CHAPTER-4
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LABOUR ON PROTEST: GANDHI, THE NON COOPERATION MOVEMENT AND ITS IMPACT, 1920-22

The most significant feature of the strikes of the period (early 1920s) was that it had assumed a near political character in some respects due to the progress of the Non Cooperation movement. The workers were not wholly immune from the impact of that movement. Also, Gandhi’s visit to Assam had a momentous influence both upon the newly formed Congress Provincial Committee of Assam and the general masses. The Non Cooperation movement had influenced the general population of Assam, but Gandhi’s emphasis upon the disciplining of the crowd for the united struggle against the British colonial rule, virtually excluded the subalterns like the tea plantation labourers because of their use of violence during the period of their protests. So the labourers protests did not earn any worthy consideration at the hands of the leaders of the Gandhi led movement.

Above all, the unique style of Gandhi also gave a new meaning to the methods of struggle in the Indian context:

The Satyagrahic method (also) required mass participation for its success. When Gandhi appeared on the scene a large number of social groups were outside the Congress and available for recruitment for example, the poor, the unemployed, the different strata, peasantry, landless labourers, industrial workers, merchants, traders, sections of big bourgeoisie, rising industrialists, women and the untouchables. He selected and set about cultivating some of these but not others. This was not an accident nor a matter of his personal political preference, nor a question of their political accessibility, but inherent in his satyagrahic method of struggle. That method could only succeed if those participating in it satisfied
certain conditions. Gandhi, therefore, recruited and mobilized those social groups that did, and ignored those that did not, satisfy them.¹

So, in the Gandhian agenda and the struggle for 'Swaraj', in the early 1920s the labourers had no place to accommodate itself with the nationalist agenda, as they were not in tune with the disciplinary behaviours, as emphasised under the Congress banner.

The violent protests of the tea garden labourers had its own significance because those protests demonstrated it clearly, that the labourers would be able to achieve their aims, not through the bourgeois leadership of the national movement, but through their own methods of struggle which had been continuing since the inception of the industry, particularly since the 1880s.

**Workers protests in isolation amidst the total monopoly of the tea-capitalists:**

Secluded from the usual vortex of the mass political game, depending primarily on the “paternalism” of their ‘manager sahibs’ in effect, the tea garden labourers had been living in isolation under the subjugation of the expatriate tea-capitalists. R.P. Dutt has explained that point thus:

From the standpoint of the potential strength of the organized labour movement, we should add that over 1 million workers employed in the plantation, who are employed in fully large scale enterprise under the most scientific slave-driving conditions and have already shown a high degree of militant activity in periods of unrest although so far cut off from all organization and held under conditions of complete isolation and subjections.²

The remark gives an idea of the poor condition of the tea garden labourers and, those who were spending days on starvation due to the low wages. But their contribution to

the development of tea plantation in Assam was immense. The turning point came in the post-First World War period, when the tea industry suffered due to the international political and economic imbalances and, automatically, the fate of the workers also since to the worst conditions.

Like other places of India, the impact of the First World War on the economy of Assam was disastrous. Naturally, the tea plantation labourers were among the worst sufferers. The tea industry suffered immensely and the industry never faced such a great crisis before. The Chairman of the ITA, in fact, in a meeting said:

There has probably never been time when the outlook for the industry was more uncertain and difficult that is at present. With the abnormal conditions prevailing all over the world, affecting every branch of trade and commerce, it is not surprising that a great industry like that of tea production should suffer seriously. 1

A.D. Gordon, who was the Chairman of the ITA, also, discussed the prospect and consequences of the crisis in more details:

A mill or a factory can reduce its staff, or go on short time, or if need be close down temporarily and wait for better times. But a tea garden must carry on, and the extent to which it can restrict its operation or reduce its working cost is necessary small. To close down altogether means the abandonment of the capital sunk in the enterprise; and tea garden labour is so costly to recruit that any material reduction in the labour strength represents a practical loss of capital. 2

The possible idea of reducing the labour force to control the crisis in the tea estates did led in fact to the fear of losing capital and only the desire for not losing capital forced the premier tea companies to abandon the prospect of closing down the tea-estates. But the industry, as a whole, did begin to recover after 1921, when at the initiative of the ITA; an agreement was reached by which the output of the production was restricted. Though, the ITA and its officials became anxious and fearful of the post-war economic situation but it was also true that the temporary

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1 Chairman's Speech at the Fortieth Annual General Meeting of the ITA held on the 11th March 1921 (Royal Exchange Building, Calcutta) in Report for the year 1920-ITA, Calcutta
2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
The issue of the lower rate of wages was also one of the main reasons of the strikes in the Lakhimpur district tea estates which culminated in the Doom Dooma riots, and strikes occurred in the tea estates of Dhoedaam, Pabhojan, Sandang, Hokanguri, Hansara etc. The labourers of the Pabhojan tea estate on 21st September, 1920, physically attacked the Jamadar of the garden and damaged the bunglow of the Manager. Again, on 22nd September 1920, at the Dhoedaam, in the same district, the Superintendent of Police was seriously assaulted and bungalow property destroyed. Mr. Colquhon, the Deputy Commissioner of the Lakhimpur district said in his report that ‘the failure of wages to respond to the enormous rise in prices and the ease with which the employers of the Dibru-Sadiya Railway had by a strike, secured an increase of pay were quite sufficient to cause unrest among tea-garden coolies’.9

Regarding the causes that led to the eventualities in the form of strikes, the Deputy Commissioner said:

That there should be some unrest amongst the coolies is I consider no matter for surprise. According to the published returns the average wage earned by men calculated on the average working strength in the Dibrugarh subdivision was Rs.10-10-9 in 1911-12 and Rs.10-8-1 in 1918-19. I admit that wages in 1911-12 were unusually high but it is not to be expected that coolies will now be content with wages approximating those paid to them before the war.10

But the Committee, which was enquiring the causes and effects of the strikes dismissed the contention offered by the Deputy Commissioner by saying that those tea estates who had been strike affected were in a position to offer sufficient wages to the labourers because those tea estates paid high dividends.11

The district officials as well as the managers sometimes believed that some strikes were politically manoeuvred, in spite of the fact, that liberal wages were given to the labourers. In the Halem tea estate riot ease where it was accompanied by acts of great violence and largely inspired by social and political propaganda; the

9 Ibid., p. 6
10 Ibid., Pp. 6-7
11 Ibid., p. 7
district officials attributed the sole cause of the strikes to the interference of the political activists in the labour affairs. The Deputy Commissioner explained in his report that the Munda origin labourers of the Halem T.E. particularly played a significant part in the incident:

The labour force of Halem consists of a very large element native Christians – there are three churches on the garden built and maintained by the garden for the Church of England, the Roman Catholic and the Lutheran communities. These coolies are mainly Mundas from Ranchi and neighbourhood. The Lutheran denomination was before the war surprised by a German pastor and it is not impossible that their present attitude is partly the outcome of his teachings. Many of these native Christians are literate and their religious interests are looked after by pastors and pundits of their own caste. Sometime before the riot the chief resident .... obtained leave to go to his country... since his return the Manager had noticed a gradual growth of a feeling of sullenness and discontent among the coolies for which no apparent cause could be assigned.  

The contention of the Deputy Commissioner was also accepted by the Enquiry Committee. The Manager of that tea estate also believed that besides the activities of the native Christians and the labourers those who were educated came under the influence of the Christianity which in turn made themselves aware of their needs. The local Congress leaders near the garden, also, stimulated a sense of uneasiness among the labourers.

In many respects, the strikes occurred due to the indifferent behaviour of the garden staff, (particularly the Indian assistants of the tea estates) towards the labourers. During a strike, at Kaliti tea estate (Surma Valley), on September 1920, the objections of the labourers were against the head clerk who was said to have too much power and to take excessive dasturi. But, there were other instances also. when the garden staff members like the head clerk or a mohurri created a strike like situation by instigating the labourers of his gardens. While during a strike at Kachujan tea estate, the head mohurrie of the tea estate ‘was instigating the strike in consultation with

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12 Ibid., p. 9
some Congress leaders at Tinsukia' and later the Manager dismissed the head mohurrie. The strike lasted for a week.\textsuperscript{13}

Generally, in the cases, where the babus and jamadars were ill-treating the labourer, it was said about the Manager that he was in the grip of the babus: ‘Some coolies complained that after doing their hazira work, the jamadar compelled them to cut grass for his cattle, and for this sort of things they liked to approach the manager.’\textsuperscript{14} It was also observed that ‘on the gardens on which the most serious disturbances took place, complaints against the garden babus were very bitter and insistent, and there was evidence that money had been extorted by them from the coolies under various pretexts’.\textsuperscript{15}

The wages of the garden staff members who were primarily natives (both the Bengalees and the Assamese) differed as garden wise. For instance, in the Galeky tea estate, under the Assam Tea Company, where the labourers got wages on September 1920, for men Rs.8-4-4, for women Rs.7-1-9, for children Rs.5-5-11, the Indian Staff started on probationary period on grades I, II, III and IV, earned a fat salary in comparison with the labourers. A mohurri got at first Rs.12 and it rose up to Rs.21. The person who was employed as grade II staff worker, got Rs.31 at first but it rose up to Rs.40. A head mohurri got from Rs.40 to Rs.65 and a head clerk got from Rs.75 to Rs.100.\textsuperscript{16} So, obviously, during the colonial period in Assam, the head clerk was regarded as the most lucrative job in a tea estate and the native people thought that his position was next only to the manager. They did led a comfortable life-style unlike the common people of Assam.\textsuperscript{17}

The Indian staff was largely recruited from the “Bhadralok” class who had a sufficient educational standard. In contrast to the Indians, who worked in the tea estates in some subordinate posts, the labourers had no such promotion in their work and the main contention of the colonial government as well as the tea planters was that ‘the labour force as now constituted is almost entirely illiterate’ and ‘drawn from

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{13} Ibid., p. 110
\item \textsuperscript{14} Statement given by Babu Lalit Mohan Chaudhuri before the ALEC 1921-22, Evidence., p.65
\item \textsuperscript{15} Op. cit.: ALEC –Report, Pp. 15-16
\item \textsuperscript{16} Op. cit.: ALEC- Evidence, p.150
\item \textsuperscript{17} Deveshwar Sharma: Herai Jowa Dinbor (Guwahati- 1980), p.145
\end{itemize}
primitive races in different parts of India. There is little scope at present for any labourer to rise above the rank of foreman'.

Though the new class arose out of the womb of capitalist relation, which was entirely expatriates owned, the cultural differences created between the labourers and the petty bourgeois section of the society, rather on the other hand, emboldened the expatriate tea capitalists to put their hold upon the poor labourers more formidably. The clashes occurred between the two groups, which was the creation of the colonial rule.

The effects of the colonial economic and social exclusion forced the labourers of the Surma valley gardens to take the ultimate step by vacating their working place and decided to leave for their original homes, situated chiefly in the United Provinces.

The Chargola exodus:

For the Chargola exodus, from where about 8,799 (17 tea estates) labourers fled in the month of May 1921, the officials and the Managers blamed the meeting held at Ratabari and particularly, they noticed the speech given by Radhakrishna Pande of Silchar who spoke in Hindi and spoke about the ‘coolies’ wages. Through his speech, Pande pointed out that ‘their present wage was inadequate and that should be raised to 12 annas for men, 8 annas for women and 3 annas 6 pie for boys. He quoted the example of some gardens near Lakhipur (in Cachar) where the coolies struck for an increase of pay’. The racist character of the Khoreal shooting case was given wide publicity in the newspapers of Calcutta and it was thought that the case had led to the widespread labour strikes in the Surma Valley.

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18 Royal Commission on Labour in India, Vol. VI, Part-I (London-1930), p. 6
19 Pande in his speech also compared the tea garden managers to Satan and he further stated that the English nation had seized Indian by foul means and that now Swaraj could be attained through non-cooperation. In his second meeting too, he reiterated the demands he gave at the first meeting and said that if their grievance were not redressed to cease work like the coolies of Khoreal Tea Estate in Cachar. Op. cit. ALEC-1921-22, p. 11
20 The case was that a European planter wanted to live with a coolie girl and, on being refused shot her father with a revolver. The accused was acquitted by the Calcutta court on the verdict of a jury of nine of whom eight were Europeans.

Among all the tea estates in the Chargola valley, the Bidyanagar tea estate did not lose a single coolie. It was observed in the context of the Bidyanagar tea estate:

The earnings on Bidyanagar Tea Estate especially of March 1921 were worthy of note. This garden had few new coolies. It was fortunate in the possession of an old settled labour force with a quantity of rice land for cultivation inside and outside the grant. Liberal leave was given and the Manager who was allowed a free hand by his agents.21

The exodus started when about 750 labourers left the Anipur Tea Estate, the very next day of the Ratabari meetings. In the majority of the tea gardens of the valley, after the exodus, when a detailed enquiry was made ‘it was found that the many labourers who left the estates were not earning a living wage, also there were cases of oppression of low caste by Sardars of upper caste and that there was some lack of sympathy on the part of the European staff’.22

Another noticeable feature of the exodus was that large proportion of the coolies those who left their respective estates were of recent importation. The new coolies were mostly Chamars and which was explained clearly in the Enquiry Committee.

Mr. Webster, the Commissioner of the Surma Valley division in his speech in a meeting said, “There is a consensus of opinion that present wages are too low and that the wage of a man for a fair task should be six annas and of a woman four annas and that unless these rates are conceded a large proportion of the coolies will strike work or desert”.23 Though, his conclusion was not accepted by the tea planters but it was frankly approved by the Committee.

The deserters when they reached their homes in the Gorakhpur district (United provinces) earned better wages than the wages they received on the Chargola

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21 Ibid., p.13
22 Quoted in Ibid, p. 12
23 Ibid.
tea gardens and obviously they did not want to return. 'The Assam Labour Board, soon after the exodus, made enquiries in the Central provinces, the United provinces and South India, with a view to seeing how many of the coolies who had left Chargola could be traced'. The enquiry was made by the Labour Board due to a letter sent by the Central Provinces (CP) government to the Assam Government that many Chargola coolies were anxious to return to Assam. But after the enquiry, it was found that they could not trace any deserters.24 The labourers, coming from the districts of United Provinces (especially Basti and Gorakhpur) had already been in a famine like situation, when they were recruited. It was observed:

The type that comes to Assam from the United Provinces is the landless agricultural labourer. In his country he has a fluctuating income. If the harvest is bad, his position is precarious. It is true that he can find employment in odd jobs such as serving for others, cutting firewood or fodder.25

From the statistics of emigration to tea gardens, it was found that in the period of 1918-19, the number of emigrants labourers were the highest and it was chiefly due to 'scarcity in the recruiting districts and the stoppage of the abnormal demand for labour'.26

The arrival of the so many 'coolies' with epidemic diseases had incapacitated themselves to do any useful work in the tea estates and it was also found that 'many arrived in such a condition as rendered them as easy victims to the influenza epidemic then raging in the gardens. Many of the survivors were so reduced in health and strength as to be incapacitated from doing a fair day's work or earning a living wage.'27

The labourers, those who worked in the tea estates of the Chargola Valley had become already a weak labour group and their lack of physical stamina did become a burden for the tea-planters. The tea planters regarded the quality of the

25 Evidence given by Mr. J. A. Milligan, Chairman, Assam Labour Board in Ibid.
26 The report also observed that 'in the valley (Surma Valley), recruiting in 1918-19 had been unusually heavy and the class of coolie imported in that year under famine conditions is a matter of notoriety'. Op. cit., ALEC Report, p.12
27 Ibid.
newly imported labourers as inferior and thought that the low quality led to the popularity of propaganda work among themselves by the political activists. The Deputy Commissioner stated in his report thus:

I think the cause of the exodus was that the appeal of non-cooperators at the Ratabari meetings found a ready response in the hearts of the coolies of low caste who had been recruited in the last few years, many of whom were never physically fit to do a hard day’s work and others who were constitutionally lazy or unwilling to exert themselves. I am convinced that if the Agents of the Tea Districts Labour Supply Association had been more careful in their selection of coolies and if the Calcutta Agents had not been so keen in getting hundreds of new coolies into the gardens .... In brief, bad recruiting made the non-cooperation propaganda easy.28

In his report, the Deputy Commissioner particularly stated that the lazy or feeble body workers had become a burden for the tea planters and by their desertion, the tea planters got a big relief. The disposal of the unwanted and useless working force from the active workers, made it abundantly clear that there would be no improvement in the status of the workers, unless they would show the stamina for cooperating fully with the tea capitalists:

What happens is that where a garden has a lot of useless, feeble or lazy coolies, they must be kept alive, and the hard-working coolies suffer. It may pay many gardens to weed out the riff-raff, but as these useless coolies have often got relations among the older and better collies this is very difficult to do. From this point of view, it is quite likely that some gardens have really benefited by the exodus in getting rid of much bad material .... 29

The use of the terms like, ‘lazy’, towards the labourers, those who were physically unfit was important in this context because it firmly asserted that by nature the new class of workers was lazy and so they would not be eligible for earning a good wage from the capitalists. From the following table, it can be observed how

28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
the wages had been remained low inspite of the fact that the living cost rose during that period.  

Table 4.1  
Rate of wages before the Chargola exodus

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>March 1920</th>
<th>September 1920</th>
<th>March 1921</th>
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<td>Men</td>
<td>7 6 3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>5 7 1</td>
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<td>Children</td>
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<td>Bidyanagar</td>
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<td>Women</td>
<td>4 12 3</td>
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<td>Children</td>
<td>3 6 1</td>
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<td>Kalinagar</td>
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<td>Children</td>
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<td>Goombhira</td>
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<td>Men</td>
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<td>Children</td>
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<td>Mukamcherra</td>
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<td>Women</td>
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<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>3 12 4</td>
<td>4 10 4</td>
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Source: ALEC – 1921-22 Report

Among all those six gardens (Table: 4.1), the wage rate was high in the case of the Bidyanagar tea estate and the tea estate therefore did not lose a coolie. But

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30 Ibid., p.13
in the other tea estates like Goombhira and in the Makumcherra tea estate, the wages were unusually low.\footnote{An examination of the registers for August 1920 at Oliviaherra garden (Goombhira division) disclosed the fact that in the height of the plucking season, too gangs comprising inferior workers and new coolies were only earning on an average Rs. 3-8 a month as against Rs.7-8 and over, earned by the best workers. In these two gangs, there were a large number of women earning 2 annas 3 pies a day, and many earning only one 6 pies. Ibid}

According to the colonial government, the political factors combined it with economic issues, ultimately influenced the labourers of the Chargola Valley to flee. The Enquiry Committee also blamed the Sylhet Conference for their anti-British propaganda. That’s why perhaps, Rai Bahadur Panch Gopal Mukherjee, the Sub Divisional Officer of Karimganj was of opinion that the exodus was entirely due to the efforts of political agitators.\footnote{Evidence by Mukerjee in Op. cit., ALEC 1921-22, Evidence, p. 61}

The Surma Valley Conference particularly played a significant role in the context of their clear-cut proposal for the demarcation of the interest between the European planters and the Indian persons those who worked in the tea estates of the valley. At the fifth meeting of the conference held on 19-20 September 1920, it was emphasised:

In view of the fact that the European merchants and planters of the Surma Valley have systematically opposed the national aspirations and legitimate claims of the people.
And in view of the fact that the said merchants and planters of this valley have frequently oppressed and tyrannized the Indian employee’s under them and have more than once trifled with their lives.
And in view of the fact that the Local Administration have, in spite of the repeated protests of the people of this valley, against such oppressions and outrages, failed to adopt effective measures to put a stop to such misdeeds.
And in view of the fact that the Assam Administration has identified itself with the said European merchants and planters.
This Conference is of opinion that complete non-violent non-cooperation with the said European merchants and planters is the only effective measure to guard against the continuation of such actions.\footnote{Quoted in Ibid, p.14}
The Conference also included in the resolution as their first step not to cooperate with the European planters and merchants. It was observed by the government: 'It seems not unreasonable to hold that the Chargola exodus was partly the result of the policy of advocating a gradual withdrawal of Indian employees in the service of European planters and merchants.'

Though the enthusiasm of the Khilafat and the Non-Cooperation movement certainly encouraged the leaders of the Surma Valley, to take up such a resolution, but it had no such practical political effects. The importance of the resolution, more or so in consonant with the larger aspects of the petty-Indian staff members worked in the European owned tea estates and there was no such concern for the vast bulk of the labour population those who had been living in a deplorable socio-economic set-up: 'What Congressmen meant by a gradual withdrawal from service was of course not 'strikes' as understood by labour. Nothing therefore came out of this resolution although individual Congressmen here and there, tried to act in this spirit.'

The name of Gandhi and his image and 'supernatural' abilities convinced the labourers that they would be too able to get rid of the clutches of the exploiters if, they would follow the principles as it was showed by Gandhi. Gandhi’s political principles had been followed by the labourers with their own unsophisticated appropriation of the Gandhian political formula.

The spread of rumours concerning Gandhi’s ‘supernatural’ abilities to heal the pain of the aggrieved workers made the struggle of the subalterns a militant one.

**Rumour and the Chargola exodus:**

The gathering of the non-cooperators in the vicinity of the tea garden areas excited the dormant hopes of the exploited labourers and they began to see a new ray of hope, in Gandhi’s promise of bringing ‘Swaraj’ within a year. The idea of Swaraj was analysed by the labourers in their own socio-economic aspects which

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34 Ibid, Pp. 14-15
35 A Guha: *Planter Raj to Swaraj* (Delhi-1991), p.128
were in existence and it was also expected that it would end all socio-economic
exploitations. Though the bourgeois nationalist leadership did not try to bring the
labourers to the national movement but the abstract ideas of Gandhi's Swaraj gave a
great political tinge to the subaltern militancy. The militant spirit of the labourers took
a peculiar derivative form and of course to their struggles, they tried to bring a new
spirit through their support to the national movement when they heard about the
overwhelming power of the single individual, namely, Mahatma Gandhi. The
mofussil leaders, especially, were more active in the explanation of the teachings of
Gandhi. Radhakrishna Pande, who gave his speeches in Hindi, which facilitated in
dealing with the labourers those who were coming from the Northern India's
provinces (basically from the U.P.), said in one of his speeches and it was observed by
the tea planters thus:

He (Pande) said Gandhi had sent a steamer to Karimganj to take them to their
country, where they would be given land free. They were told that the British Raj
at an end...This was new and big move on the part of the non-cooperation
agitators, ordinary strikes on other gardens having failed. The coolies, I have been
told, were made to take an oath over a bowl of holy water not to disobey Gandhi's
orders...we were repeatedly told that it was by Gandhi's order they were
leaving.36

In another incident, where about 529 labourers deserted and then the
Superintendent of the Company went to see them, but they replied "Gandhi ka
hukum".37 An interesting episode of melodramatic manifestation of the workers'
resistance took place in the tea estates like Anipur and Singlacherra:

A Bhor boy (of about 18 years of age) upon whom the spirit of Gandhi was
supposed to have descended was placed on the Hindu-shrine in the lines and
worshipped by the coolie for two days. The third day he made a fatal mistake by

36 Evidence given by Mr. W.R.P. Gunnery, Manager, Chargola Division before the members of the
37 Evidence by Mr. C.Townsend: Superintendent- Longai Tea Company, Ibid, p.51
stating that it was Gandhi's order that in the future the women were to do all the work and the men squat.38

In some of the official reports, it was also observed that fakirs and Sadhus played a part which hypnotised the minds of the poor labourers towards their own home states. Mr. E.B. Shaw, a Subdivisional Officer of Maulavi Bazar, (Sylhet district), mentioned in his evidence given to the Enquiry Committee that a fakir one, Mustan Shah, preached a strike and though there was a case against him, but the coolies did not come forward to give evidence to the authority.39 Interestingly, in a CID report of 1921, the colonial authority attributed Chargola exodus 'partly to the teachings of Sadhus like Bisambar Das Guru of Central provinces and Siyaram Das of Ajodhya'.40

The 'thaumaturgical role'41 which was ascribed to Gandhi in the context of the militancy of the subalterns worked as an indirect catalyst of giving a sense of political knowledge to the exploited people, like the poor peasants and the labourers. The teachings of the 'political Sadhus' among the poor labourers and the charm of Gandhi's Swaraj ointment as the healer of all exploitations, carried a new kind of jubilation for the poor labourers. But, in reality, it brought a melancholy picture of negligence by the conscious bourgeois leadership. Sometimes, the politics of the subalterns tried to imbibe the spirit of the bourgeois Congress leaders without comprehending the ethos of the national movement, where the entry of the subalterns was strictly prohibited. The labourers were particularly inspired by the epistemological experiences of their close relatives those got involved at the same time in the national movement in their home districts. The Superintendent of the

38 Ibid., p. 58
The fatal mistake that boy had committed also led to the easy disperse of the labourers.
39 Evidence by Mr. E.B. Shaw, S.D.O., Maulavi Bazar (Sylhet district) Mustan Shah was ultimately convicted under section 110, Criminal Procedure Code. Ibid
40 Notes by Intelligence Branch, CID, Bengal, 9 July 1921, 7 Nov. 1921 and by CID Assam, 21 Oct 1921, Reports on activation of political emissaries disguised as Sadhus and Fakirs. GOI Home poll 118/1922. NAI; Cited in The Conditions and Nature of Subaltern Militancy: Bengal from Swadeshi to Non-Cooperdton, c. 1905-22, in Sub. St-III (Delhi-1999), p. 294
41 Brian Wilson has tried to distinguish the belief of some people on magical powers of a leader and he distinguishes it into two parts: thaumaturgical and millennial. This has been explained by Wilson in his book Magic and the Millennium: A Sociological Study of Religious Movements of Protests among Tribal and Third World Peoples (London-1973); Quoted in Sarkar. Ibid. p.310
Longai Tea Company said that those labourers who went said that they had got orders to go along with their ‘bhaulog’.

The appeal to religion made by Gandhiji and the image of Gandhi as a Sannyasi evoked a much more moral but militant spirit among the poor labourers, and it was thought that they had secured approval of their methods of protests through the lexicon of Gandhian form of struggles. The struggle of the labourers was largely made up with their (labourers) own discourse of struggles. It was not bourgeoisie driven but paupers driven.

Gandhi had a disdainful attitude towards the poor and illiterates like the plantation labourers. The propensity of the labourers to violence and militancy convinced Gandhi of the ineffectiveness of the Satyagraha among the labouring poor of India:

Gandhi’s belief that any sharp distinction between means and ends was theoretically dubious and practically unhelpful confirmed his basic conviction that violence, in any form and for any end whatsoever had to be explicitly repudiated in principle. He was not burdened by the reductionist and historicist inheritance that weighed heavily on Marx and to the degree that he grasped its general tenets; he rejected most of them, especially utilitarian conception of social amelioration arising out of capitalist economics.

So, the poor illiterates of India and their struggle did not able to hegemonise the main aspects of the national movement because of Gandhi’s disapproval of the political methods of the subalterns.

Gandhi even did not justify the happiness of the human beings from the stand point of the material benefits, which they enjoyed. Gandhi defines happiness as the mental condition. Gandhi says:

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43 Raghavan Iyer (ed): The Essential Writings of Mahatma Gandhi (Delhi-1998), p. 10
A man is not necessarily happy because he is rich or unhappy because he is poor. The rich are often seen to be unhappy, the poor to be happy. Millions will always remain poor. Observing all this our ancestors dissuaded us from luxuries and pleasures. We have managed with the same kind of plough as it existed thousands of years ago. We have retained the same kind of cottages that we had in former times, .... we have had no system of life-corroding competition.  

His efforts to impart the concept of civilisation against the hegemony of the materialist civilisation of the West, did give a new meaning to the peoples’ psychology, where the causes and consequences of poverty had become mixed up with the idea that after all, the ‘civilization’ meant ‘good conduct’. Gandhi largely succeeded in occupying a permanent place in the psychology of the people’s minds because his extraordinary understanding with the pulse of the poor people, where again he used the weapon of the spirituality in order to study the effects of civilisation. In the poor peoples’ minds, ‘Gandhi evoked rather the mood of renunciation, austerity and sacrifice’, and ‘his emphasis upon the giving up of fashionable garments and the prospect of comfortable jobs through official education, going to jail, unflinchingly facing lathis and bullets without retaliation, the ritual of fasting so deeply ingrained in Hindu tradition’, did able to attract the vast bulk of the Indian masses. The espousal of traditions (which was the indirect effect of Gandhi’s political teachings) by the people in the political movement did much slow down also the pace of people’s violent rebelliousness.

The labourers, those who fled were mostly from the districts of Gorakhpur and Basti, situated in the eastern part of the United Provinces and they were low caste people. These districts of the eastern U.P. were comparatively in a backward region. Above all, ‘the peasants of the eastern U.P. and also of Bihar had been portrayed as more superstitions than those of some other region such as western U.P. and Punjab’. At the same time there was also developing an intense political solidarity in the Gorakhpur district and the name of Gandhi did spread in the midst of

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44 Anthony J. Parel (ed):*Gandhi Hind Swaraj and other writings* (Cambridge-2004), p. 68
45 Gandhi gave the Gujarati equivalent for civilisation ‘good conduct’ (Sudharo), *Ibid.*, p. 67
46 For a brilliant analysis of Gandhi’s use of religious text to get reach at the base of the peoples’ minds, see the excellent piece of essay by Sarkar: *Op. cit.*, Pp.313-320
the peasant as the supreme saviour. Gandhi visited this area on the early part of 1921 (8 Feb) and gave lectures in a meeting, where around 1 lakh and 2.5 lakhs people gathered. But Gandhi did not come to Gorakhpur to redress the woes of the peasantry. The Chamars had a low caste origin and they were employed in the Chargola valley gardens, got some news most probably and filtered messages gave them a new enthusiasm in getting rid of the exploitations. Even, in their home district, they refused to offer begar (forced labour) to the government officials. In a petition addressed to the Governor, they wrote:

We are ready to perform any legitimate services required of us appertaining to our profession but inhuman treatment meted out to a Chamar every day, by petty servants of the thana and tahsil is nothing sort of a festering sore.

That there was growing up a consciousness though not wholly nurtured by the bourgeois leadership, rather gave their (the workers) struggle a political form with much militancy. Gandhi seemed to have acted as the messiah for those people who had already been spending their days in squalor and poverty:

The enthusiasm Gandhi generated, the expectations he aroused and the attack he launched on British authority had all combined to initiate the very first moments of a process which, given other factors, could help the peasant to conceptualize the turning of his world upside down. This was an incipient political consciousness called upon, for the first time, to reflect—albeit vaguely and intermittently—on the possibility of an inversion of many of those power relations deemed invisible until then, such as British/Indian, landlord/peasant, high-caste/low-caste etc.

48 J.E. Webster, the Commissioner of the Surma Valley observed, ‘....the majority of the coolies who were leaving were the remnants of large batches of Chamars and low-caste men from the Central Provinces and Gorakhpur who had been imported in famine years, had suffered severely in the beginning of the influenza epidemic, and had quite got over that, Also they had a very poor time on the gardens, because the old, indigenous coolies of Chargola are good caste Hindus, who utterly despised those people who had been brought in among them, and I gather, rather bullied them; so they had special reason for being unhappy’. Op. cit., ALEC: Evidence- to a testimony submitted to the Enquiry Committee.


50 Ibid., p. 25
The development of a new kind of self-confidence among themselves, led to the abandonment of the jurisdiction of the tea planters' dominated dominion, called as the tea-estates and simply they left their working-place (e.g. Chargola Exodus) by saying that it was Gandhi's order (*hukum*).

If the rumour of the possible breakdown of the British authority in India, became the precondition for the mobilisation of the poor labourers and the peasants, then the failure of that rumour, also, gave a new stability to the imperical rule in India. After a considerable analysis of the subaltern militancy that prevailed in Bengal during the eventful period of 1920-22, Sumit Sarkar has arrived at a decision: '... the importance of rumours of breakdown as preconditions for popular militancy is probably not a universal phenomenon, but related to the suitability attained by British rule in the post-mutiny phase'.

Be that as it may, the plight of the labourers did not end in their desertion only because they had to face the terrible atrocities at the hands of the police when they took shelter in the Chandpur railway station of Bengal.

**The Chandpur incident and the involvement of the Congress leaders:**

At the Chandpur station the labourers then faced the real crisis, when the colonial state with the help of police, tried to push back those stranded labourers again in to the tea-estates. The Sub-divisional Officer of Chandpur with an European Assistant was particularly active in dissuading the labourers, not to go to their home districts. The frightened labourers tried to get rid of possible torture at the hands of the police, rushed to the steamer in the near by ghat but there too, many of the labourers fell in the river, when the gangway was removed at the S.D.O's order, when, the 'S.D.O. was manhandled by some coolies'. A contingent of Gurkhas had been called from Narayanganj at the order of the Divisional Commissioner and 'at midnight next, when sleeping at the railway shed, the coolies were asked to vacate immediately, some of them having refused, the Gurkhas fell upon the unarmed coolies and by kicks and beating with sticks and butt ends of their guns forced the men, children, women

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51 Sarkar: *op. cit.*, p.319
and children to leave the station and take refuge in an open ground although it was raining heavily. Thousands of coolies were stranded at Goalando, Rajbari and other stations.\(^5^2\)

The Chandpur incident and the belabouring of the stranded labourers, made a deep impact upon the nationalist minded leaders, particularly in Bengal. C.F.Andrews, who was the faithful companion of Gandhi since his South African days, visited Calcutta and left a vivid account of the oppression made by the Gurkhas upon the poor labourers. The Bengal Central Labour Federation organised a meeting at Mirzpur park in Calcutta (26 May-1921), to protest against the oppression\(^5^3\) and Andrews also made a statement there. The Divisional Commissioner of Chandpur, R.C. De later admitted that the assault had begun immediately after the arrival of the Gurkhas. Girish Chandra Datta and Khirode Chandra Deb, the Congress leaders of the Surma Valley went to Chandpur and ‘arranged relief for the victims.’\(^5^4\)

To ventilate their deep anguish over the Chandpur incident, the railway employee of Chandpur and Laksham in Bengal decided to start a strike on 24th May, 1921 and the Chittagong based Assam-Bengal Railway Union, declared a general strike on 25th May and after that declaration the steamer workers too began their strike(27 May).\(^5^5\)

But, to call the Railway and Steamer strike as a politically motivated labour strike would not be a true appraisal of the situation. C.R. Das, the prominent leader of the Congress in Bengal frankly stated:

If it had been a labour strike, a mere question between the employer and the employed, I should have certainly discouraged it from the Congress point of view. I mean I would not have allowed it to interfere in anyway with the ordinary work of the Congress.\(^5^6\)

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\(^{52}\) For graphic description of the incident, see- J.B. Bhattacharjee: *Cachar Under British Rule in N.E. India* (Delhi-1977), p.270  
\(^{53}\) Ibid  
\(^{54}\) Ibid  
\(^{55}\) Indian Annual Register, 1922, p.144; Cited in Sarkar: *O.p. cit.*, f. n. 98, p. 294  
\(^{56}\) *Mussalman*, 17 June 1921, in *Ibid*, f. n. 97, p.295
From a detailed study made by S.N. Gourlay, it has been made clear that:

Although these strikes were initiated partly in response to events at the Chandpur railway stations (which included assaults on railway staff, as well as on the tea plantation labourers), and were supported throughout by the non-cooperators, it is an over-simplification to describe them as sympathetic or political strikes. Except in Chandpur itself, the strikes only began in the wake of rumours of assaults on railwaymen and a steamer crew representative. Once the strikes were underway, they soon focused on substantive questions of pay and conditions of the strikers.\(^{57}\)

In Assam, the leaders like Nabin Chandra Bardoloi and Tarun Ram Phukan played a leading role in spreading the strike to Brahmaputra valley section of the Assam Bengal Railways and Steamers.\(^{58}\)

The actual consequence of the Chandpur incident was that the strikes did not begin ‘until several days after troops had been deployed on the Chandpur station’. Two deputations had been sent by the railwaymen to the Union headquarters in Chittagong (21st and 23rd May) in order to pressurise the leaders. But the executive body of the Union ‘opposed the move on the ground that the Chandpur question nothing to do with their relations with the railway company...’.\(^{59}\) Only after several meetings, the Union president decided to start strikes ‘to protest assaults on railwaymen at Chandpur. No mention was apparently made of the tea plantation labourers’.\(^{60}\)

The tempo of the strikes began to decline after the management of the respective companies did take up steps of retrenchment of the strikers. The further abandonment of the steamer strike began after the crew members of the steamer eventually saw that ‘the sight of their jobs floating away from the quaysides and

\(^{57}\) Gourlay also points out that ‘had there not already been substantial grievances over which the railwaymen were about to submit a claim, as well as the rumours of assaults on railway staff at Chandpur, it seems extremely unlikely that they would have expressed whatever sympathy they felt for the tea plantation labourers in the form of a strike’. S. N. Gourlay: *Nationalists, outsiders and the Labour Movement in Bengal during the Non-cooperation Movement 1919-21* in K. Kumar (ed): *Congress and Classes* (Delhi-1988), Pp. 52-53

\(^{58}\) For the role played by T.R. Phukan and N.C. Bardoloi, see Guha: *Op. cit.*, Pp. 130-131

\(^{59}\) *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, June 1921, *Englishman* 6 June 1921, 21 September 1921, in *Ibid* f.n.52, p.52

\(^{60}\) *Ibid*, p.49
harbours as ships were moved away by crews brought up from Calcutta'. Inspite of
the attempts made by C.R. Das and, the Union President of the ISFEU; the strike
collapsed in July. The Railway workers strike also met the same fate after the railway
company began to recruit new staff and to evict strikers from their quarters, and at the
same time the funds for supporting the cause of the strike exhausted. Gandhi's visit to
Chittagong (31 Aug, 1921) only demoralised the strikers when 'he chastised them for
having relied on the non-cooperators for assistance, and advised them, if they wanted
to continue striking, to take up weaving and spinning to support themselves'.

The view which has been offered by some historians like Amalendu
Guha that 'it (strike) was a politically oriented solidarity action with the backing of
the non-cooperators in general', is not based on study of the real situation. The
connection of the strikers with the Congress leaders has automatically convinced us
about the role of the outsiders and in this context, the non-cooperators, those who
helped the strikers by giving necessary food and funds have been thought of by some
historians that involvement of the non-cooperators with the strikers, gave a political
character to the strike. The detailed data regarding the role of the outsiders in the
labour movement of the period (1919-22) has been provided by S.N. Gourlay:

This evidence for strikes and union leadership suggests, first, that as strike leaders,
and probably also at the operational-level of union hierarchies, actual employees
were more important than outsiders. Among outsiders, non-cooperators certainly
formed an important group. But even together with other nationalists, they
accounted for only 25 percent or less of union office-holders. This suggests that
political outsider union leaders should be seen primarily as part of the general
category of outsiders, rather than as politicians.

The informal involvement of the non-cooperators did not alter the
situation much and in Assam, the nationalists too failed to give a conscious leadership
to the strike-ridden workers. The workers those who fled from the tea plantation

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61 Ibid., p. 52
62 Guha writes : 'It was a politically oriented solidarity action, with the backing of the Non-
Cooperators in general.' Guha: Op. cit., p. 131
63 S.N. Gourlay: op. cit., (particularly Table p. 38), p. 40
industry were the worst sufferers and interestingly, they received support only when their case too had been mixed up with the railway employees in Bengal.

**Economic aspects of the strike-wave:**

The basic reasons which led to all those incidents were the fact that the workers were not earning good concessions even to lead a decent living. The wages were not sufficient to earn extra needs. Generally, concessions were defined by giving "free housing, medical attendance, cheap rice, clothing, garden land, and the like" to the labourers.64 The principal objectives which forced the plantation authority to look into those matters were not the humanitarian and welfare aspect of the problem but rather the point that a weak, unfit labour would be a burden for the tea-estate.

In respect of family earnings in the early 1920s, in comparison with 1914, the total percentage of rise in family earnings from the whole province was just 19.2. For the Assam Valley it was 22.3 and for the Surma Valley it was 12.3.65 Even in respect of cost of living also, there was a marked-difference between the year 1914 and 1922. The labourers spent less on clothing due to high cost of the clothes. The gardens no doubt provided blankets during the cold season prior to the war free of cost or at reduced rates to new 'coolies'. Though the garden authorities continued the sale of blankets even after 1917, but the Committee observed that 'free or cheap clothing is not given to any large extent'. The Committee categorically observed that the tea garden labourer was not only singular in that context. Mr. Rhodes, the President of the Bengal Chamber of Commerce, gave in a speech at Delhi said: 'Whereas before the war there were about 18 yards of cloth per head of population in India, the average has now fallen to 10 yards.'66 It was assumed that, '.... in the political unrest of the past two years, the universal dearness of clothing has played a more important part than is generally recognized'.67 In the table (4.2), there has been

65 Ibid., p. 68
66 Ibid., p.28
67 Ibid.
provided a statistics showing the 'coolie' family's spending in different necessary items.68

Table 4.2

Monthly Budget for a 'Coolie' Family

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Monthly</th>
<th>Rs.</th>
<th>a.</th>
<th>p.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Paddy - 2 maunds, 10 seers at Rs.3 a maund (i.e. rice at about Rs.4-8)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed dal - 4 seers</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salt - 2 seers</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mustard oil - ¾ seer</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vegetables -</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fish -</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spices -</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tobacco -</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Betel nut -</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Molasses -</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kerosene oil -</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coconut oil -</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vermillion -</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soap -</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lime -</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paddy for rice beer -</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chilies -</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Clothes yearly

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Rs.</th>
<th>a.</th>
<th>p.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 coat</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 dhotis</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 blanket</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 kurtas</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 saris</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 blanket</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 kurtas for children</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Clothes: 1 13 0
For entertainments and ceremonies: 0 12 0
Total: 13 12 0

Source: Mr S.P. Barua’s budget for a family consisting of a man, wife, 2 non-working children. Cited in ALEC – 1921-22

68 Ibid, Appendix (h) p.136
The statistics which has been presented here, amply proved the point that the family budget of a garden labourer did not meet always the decent living standard and the rising cost of the basic commodities obstructed in leading a comfortable life as the wage-structure was abysmally low.

The reason of not giving adequate wages to the labourers was that the high wage-structure would only create a sense of laziness among the labour force and hence they would do less work. For instance, the Manager of Sephijnuri tea estate replied: ‘It can safely be said that this would occur in 90% of cases’.69 The Committee categorically remarked that they were not disposed to accept this view without some qualification:

If the increase in the rate of wages corresponds more or less to the rise in the cost of living, they think it probable, unless the standard of living has fallen that the average coolie will be inclined to do as much work while some may even be encouraged by the higher wage to do more. If the rise in wages is in excess of the increased cost of living, many would probably do less work. There are of course lazy individuals who will be content to earn just enough to keep themselves alive whatever the wage may be.70

The fear of losing the production in the tea-estates, then, forced the managers as well as the proprietors of the tea-estates to give a sincere attention to the laziness among the labourers which, according to them, could have risen if the high wages were given to the labourers. One Manager stated: ‘In all probability as in common at home and abroad so with the coolie, more pay would result in less work.’71 But inspite of the opposition of the tea planters, the Committee approved a higher wage-structure for the labourers and that view was also accepted by the Government with a caution:

Satisfactory as the steady increase in wages in recent years is, it should be accompanied by an improvement in the standard of living if it is to be of benefit.

69 Ibid., p. 71
70 Ibid., p. 72
71 Ibid.
Not much is gained by an increase in earnings beyond the level of a subsistence wage, if the labourer has no desire for any additional comforts or luxuries save drink. An increase in the standard of living would give a further incentive to work and improve the outturn and efficiency of the labourer. *It is however, difficult to instill new ideas where any innovation is regarded with suspicion and often tends to active resentment.* Progress in this direction must unfortunately be slow.\[72\]

It was thought out by the tea capitalists that the labourers were by nature hostile to any progressive measures. The plantation authority as well as the Government had become convinced that the labourers were 'conservative by nature, suspicious of change and excitable'. And so dealing with those kind of people, caution would be necessary and because 'they are not an intelligent body of mess who desire to raise their own standard of living....their resentment is quickly fanned in to violence'.\[73\] The Colonial government only suggested thus:

What is needed is the education of the labour force to the appreciation of a higher standard of living, when they will want more and be prepared to work for it and make use of their earnings. The very nature of the labour force makes progress in that direction slow, but is only by such progress that any lasting improvement can be effected. It is impossible to introduce suddenly measures suited to the educated labour of other parts of the world.\[74\]

The inner thought which impressed upon the tea plantation authority as well as the Government was the notion of the labourers' inherent lack of a civilized behaviour. Interestingly, that view which had been given shape since the start of protests led by the workers themselves against the tea planters was also accepted by the conscious leadership of the premier political party, namely, the Indian National Congress. Particularly, after the advent of Gandhi in the Indian political scenario and his chief emphasis on the harmonious relationship between the labour and capital, did not bring any radical turning point in the workers' protests.

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\[73\] Ibid., p. 3
\[74\] Ibid.
Reactions of the nationalist leadership towards the strike-wave:

The real debate concerning the attitude of the outside leadership towards the labour movement has still problematised the main analysis of the labour historians of India. The above description of the strikes both at the plantation sector and the consequence of the belabouring of the stranded labourers at the Chandpur incident, emphatically showed itself that the workers did not get sufficient help from the nationalist leadership. Even the provincial leadership in several instances, did avoid any entanglement with the labour affairs. From the autobiographical writings of prominent provincial level leaders like Omeo Kumar Das\textsuperscript{75} and Padmanath Barthakur,\textsuperscript{76} it has become apparent that the Congress leaders in Assam during the eventful years of 1920-22 became apprehensive towards the protests of the labourers because they did not want to create unwanted trouble by leading the workers struggle simultaneously with the movement.

It was also doubtful, how far their personal interests in the tea plantation sector, forced the Congress leaders of Assam not to give any guidance to the workers. As the representatives of the nascent bourgeoisie, the Congress leaders who had their stake in the tea industry did not want to jeopardise the capitalistic growth, which they had thought would be possible only by establishing indigenous tea plantations. Certainly, personal interests also forced the nascent indigenous capitalists of Assam cautious enough not to get involve themselves in the workers protests. But they thought that it would not be wise not to block the prospects of further industrial development of the state.

The establishment of the Congress branch in Assam and the eventual political twist of 1920-22, did not happen without obstacles. Some of the established leaders of Assam, and later also, those leaders played a significant part in the province’s politics, never did show genuine enthusiasms towards the Non-Cooperation movement and its objectives. The stalwart of the leaders of Assam such as Tarun Ram Phukan in his earlier speeches discouraged the youths from joining in the movement, but in contrast the leaders like Chandranath Sarma encouraged the

\textsuperscript{75} O. K. Das: \textit{Jivan Smriti} (Guwahati–1983), and in \textit{Diary} (P.H.A. Record)
\textsuperscript{76} P. Barthakur: \textit{Swadhinata Ranar Sansprasat} (Dibrugarh -2006)
students to join in the movement. In fact, Sarma was the most active Congress activist at that time in Assam.\textsuperscript{77} Some prominent personalities of Assam openly did ‘anti propaganda’ activities and their anti Congress propaganda was fully used by the British government against the Congress movement.\textsuperscript{78}

The labour historians like Amalendu Guha, Ranapratap Behai have given utmost importance on the role played by the Congress leaders during the period of 1920-22. They thought that most of the Congress leaders were silent in respect of the workers’ protests. Amalendu Guha writes:

\begin{quote}
Reservations of the Congress were understandable. Several of its local leaders, Kuladhar Chaliha, Jadav Prasad Chaliha, even N. C. Bardoloi were planters themselves and also that they were socially and matrimonially related to planter families.\textsuperscript{79}
\end{quote}

R.P. Behal also writes in an excellent piece of article that:

\begin{quote}
While the planters were determined to keep ‘outsiders’ at bay from the labour force in gardens, the outsiders themselves did not seem to be very enthusiastic about organizing the labourers.\textsuperscript{80}
\end{quote}

He has noticed that the nationalist leadership played a diabolical role in taking up the problems of the tea-garden labourers:

\begin{quote}
During the 1920-22 labour struggle while the nationalist leadership and the newspapers from Bengal took a very keen and active interest in the Chandpur exodus case (Surma Valley), the simultaneous strikes in the Assam valley were not even noticed by them.\textsuperscript{81}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{77} Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya (ed): \textit{Karmabir Chandranath Sarma} (Guwahati-1983), p 216
\textsuperscript{78} The persons like Ananda Chandra Agarwalla, Pandit Hemchandra Goswami etc opposed the movement. \textit{Ibid}, p. 233
\textsuperscript{79} Guha: \textit{Op. cit.} p.139
\textsuperscript{80} Rana Pratap Behai: Forms of labour protest in Assam Valley tea plantation, 1900-1930, in \textit{EPW Vol. XX, No.4} Jan. 26,1985
\textsuperscript{81} Ibid
The question of the bourgeois failure of providing enough importance to the protests of the workers and the workers aspirations to achieve their immediate demands through protest must be analysed in the context of the bourgeois formation of the ideological setup of the movement. No doubt the nascent indigenous bourgeoisie had to face innumerable difficulties to construct a defensive shield against the forward march of the expatriate capitalists. In a colonial socio-economic set-up, the leadership of the national movement did not thing it possible to overthrow the whole exploitative system. Also, the political developments in the colonial India was uneven, whereas in Bengal, chiefly in Calcutta, the ‘Bhadraloks’ tried to give a shape to the rising political consciousness of the educated Bengalis but in contrast in backward provinces, like in Assam, which more or less started her journey as a mere appendage under the Bengal administration, failed even right upto the early 1920s to establish a branch of the Indian National Congress. That’s why, perhaps, in a Government report it was stated that when the political movement namely the Non-Cooperation movement was in progress throughout India, but it was little in evidence in Assam.82

The disavowal of some of the members of the Assam Association, the only political body in Assam, towards any unification with the INC was significant. When N.C. Bardoloi suggested in a meeting held in Gauhati in 1919 (Apr 19) that ‘it is expedient for the Association to have provincial Congress along with the all-India Congress to represent the interests of Assam proper’, and, his proposal was turned down by the members who were present at the meeting and, even ‘there was absolutely no talk about Gandhiji’s Satyagraha vow or any proposal for any movement for closing shops etc’.83 Though, majority of the Assamese intelligentsia was hostile to the nationalist politics of the 1920s but the leaders like Nabin Chandra Bardoloi and Chandranath Sarma played a key role in amalgamating the Assam Association with the Indian National Congress.

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82 Report on Administration of Assam for the year 1920-21
83 Some of the prominent members who did participate in that meeting held in the Curzon Hall: Tarun Ram Phukan, Nabin Chandra Bardoloi, Chandrahas Sharma, Satyanath Bora, Bishnuram Medhi, Gopinath Bardoloi, Kuladhar Chaliha etc. Assam Police Abstract of Intelligence, 1919. File No.97 PHA Record.
It has been also observed by some historians that Gandhi’s visit to Assam gave a real boost to the rising tide of the political mobilisation among the masses of Assam (particularly to the tea plantation labourers):

Gandhiji’s maiden visit to Assam, in August 1921, revolutionised the whole atmosphere....Gandhiji’s arrival in Assam provided new rays of hopes to the toiling masses. His visit thus helped in extending the Congress base to the rural areas.84

Gandhi’s visit particularly created a new kind of enthusiasm among the members of the newly formed branch of the Congress party which was established in Assam but in general, in the context of the workers there was no such significant development because the tea plantation labourers did not get any tremendous support from Gandhi to their struggles.85 No doubt, Gandhi acquired sufficient knowledge of the tea plantations during his visit to Assam about the economic conditions of the labourers but he was not contemplating of bringing enlightenment to the tea plantation labourers by bringing real political consciousness or giving any approval of their joining in the national movement. He even ended his Assam tour by giving a friendly speech in a local club (British) of the Dibrugarh town.86

The reservation of some of the Congress leaders in Assam towards the volatile labour affairs, was important, though some of them continued their indigenous capitalist concern. For instance, Omeo Kumar Das wrote after seeing the outbursts of workers protest in the Darrang district that they (the Congress leaders) got a big lesson from the tea-garden coolies’ strikes.87 It was true that Gandhi attended meetings with the planters and throughout his visit to Assam, he maintained a friendly relationship with the British tea planters.88

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84 Shrutidev Goswami: The Nationalist Upsurge: Its impact on peasants and Tea Garden Workers in Arun Bhuyan (ed.): The Nationalist Upsurge in Assam (Guwahati- 2000), p.194
86 Chandraprasad Saikia (ed.): Asomat Mahatma (Gauhati-1969), p. 35
Though the bulk of the Congress leaders were quite ambivalent towards the protests of the tea plantation workers but the tea plantation labourers continued the rhythm in their culture of protests. The labour historians, usually by applying the Marxist phenomenology (orthodox), has ascribed to the strikes as the workers failed attempt to achieve the larger aims of the class struggle. They have written that among the causes that led to the failure of those strikes, the lack of education among the labourers and the lack of providing outside leadership to the workers' protests were the major causes of the failure.

The ignorance of modern textual curriculum among the workers was a great negative feature of the Indian working class movement and in their struggle against the capitalists; it remained a great hindrance to emulate the brighter aspects of the true class struggle against their expropriators. It was explained in the case of the tea plantation labourers: ‘The abysmal ignorance is of book learning among the annual labourers on tea gardens is well known’.89

The tea plantation authority particularly maintained a close surveillance over the entry of the outside leaders into the garden areas and so, it became impossible also for the local level Congress leaders to enter into the tea gardens. The inherent thought among the colonial-capitalist representatives about the role of the outside leadership was stated thus in the Enquiry Committee of 1921-22:

The tea garden labourer is often swayed by gusts of unreasoning passion and in the last years or so, has not infrequently been the tool of the self-seeking political agitator. He has no Trade Union to back his case. He has to look to the Manager as his best advocate and advisor.... 90

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89 In the Census of India 1921 it was observed about the literacy among the tea garden labourers: 'A few years ago attempts were made to introduce primary education among the coolies, with the cooperation of garden managers. Three types of school were proposed- Govt., aided private and unaided private; managers who agreed were allowed to choose which type of school should be established. At the schools were free. The result has been a dismal failure. A few managers were enthusiastic; many were indifferent. Some, considering that education would cause a distaste for manual labour when the children grew up, were hostile or merely tolerant'. Op. cit. Census of India, p.108

The concept of the causes of the failure of the workers’ strikes has been given chief importance in the writings of historians like R.P. Behal and Ranajit Dasgupta.

The historians should be alert in the analysis of the workers protests and above all, of the specific characteristics of those protests. The analysis of the class conflict as it has been assumed by the historians must also take into account in explaining the independent role played by the labourers in their struggle against the powerful plantation authority. The form of protest or culture they gradually developed during the period of their protests, made themselves hugely conscious of their rights. Though they did not try or understand the bourgeois methods of struggle to achieve their demands but there was no doubt about the fact that the tea capitalists did not remain oblivious always to the demands of the strikers and they were also forced to gives some concessions to their aggrieved labourers. The militancy of the labourers were suppressed by deploying the police forced and the help from the judiciary made the striking labourers as prisoners of the state.

After the strike wave of 1920-22, the garden authority did take steps not to be too casual about the concerns of the labourers and in particular, they were too conscious not to give any chance to the political agitators who might have encroached in to the tea gardens. The big success from the workers point of view, came when the Workman’s Breach of Contract Act XIII(1859) was abolished for good.

The rising tide of the national movement did not really make any great impact upon the workers fates. The consciousness of the illiterate and poor workers was regarded by the bourgeois Congress leadership as tantamount to Gandhi’s non violent satyagraha movement. Although, the leaders of the national movement disavowed the workers deep involvement in the nation struggle for self-rule or Swaraj (right upto the December 1929, the aim of the movement was to achieve only Swaraj but after the Lahore Congress session, the aim of the movement was declared as the

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92 Ranajit Dasgupta: *Plantation Labour in Colonial India* in M.S.A. Rao (ed.) *Studies in Migration-Internal and International Migration in India* (Delhi 1986) and also in *From Peasants and Tribesman to Plantation Workers* (EPW-1986)
struggle for complete independence) but never the less after 1920s, a concrete stage was prepared with the active cooperation of the leftist forces. The strong opposition of Gandhi and his rightist colleagues against any intrusion of the leftist elements into the movement made the stand of the leftists a vulnerable one because of the powerful position enjoyed by Gandhi and his rightist colleagues in the decision making apparatus of the movement.⁹⁴ Despite the opposition of the leaders of the movement, the tea plantation labourers continued their own forms of protests to achieve their demands (concerning their basic necessities).

The emergence of a fragmentary form of consciousness among the labourers, stimulated the desires of the labourers to achieve some new aims and on the other hand, the colonial state had been constrained to establish an Enquiry Committee to look into the labour affairs which deeply aggravated the crush in the existing relationship between the labour and capital. The peasant root of the labourers in that context never became a hurdle in their protests and it became apparent that during the period of 1920-21, largest numbers of cases were instituted against the labourers (total number of cases against the coolies, 1,604).⁹⁵

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⁹⁴ Gandhi's antipathy to the socialistic struggles and his way of critique of the socialism was linked up with his disenchantment against the western civilisation: 'Bolshevism is the necessary result of modern materialist civilization. Its insensate worship of matter has given rise to a school which has been brought upto look upon material advancement as the goal and which has lost all touch with the finer things of life.'
Message to Madras Meeting, 30 March, 1919 CWMG Vol-17, p. 367; Quoted in David Hardiman: Gandhi in his time and ours (Delhi-2003), f. n. 50, p. 81

⁹⁵ Op. cit. ALEC 1921-22, p.82