nationalist politics- indeed, about its articulation precisely at those points where the elite and subaltern domains intersected and the controlled rhythm of a campaign was disturbed by the irruption

93 Amartya Sen writes: ‘It can certainly be agreed that the continuation of educational and social inequalities in India has been helped by the tendency of classical nationalist theory to focus on an automatic tendency towards ‘unity’ and to underplay differences and disparities.’ Amartya Sen: On Interpreting India’s Past in Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal (eds.): Nationalism, Democracy and Development (Delhi-1999), p. 32
of an Aika movement, an exodus of Assam coolies, an uprising at Chauri Chaura
or by any of those numerous transgressions which stepped beyond the limits of
passive disobedience. Such transgressions were, for Gandhi, a positive evidence
of the lack of ‘sacrifice, discipline and self control’ among the masses – the three
qualities without which there could be no ‘deliverance and no hope.’ And, of
those three, discipline was the most essential....’ Discipline became a matter of
vital concern for the bourgeois leadership as with the end of the First World War
masses began to participate in the nationalist movement on a scale larger than ever
before.94

The unique kind of the mass movement, the Indian National
Movement was able to achieve its aim of independence which was declared as its goal
of struggle since the late 1920s (Lahore Congress Session). Despite some inherent
negative features in the national movement, the people and the nation as a whole
achieved independence and the force of colonialism was defeated by the force of
bourgeois nationalism (with the active mass support) David Arnold’s characterisation
of the anti-colonial movements is important in the Indian context:

Broadly speaking, the anti-colonial movements of this century developed in one of
two directions. Either they utilized the institutional structure, created by the
colonial regime to achieve self-government, or they worked outside that structure,
attempting to overthrow the regime from without rather than succeeding it from
within. In the case of the first the anti-colonial struggle was generally
constitutional and non-violent; of the second it was almost invariably violent. The
ideology of the former inclined towards western style liberalism and democracy;
the later revolutionary nationalist and/or socialist creed.... In India anti-colonial
movement was, in essence, of the non-violent constitutional variety. In some parts
of the sub-continent terrorism was a factor determining the policies of both the
nationalist and British rulers but it was not a fundamental characteristic of the
struggle.95

94 Ranajit Guha: Discipline and Mobilize in Sub. St.- VII. (Delhi-1997), Pp. 104-105
The most important dimension of the national movement in India was that the leadership created a mythical culture around the prospect of achievement of freedom from the colonialists (British) and the poor and the lower middle class alike began to think that all their material ills would be removed after the capture of power. The national movement above all was also able to define its ideological and practical political struggle against colonialism through the implication of a great sense of 'authentic innocence' (to use the phrase of an eminent psychoanalyst Rollo May which we have taken from Ashis Nandy). Nandy has explained:

...the innocence which includes the vulnerability of a child but which has not lost the realism of its perception of evil or that of its own complicity with that evil. It was that innocence which finally defeated colonialism, however much the modern mind might like to give the credit to world historical forces, internal contradictions of capitalism and to the political horse sense or 'voluntary self-liquidation' of the rulers.96

That would be the real analysis of the strength of nationalism and its success (of course save its contradictory role or abhorrence for the subalterns struggles).

The native bourgeoisie and the tea plantation sector:

India was quite different from other colonies97 in one respect that it had a strong capitalist class of indigenous origin which gave a great challenge to the expatriates' domination over the economy of colonial India and 'the rise of this class was one of the by products of the British rule, though wholly unintended by the

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96 Ashis Nandy: *The Intimate Enemy* (Delhi-2004), Preface p. XIII
97 For instances the situation was quite different in other British ruled colonies and in Sri Lanka the native bourgeoisie never played an independent role vis-à-vis with the colonial capitalists: 'As in many colonies, the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie was the product of a specific colonial form of capitalist production. It was an appendage of imperialism; a 'dependent' as opposed to an 'independent' class, whose creation and continued existence was based on protection and opportunities by the colonial state. It did not attain that maturity and autonomy which was a hallmark of the bourgeoisie in countries where development of industrial capitalism took place. The situation in Sri Lanka was thus different even from that in India, where a section of the bourgeoisie not only branched out into industrial activity that brought it into conflict with competing foreign industrial interest, but also adopted pronounced nationalist and anti-imperialist stance.' Kumari Jayawardena: * Nobodies to Somebodies* (Delhi-2001), Introduction, p. XVIII
The indigenous capitalist class emerged as a powerful lobby in Indian politics only after the First World War and, although it did not join openly in the nationalist politics but it seemed that there existed an obvious harmony between the two parties (the Congress and the Capitalist lobby). But, sometimes, there occurred disharmony, too, between the two groups:

The visible affiliation of Indian industrialists with the Congress, a characteristics feature of national politics before the First World War, declined as the organisation set off on an agitational course under Gandhi. Not a single important leader of Indian business was actively associated with the Congress after 1919. A policy of equidistance as from the government and the Congress was considered to be more appropriate.... Behind this facade of equidistance, however, we can detect a four pronged strategy: (a) Keep aloof from the confrontational- agitational aspects of the freedom struggle, (b) support with funds such constructive activities which were indirectly linked with the Congress organization, (c) influenced policy formulation by the Congress to ensure that its thinking or major issues affecting business interests was in tune with their own and (d) act in unison with the nationalist minded elements in the legislatures to press the demands of Indian industry.99

Generally the big bourgeoisie did concentrate on some specific industrial sectors, (textile, and steel industry) and interestingly there was no such proof that they had ever tried to jump into other commercially precarious industries like the tea plantation industry. Only since the 1950’s the Indian owned tea estates grew in large number but still in one government report it was stated: ‘In spite of the Indianisation, the Europeans have still maintained overwhelmingly predominant hold over the industry.100

Few Assamese capitalists tried to make a venture into the tea plantations despite facing numerous difficulties during the colonial period. The

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99 Ibid., p. 96
100 Report on and Enquiry into the Family Budget of Tea Garden Workers in Assam, 1951-52 Govt. of Assam, 1953, p. 14
formation of capital-produced industries in Assam was very meager and the low investment in the tea plantations by the indigenous capitalists did not able to alter the situation to their favour. The stagnant nature of the capital formation outwardly or inwardly did not revolutionise the industrial scenario due to lack of its diversification. The intrinsic nature of the capital remained unchanged during the whole colonial period in Assam. The process of the capital-formation in Assam did not initiate eventually an implacable record of transformation and it failed to bring a full growth of the productive resources.\textsuperscript{101}

The problem which has been continuously disturbing the labour historians is how far the formation of the industrial bourgeoisie in the colonial India acted as a purely class-conscious group and how far did its activities influence the larger interests of the masses? No doubt, in Assam we could not observe any group of bourgeoisie who could have challenged or come into competition with the foreign capitalists. The assumption that the coalition of bourgeoisie (indigenous capitalists those who were nationalists also) with the bourgeois political party (INC) unequivocally did not want to help (because of their interest in the tea plantations) the cause of tea labourers has seemed to be heavily burdened with the later day Marxist rigidity where the role of the native bourgeoisie had been observed due to its comprador origin or a dependent variation of the expatriate capitalism. It would important in this context that the native capitalists of Assam and their power of capital diversification or its capability of variation was very weak. If they did not want to spread political consciousness among the labourers it was only due to the subaltern militancy of the labourers and after the 1920s, the Satyagraha method of struggle so far brought a benign excuse for the leaders of the national movement (both indigenous capitalist and who had also their entrepreneurial interests) not to entangle themselves in the volatile labour affairs.

\textsuperscript{101} Marx beautifully defines the nature of capital in a succinct manner by taking into account the natural features of its growth: ‘Capital is not a thing, but rather a definite social relation belonging to definite historical formation of society, which is manifested in a thing and lends this thing a specific social character. Capital is not the sum of the material and produced means of production. Capital is rather the means of production transformed into capital, which is themselves are no more capital then gold or silver in itself is money. It is the means of production monopolised by a certain section of society confronting living labour power as products and working conditions rendered independent of this very labour-power, which are personified through this antithesis in capital.’ K. Marx: \textit{Capital Vol.-III}, (Moscow-1986), Pp. 814-815.
It would be also preposterous to say that the Congress led national movement oversimplified the efforts of the dependent classes and that the movement led by the dominant groups was always in a false point due to its refusal to pay sympathy and support to the workers protests. If Gandhi wished to deter himself from espousing any class conflict between the capitalists and the poor workers his advocacy of such compromising principles did not falsify the overall aims of the movement.\textsuperscript{102} For the radicals, the need was only to strengthening consciousness of the masses (especially the workers) about the exploitative network of the capitalism through a systematic analysis and with scientific precision before the working class.

The aim of the native capitalists in Assam was always to bring capitalist development to the province. On the other hand it was also true that they did not want to create an unhealthy atmosphere by helping the cause of the labourers. If prior to the starting of the national movement in the 1920’s, they eschewed that cause by simply citing the ‘developmentalist’ attitude of the colonial state and if they also accepted the anthropological separateness of the labourers from themselves (bourgeoisie), but after the advent of Mahatma Gandhi and his non-violent principle, they got a readymade weapon of counteracting the sarcastic criticism of the opposite group( like the Left Parties) by simply denouncing the violence of the oppressed section as the antithesis to the Gandhian methods of struggle.

It was also true that culturally the bourgeois leaders (nationalists) were more akin to the aspirations of the bourgeois capitalistic structure and there developed a mutual trust between the native capitalists and the expatriate capitalists. But, it would be also futile to say that the cultural connection established between the two

\textsuperscript{102} Marx in a different context explained by taking in to his analysis the matter of the attitude of the Communists towards the bourgeois led struggle for a democratic government (e.g. by Marx-Germany) where the classical political economy still dominated with absolutist rules by the Chancellor Bismarck and where the formation of the working class was rather slow unlike England, France or America: ‘...in Germany the decisive struggle between the bourgeoisie and the absolute monarchy is still to come. Since, however, the Communists cannot count on the decisive struggle between themselves and the bourgeoisie until the bourgeoisie rules, it is in the interests of the Communists to help bring the bourgeoisie to power as soon as possible in order as soon as possible to overthrow them again. The Communists must therefore always take the side of the liberal bourgeois against the governments but they must ever be on their guard against sharing the self-deceptions of the bourgeois or believing their false assurances about the benefits which the victory of the bourgeoisie will bring to the proletariat.'

Marx and Engels: \emph{C.W.VOL-6}; Quoted in K. Marx and F. Engels: \emph{Manifesto of the Communist Party} (Calcutta-1991), Appendix, Pp. 86-87
antagonistic groups viz., the expatriate tea planters and the indigenous ever concretised a synthesis between themselves. One group had a mortal fear of the rising consciousness of the exploited sections (in the case of Assam, the tea plantation labourers) of the colonial Indian society and the other section namely the nationalist bourgeois leadership had a great fear of the "indisciplinary" nature of the crowd.  

There was no proof either that in spite of the capitalists' help to the Congress organisation that it completely got the upper hand in controlling the day-to-day affairs of the Congress party. After all, the Congress was pronounced since its new organisational set-up after the early 1919-20, as a organisation for the whole Indian masses irrespective of the manifold diversities and no doubt that the bourgeoisie or the rich peasantry also cultivated that relationship with the Congress Party in order to secure their own fortunes.

But in great contrast, in the case of Assam, due to the weak formation of the bourgeoisie, they never played an active role in manipulating the decisions of the Party in favour of them. The nationalists those who had also their stake in the tea plantations never openly denounced the interests of the labourers But at the same time they stood in an unjustified position when they failed to offer necessary help to the oppressed workers struggle. The feeble form of their attempts to industrialise the province with the help of the expatriate planters had based on an irrational groundwork and their pronounced agonies seeing the poverty and backwardness among the common people did not take the form of radical protest against the whole colonial capitalist system. And even unlike the early critique of the colonial economic policies made by the moderate Congress leaders and the intellectuals in 1885-1905, it was never developed in the case of Assam. It was rather a great irony that whereas the leaders like Jadav Prasad Chaliha, Nabin Chandra Bordoloi always stressed and explained the need of a regeneration of the natives of Assam against the foreign rule,

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103 In a brilliant essay, Ranajit Guha elaborates the crowd - controlling means of Gandhi and his lieutenants: 'Gandhi's theory of leadership amounted ... to a formula to dissolve the immediacy of mobilization in the subaltern domain and open up a space for the nationalist elite to interpose with its own will, initiative and organization in order to pilot the political activity of the masses towards goals set up by the bourgeoisie. Discipline in the lexicon of Gandhism, was the name of that mediating function. This disciplinary leadership operated by two kinds of mediation. Together, they formed a spearhead which had its cutting edges in crowd control and soul control.

the same leaders on the other hand, tried to secure their financial side by deploying the toiling workers and those who had already been under a exploitative mechanism. Perhaps, those leaders thought that the place of the struggle of the imported workers had no place in the politics of the province and the regional-cultural diversities; a discovery of the early colonial masters, hypnotised their angle of thought too. There was no concrete study of the real situation of the labourers and the nationalism of the dominant groups always had a great fear of the economic issues. The working class just stood in a mimic position before the combined force of the bourgeoisie and the colonial state. R.Chandavarkar explains:

The rhetoric of nationalism rarely sought, least of all before its heterogeneous audiences, to define a particular working-class interest, or to speak, even within a given context, exclusively to its immediate objectives. Of course, the Congress did not readily admit the distinction between the interests and aspirations of the working classes and those of the nation, and when it did so, it was usually not in order to represent the former but to control and constrain them in the name of the later.\textsuperscript{104}

The interesting phenomenon of the whole period was that the strikes always became more ‘explosive particularly when they coincided with anti-colonial upsurges.’\textsuperscript{105} For instance the coincidence of the labour upsurge during the period of 1920-22 with the Non-Cooperation movement rather frightened both the colonial state and the bourgeois leaders of the Congress party and after that incident (1920-22), we would not observe the same phenomenon in the history of the India’s struggle for freedom (only in the later phase of the freedom movement there occurred some coincidental strikes that too only in Bombay).

\textbf{Review of literature:}

Although, the labour history writing in the West got its maturity in the 1950s but in India the study of working class struggle was not so dynamic and in the early 1980s, Sumit Sarkar for instance noticed that lacuna and has explained: ‘Labour

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\textsuperscript{104} R. Chandavarkar: \textit{Op. Cit., Imperial Power}, p. 28

\textsuperscript{105} S. Basu: \textit{Op. Cit., Does Class Matter?}, p. 16
history unfortunately is still in its infancy in our country.' Sabyasachi Bhattacharya also has explained the causes of the dearth of labour history writing in India:

The social and cultural world of the industrial working class remains unknown till now partly because the kind of sources which are available to the historian of let us say the European working class on account of the literature generated by the literate artisans and skilled workers and petty-bourgeois radical do not exist in India. Moreover, the academic historians’ dependence on “official” sources i.e., those to be found in government archives, has until recently excluded from their notice whatever data that there may exist in the private papers of labour leaders, trade union organisations, industrialists, social workers etc.

Now, a new group of historians have tried to fill up that void by developing new kind of research in the labour history writing. Dipesh Chakrabarty’s monumental work in respect of the jute workers of Calcutta has hugely influenced the labour historians of India in spite of severe criticism against his handling of the ideas concerning the trade unionism or the hierarchical role of its leaders. Chakrabarty’s two other important articles published in the Subaltern Studies particularly points to the lack of a full-growth capitalist relationship in the labour struggle and the hierarchical nature of the trade union culture which deeply influenced the labour politics in the colonial period. The works of Parimal Ghosh, Vinay Behl, S. B. Upadhyay, Chitra Joshi, and Janaki Nair are also important in this context and they have respectively studied the jute workers strikes in Calcutta, Tata Steel and Iron Company workers strikes in Jamshedpur and textile mill workers conditions in Bombay and discussing

106 Sumit Sarkar: Modern India (Delhi-2002), p. 470
108 Dipesh Chakrabarty: Rethinking Working Class its History: Bengal 1890-1940 (Delhi-1989)
109 A. K. Bagchi is particularly prominent who as a believer in the classical Marxism severely criticised Chakrabarty’s work Rethinking Working Class its History: Bengal 1890-1940 (Princeton University Press-1989) in a review article: ‘... Chakrabarty’s strategy of dumping all the features that seemed to have fractured a worker’s capacity to act as a worker struggling against capital into the catch-all category of ‘pre-capitalist’ features. Take, for example, his notion of the ‘Babu-Coolie’ relationship. ...This general aspect of the pre-capitalist relationship between the rich and the poor would thus appear to have constituted an important stand in the tradition that moulded the culture of trade unionism in colonial Calcutta. ... If, by calling the so-called ‘babu-coolie’ relationship a pre-capitalist relation, he implies that it was generated by pre-colonial society and was a survival from those days, he is obviously wrong.’ A. K. Bagchi: Working Class Consciousness in EPW Vol-XXV No. 30- July 28,1990.
the textile mill workers strikes in Kanpur and gold miners strikes in Mysore. In recent years, the perspective of gender in labour history writing has also been given importance in the works of the historians like, Samita Sen and Leela Fernandes.

The tea plantation workers struggle in the midst of the two giants, namely the colonial state and also with the plantation authority and the bourgeois led national movement, hitherto, has been an unexplored field and some dissertation works are available but most of them have adopted a rigid theoretical approach by neglecting the internal force and self-propelled combination of the workers against the tea capitalists. Some earlier explanations of the tea workers pathetic leaving conditions are available but those significant monographs which were produced mostly during the colonial period. About the labour system of the plantation of the

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Chitra Joshi: *Lost Worlds, Indian Labour and its Forgotten Histories* (Delhi-2000)

112 Sen writes (largely in the context of the jute mill workers where single migrants were preferred for factory work unlike the tea plantations of Assam) after witnessing the negligence of the historians towards the study of the role of the gender and various discriminations faced by the women workers: 'So...issues of gender have not evoked any response from Indian labour historians who have sustained their arguments about “class” by narrowly focusing on “organised” industrial workers. Since industrial workers are primarily men and usually “single” migrants it has been assumed that “working class women” have no specific relevance to “class”. It has not even been asked why or how the industrial working class became overwhelmingly male. As a result, the more fundamental issue of how gender was, in fact, crucial to the very constitution of labour processes—not only in organised industry but in other arenas of economic activity remains unaddressed.'

Samita Sen: *Women and Labour in Late Colonial India* (Cambridge-1999), p. 4

113 Fernandes also writes: 'Class represents a social relationship constituted of three central ties-structure, consciousness and political activity. Each of these ties is constructed in turn through the categories of gender and community'.

Leela Fernandes: *Producing Workers* (Delhi-1999), p. 10


Dewan Chamalal: *Coolie-The Story of Labour and Capital in India* (Lahore-1932)

In the post independent period some valuable research works have been produced about the tea workers problems and S. K. Bose’s work is important in this context. S. K. Bose’s *Capital and Labour in the Indian Tea Industry* (Bombay-1954).
Dooars (Jalpaiguri) some good works are available. But Guha’s work has so far failed to discuss the role of the national bourgeois Congress leadership’s in the context of the provincial Congress leadership’s controversial decisions in the crucial moments of the working class struggle. Amalendu Guha’s celebrated work has left certain important points untouched, due to his extra importance given to the history of electoral politics of Assam and his stiff insistence on following a classical Marxist model of thought (Post Leninist) in evaluation of the bourgeois phenomena of the Assamese society. But, in spite of the major discrepancies in his work; Guha’s “Planter Raj”, ‘not only became a trail-blazer stimulating further research, but continued to hold its own among dozens of voluminous new publications by virtue of its combination of clarity and rich comprehensiveness.’ Guha did not make any comprehensive study into the grievous trajectoriness of the workers led protests in the tea estates and as a follower of Marxist principles, with a certain deterministic affiliation to ideology, for which he has been averse throughout his work in taking up the study of the development of consciousness and unity forged among the workers and which occurred in truth without the concrete support and help of the outside leadership.

Ranajit Dasgupta’s works also have not made any exemplary departure from the existing literature, as available, about the study of the tea plantation workers and the specific thrust he has given on the formation of the working class is really based on the post Leninist study about the workers success and failure in their struggles. Dasgupta has given particular attention to the peasant characteristic of the

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Sharit Bhoumik: *Class Formation in the Plantation System* (Delhi-1981)
117 Hiren Gohain writes: “Guha’s treatment necessarily fails to throw any light on the exact relationship between the regional bourgeoisie and the “national” bourgeois. Guha also fails to be sufficiently critical of the class character of the congress leadership in the national scale. Hence, while he makes much of the chauvinist tendencies in the Assamese middle class, he is unable to see that this can be connected with the failure of the all-India leadership to solve the national question with wisdom and foresight.’
118 Hiren Gohain in a sublime form has reviewed the new revised edition of the *Planter Raj to Swaraj* (Delhi- 2006) with a candid review article of Guha’s book.
tea plantation workers for which they ultimately failed to develop their class consciousness:

The plantation work itself, such as digging, hoeing, planting, weeding, plucking, etc. was (and even today is) essentially agricultural in nature. Consequently, for the labourers coming from various forms of peasant and tribal background there was no radical change in the pattern of occupation. Most of them were drawn from subsistence agriculture or activities akin to agriculture and remained in agriculture though basically in a different nature.¹¹⁹

Rana Pratap Behai's magnificent research work¹²⁰ gives importance in the development of the organised nature of the workers protests. He also has pointed out certain lacunas in the labourers' struggle and writes:

The tea garden worker's struggle did not, however, crystallize into a unified and organized labour movement in the Assam valley. The major constraining factors were the various features of the plantation structure such as restrictions on mobility, enforced isolation and social and physical control of the workers. These along with oppressive state machinery prevented the emergence of a political leadership from among the workers themselves.¹²¹

¹¹⁹Das Gupta also writes: 'The penetration of colonial capitalism in India led to the growth of a wage-earning industrial labour force divided into several segments in the second half of the 19th and first half of the 20th Centuries. A major segment was the plantation labour force formed and maintained essentially on the basis of unfree labour. With their access to means of subsistence dependence on subsistence economic in their pattern of occupation, the plantation workers had quite pronounced rural and peasant like characteristics. The labour force remained semi-proletarianized, essentially half peasant, half industrial wage worker.'


Behai's theoretical ambiguity rather has confined himself in the prism of an uncertain evaluative framework about the workers spontaneous and self-guided struggle and he has tried to explain the ultimate result of the workers protests in a pessimistic note:

The hindrances to the development of class consciousness among plantation workers can't be fully understood without reference to the nature of the work which primarily was agricultural.\(^{122}\)

The peasant characteristics of the labour force and hence to define the tea plantation as merely agricultural, has been its analogy with the debate that was raised up in the Calcutta High Court in the context of the payment of income-tax as demanded by the Government. The Government of India explained, 'the manufacturing processes carried out in a modern tea factory with scientific appliances and up-to-date machinery, are different from those ordinarily employed by a cultivator to render big produce fit to be taken to market.'\(^{123}\) The debate which has still confused the historians of the labour history, then, also, confused the Colonial administrators during the whole period since 1920s.

Nitin Varma's excellent approach in dealing with the tea garden workers resistance through an angle of a cultural approach has unraveled a deep site of the workers resistance against the planters' oppression. Varma's too much desire to give importance only to the cultural aspects of the struggles fabricated his main arguments with a canopy full of ambiguities which has been woven up with a perspective, strongly borrowed from the Thompsonian approach.\(^{124}\)

The main arguments of the dissertation is to show that the workers' protests did not become an illusion and failure of the anguished workers' protests was not due to their peasant roots, and those struggles were very real and those were in

\(^{122}\) Ibid.
\(^{123}\) Indian Tea Association – Report for the year- 1920 And Proceedings of the Fortieth Annual General Meeting held on the 11th March. 1921 Calcutta. The case was carried through by Killing Valley Tea Co.Ltd. vs Secretary of State for India in Council and the court verdict was that the contention of both Government and the Company were erroneous that the actual position is that the Company cannot be made to pay income tax in so far as they are cultivators, but qua manufacturers, they can be taxed.
close proximity with the resonance of the class struggle. But the emergence of the workers consciousness had an ephemeral character and the consciousness emerged not because of the interference of the external agencies but through a self developed understanding among the workers against the oppression committed by the tea planters. The actual effects and consequences of their strikes were great indeed and in the process of their protests against the employers they showed a keen sense of consciousness. This kind of protests amply made it also clear that the main themes of their protests had been in transformation since the beginning of the culture of protests in the tea gardens (recorded evidence since 1880s). The ambivalent attitude of the bourgeois leadership towards the workers interests made the workers task of developing a consciousness around the economic issues simultaneously with the national movement among the workers a difficult one. The national movement had failed to impress upon the workers deeply and they were largely remained untouched of any bourgeois nationalist political consciousness. It has been made crystal clear from the documents of the British Colonial officials that the workers made definite improvements in the methods of their protests and they also filtered down the information about various labour laws, and it made the workers protests in course of time, stringent and worthy of achieving some goals.

The whole point of the dissertation, but is not to eulogise the struggles of the workers, who had never gone through the cyclical bourgeois socio-economic development, as experienced by other developed countries workers. Within the Colonial setup and the paraphernalia of Colonial jurisdictional and capitalist disciplines, the workers struggle took the form of quick outburst of anger against the planters' domination over their livelihood. But the significance of the plantation workers protests lies in the fact that they developed their own idioms of resistance against the domination of the capitalists and though their protests lacked of the concrete political programme but their efforts to achieve their demands amidst the hostile attitude of the planters and the bourgeois elites were most important.

But one point is very clear that, they had made their own efforts to force the oppressors to grant some concessions to their economic life and it was, in the sence, that the planters and the Colonial State's concessions to the labourers were
not out of benevolence because the idea of benevolence as always in the world of capitalism has been a proxy idea.

**Theoretical apparatus of the main chapters:**

The chapters have been arranged chronologically with a rigorous application of scientific arguments and we have tried as far as possible to avoid the hypothetical presentation of the ‘utopian’ principles. But, we have tried to stick to the objective analysis of the things through an ‘intertext’ (to use the phrase of Roland Barthes) and the ‘intertext’ in this context is the scientific analysis keeping in view the main objectives of the study. To look into the complex amalgam of labour and capital in a colonial country like India, we have tried to bring into focus the role of the national bourgeois leadership who had played the key role in determining and lessening the role of the labour force in the industrial relations. The dissertation has also endeavoured to analyse the Gandhian logic towards the working class struggle (particularly in the context of the tea plantation workers).

The first chapter of the dissertation is Introduction and here we have discussed the theoretical aspects in the labour history writing and we have also tried to analyse it through the current debates in the concerned area of study. The problems of studying the tea plantation workers struggle have been particularly emphasised.

The second chapter has explained a history of the emergence of the working force in the tea industry since the inception of the industry in the late 1830’s. The import of tea labourers from the different parts of India was started because of the refusal of the indigenous people for doing service in the newly established tea industry besides the low wages in the tea estates and later, the anomalies in the labour recruitment process gave a bad name to the tea plantations of Assam. They (tea planters) later succeeded in filling up the shortage of labour through a secure and inhuman labour procurement from the various regions of India to keep up the capitalist production in the tea estates. In the tea estates, the imported labourers were subjected to harsh disciplinary mechanism where the labourers indocile nature was newly structured through the implication of the capitalist disciplines. One of the most
interesting natures of the capitalist production in India was that it could accommodate the diverse groups of human beings, in different professions (usually in the textile mills, jute mills or in the tea plantation of Assam) and those were inducted by luring them for a better future. The reaction and critique of the early nationalist leaders of the INC was also important in this context. But inspite of their criticism against the foreign monopolists, they did disavow any prospect of the notion of class struggle in the colonial India’s context. In the second chapter the overall aspects of the affects of the new expatriate entrepreneurship (the tea capitalists) upon the labour force has been discussed.

The third chapter explains the formation of the indigenous capitalist class in a colonial-industrial environment. In a colonial economy, like Assam the obstacles faced by the native capitalists were immense. The nascent growth of the bourgeoisie also took its root in the context of Assam with the establishment of tea garden by the Assamese capitalists and that class politically also played a significant part in the evolution of the nationalist political consciousness in Assam since 1890s. But, culturally, they were much more influenced by the western form of lifestyle and the upbringing of their thoughts in a liberal bourgeois fashion later manifested itself in liberal imitation of moving in a bourgeois pattern in their respective fields, where the independent and evolutionary progress of the class consciousness among the oppressed section of the society was unequivocally denied. The early generation of the tea-capitalists of Assam encouraged the later generation at the dawn of the twentieth century to embark on a risky but fruitful business venture. Some, early patriotic nationalists of Assam also became the active supporters of industrialising the province by joining in the rush for the tea plantation. The leaders like N. C. Bordoloi, J. P. Chaliha, Kuladhar Chaliha etc. performed the dual acts (they were capitalists and the Congress leaders also) beautifully but they were much more poor in power and wealth before the managing agency controlled tea estates owners. Their sporadic references to the labour problems in the Legislative Council or in the Assembly debates did not lead to an all-round struggle against the monopoly rights enjoyed by the expatriate business class in all spheres of the state’s political economy.

The fourth chapter has tried to unravel the history of the Non-Cooperation movement and its impact upon the tea garden labourers. That period was
one of the most crucial periods in the working class history of India as well as in Assam. The chapter also has brought into focus the contradictory and ambivalent attitude of the bourgeois politicians (INC) towards the workers protests. The impact of the First World War in a weak economy had a bad affect upon the living condition of the workers and the rise of the price of basic commodities brought discomfiture to the already poverty-stricken working force. That was the period when for the first time, the fate of the economy of the province had been interlinked with the fluctuations of the world commerce. The workers became restive and they resorted to strikes as their form of protests to get the benefits for a comfortable living standard. The increasing tide of the strikes compelled colonial state to set up an Enquiry-Committee to make an enquiry into the rate of wages and the causes of the strikes. The effects of the strikes were obvious and the colonial government despite the obduracy of the planters constrained to dispose of some elementary comforts to the mental and physical world of the labourers. But once again it had become clear, that before the owners of the agency houses and the capitalist monopoly organisation like the ITA, the government could not do anything.

The fifth chapter, starts with the analysis of the World depression in the early 1930s and the consequences of the depression on the economy of the province. Some pioneering efforts were made by the trade unionists to make a united struggle against the foreign capitalists and they also conducted some memorable strikes in that period and the most important event of the period was the Digboi oil-workers strike. The Digboi strike also influenced the vast bulk of tea workers living in the vicinity of the oil refinery. The formation of the new Congress Ministry after the passing of the Government of India Act, 1935, did bring a great metamorphosis in the psychology of the Indian masses when they got the first taste of the indigenous government rule but in respect of the workers struggles, the new ministry did not bring any radical departure in the labour-management relationship and so far the base of the exploitative-capitalist system was not hurt and, so, the fate of the poor workers remained unchanged.

The sixth chapter has analysed the axiom point as explained by the Post-Leninist trade unionists that through the formation of trade unions among the factory workers which was assumed to have led automatically to the class conflict in
its fullest form, thus bringing emancipation of the working class. The weak and sluggish development of trade union organisation in Assam was another feature, which this chapter has tried to analyse. The weak formation of the trade union organisations did not mean that the lack of organised combinations became a great hindrance in the growth of an incipient form of class consciousness among the tea plantation workers. The special difficulties faced by the labour organisers in the vortex of the combined opposition of both the colonial state and the tea capitalists made the task of the labour organisers singularly an Herculean one. The hostile attitude of the capitalist towards any unionisation among the labourers had been explained too. The chapter has given especial emphasis upon the emergence of the left forces in India in general and in particular Assam.

The seventh chapter has tried to bring into focus, the late period of the nationalist movement and the political events of the period and it has tried to show that in the considerations of the nationalist leaders, the concern of the workers always took a second position. In considering the great climax of the freedom struggle, the strikes and the isolated struggles of the subalterns continued even during the last days of the British colonial rule. This chapter has also tried to analyse that the workers remained mere spectators in the final game of the peoples struggles for freedom.

In the eighth chapter, which is also the concluding chapter of the whole dissertation, and here an overview of the discussion has been made to complete the synthetic fabric of the whole title of the dissertation and its viewpoints.