CHAPTER-5
CHAPTER-5


In the last Chapter, we have observed that the resistance of the workers in the tea plantations did lead to the growth of a series of protests among the labourers and it culminated in the Chargola exodus. The Chargola exodus and the Chauri Chaura incident (4th February, 1922) in the U. P. gives us a new thought to look into the complex events of the period (1920-22) when the resistance of the subalterns did not usually earn any important attention from the nationalist Congress leaders. Those incidents helped only in spreading the fear of the outbursts of the poor workers and the peasants against the colonial capitalist masters as well as the whole system. The bourgeois Congress leadership, on the other hand, always tried to impinge upon the protesters, the label of the anti-nationalists.

The aftermath of the 1920-1922 in the Indian political scenario could be observed in the obvious disintegration in the Congress party and the birth of the Swarajya party in 1923 under the brilliant leadership of Chittaranjan Das and Motilal Nehru. In Assam also, the Swarajya party's activities grew and the party was strengthened with the formation of a coalition namely the Swarjist-Nationalist-Independent Coalition. But in the nationalist politics of Assam, the most important event was the twenty-sixth Congress session at Pandu (Gauhati) in 1926.

1 Shahid Amin writes about the Chauri Chaura incident: ‘... nationalist prose would memorialise the event by police and policemen killed. Forever a lesson to be learnt, the ‘riot’ would no longer be accorded a narrative past. It could at most refer to past imperfections in the Congress as an organization in the nationalist public more generally.’ Shahid Amin: Event, Metaphor, Memory (Delhi-2006), p. 47
In the labour front, at the all India level, the period of 1922-27 at the first glance showed a sharp and ‘definite decline’ but after 1924, the rising tide of the labour movement did able to overcome the initial decline:

In the history of labour movement, the years from 1922 to 1927 are marked at first sight by a definite decline. The number of strikes as calculated by the Royal Commission of Labour (1931) went down from a peak figure of 376 in 1921 to about 130 annually between 1924 and 1927. Though AITUC membership went up with 183 affiliated unions listed in January 1925, the leadership remained very moderate, being either liberal or Congress in political temper... Yet if strikes were less numerous, they also tended to be more prolonged and bitter in face of the major employer offensive of these years.2

In contrast, in the labour front of Assam, we would not observe any great hazard upon the domination of the tea planters, unlike the period of 1920-22. The political activities of the nationalist Congress leadership in the provincial level did not at all touch the world of the subalterns like the tea plantation labourers but the labourers had become more restive when they got the bitter experience of the Depression of the early 1930s.

The sombre picture which emerged after 1929 erased the image of the boom period of the pre-depression years’ world economy:

The Great Slump or the Depression destroyed economic liberation for half a century.... Almost symbolically, Great Britain in 1931 abandoned Free Trade, which had been as central to the British economic identity since the 1840s as the American Constitution is to US political identity.3

The impact of the Depression in the World Economy, particularly on Great Britain, which along with USA, still dominated the World Commerce in the 1920s, was devastating and the slump also meant for the Great Britain that ‘its retreat from the principles of the transaction in a single world economy dramatises the general rush

---

2 Sumit Sarkar: Modern India (Delhi-2002), p. 244
The Depression also brought a suffocating atmosphere to the weak colonial economy of India. Basically, this world wide economic slump affected Indian economy in 'two main ways':

Through a very sharp fall in prices, particularly of agricultural commodities, and by bringing about a major crisis in the entire export-oriented colonial economy.... The Depression brought about a qualitative shift in the overall pattern of British colonial exploitations of India which through somewhat weakened by the First World War, had remained fundamentally unchanged till 1929.4

The Depression also brought down the value of Indian exports from Rs.311 crores in 1929-30 to Rs.132 crores in 1932-33 (imports fell off in the same period from Rs.241 crores to Rs.133 crores).5 Though the colonial economy got a sever jolt due to the Depression but the big bourgeoisie of India made a great advance during the 1930s.

**The Depression and the big bourgeoisie in the 1930s:**

Though the Indian labourers had to face adverse circumstances due to the Depression but one class of the Indian population prospered in the 1930s and that class was the Indian big bourgeoisie or the Big Business group:

The largest advances in industrial development in the last thirty years of British rule were led by a diffuse group of Indian entrepreneurs from many different communities, of which the Parsis (Tatas), Marwaris, (Birla, Dalmia, Sarupchand Hukum Chand), Gujarati Banias (Walchand Hirachand, Ambalal Sarabhai,

---

4 'Down to the late-1920s, India still took in about 11% of British exports (including no less than 28% of Lancashire textiles). Her export-surplus with non U.K. countries of agricultural raw materials remained crucial for Britain's balance of payments, while India was still a vital field for British capital investment in extractive and export-oriented industries (mining, tea and jute). The Depression brought down the value of Indian exports from Rs. 311 crores in 1929-30 to Rs. 132 crores in 1932-33 (imports fell off in the same period from Rs. 241 crores to Rs 133 crores), and the Home Charges could be met only by massive exports of gold through distress sales by Indians.' Claude Markovits: *Indian Business and Nationalist politics*, Pp. 19-20; Quoted by Sumit Sarkar: *Modern India* (Delhi – 2002), p. 258
5 Ibid
Kusturbhai Lalbhai and Punjabi Hindu Bania (Lala Shri Ram) were the prominent.\textsuperscript{6}

Also, 'the Indian firms provided more than 60\% of the total employment in large-scale industry by 1937, and over 80\% by 1944'.

Another major consequence of the Depression was the decline of the expatriate business enterprises, the so-called managing agency houses in Calcutta. B. R. Tomlinson has refuted the viewpoint offered by some historians and he has observed that 'the dominance of such firms before 1947 was the result of political alliances with the colonial states and their subsequent decline the consequence of that state’s replacement by the nationalist regime, to which rival businessman had long standing ties.' He has defended his views and says:

In reality the success of expatriate enterprise depended as much on a particular set of economic circumstances as on the political condition of colonial India. Their position inside the Indian market rested on their ability to drew resources of men, money and markets from outside South Asia and hence as a specific form of imperial and international economy. The rise of new industries in Britain, changes in the British employment and capital markets and the difficulties undermine the foundations of expatriate firms’ past success.\textsuperscript{7}

And the result was obvious: 'the triple foundation of colonial Calcutta jute, coal and tea was seriously undermined during the depression'. Though the expatriate business enterprises somewhat suffered due to the depression but it would be naïve to assume that their total control over the region’s(eastern) economy also met its decline and in fact, the firms like Shaw Wallace and Co., Andrew Yule and Co. who had diverse commercial interests still controlled their main business (tea) in Assam.\textsuperscript{8}

\textsuperscript{6} B. R. Tomlison: \textit{The Economy of Modern India} (Cambridge-1998), p. 43
\textsuperscript{7} \textit{Ibid.}, Pp.144-145
\textsuperscript{8} Lionel Carter: \textit{Chronicles of British Business in Asia} (Delhi-2002), Pp.124-25, Pp. 130-31
The Indian ‘Big Business’ class clamoured for state protection in the 1930s to protect their business interests and the government too after seeing the rising radicalism of both the working class and the leftist forces tried to placate the new entrepreneurial class. The small Indian entrepreneurs in the tea sector of Assam, also, faced adverse situation during the Depression period and which was recognised in a speech given by the Governor of Assam in 1931 (16th March): ‘Their very existence (petty Indian tea capitalist class) today is jeopardized by the present precarious position of the industry.’

The problems faced by the capitalists were just different in comparison with the problems of the labourers because the labourers were already in a precarious socio-economic set-up and so their culture of protests against the employers continued.

**The effects of the Depression in the tea plantation sector:**

The tea plantation industry of Assam also suffered due to the slump. Mr. E.S. Roffey, the finance member in a speech given at the Assam Legislative Council, said: ‘It is needles for me to point out that this province very largely depends on the prosperity, or otherwise of the tea industry. The revenue to a very large extent is obtained from the tea industry.... The present position is appalling.’ Mr. Roffey also mentioned in his speech, about the probable situation that might arise if the Depression would continue:

The sad fact stares us all in the face that the tea industry is in a very bad plight and that unless conditions improve not only there be a further worsening of our provincial revenues but we may be faced with a very serious problem in the shape of discouraged and discontented tea garden labourers.

The causes which affected the tea industry, as pointed out by the Government: ‘Over production, heavy stocks’ of the tea in the markets and importation into Great Britain of foreign grown teas.... The fact remains that in both the Assam Valley and the

---

9 ALCP-1931
10 ALCP 1931.
Surma Valley a large proportion of tea estates are at present working at a loss and that expenditure necessarily been curtailed everywhere.\textsuperscript{11} The value of the import of tea into India in 1928-29 was Rs.74,22,000 and the British tea-capitalists in Assam, seeing that phenomenon, so astonished that they started to demand a higher import duty on foreign tea.

Though the impact of the Depression affected the tea industry but it did not led to a heavy curtailment in the labour recruitment process and in fact, there was a very small decrease in the procurement of labour even during the Slump years (the number being 50,997 against 53,519). The number of imported labourers reached at the figure of 56,473 in 1928-29. A table has been given in the following page indicating the number of recruited labourers (1924-29).\textsuperscript{12}

**Table: 5.1**

**Number of migrant workers in the in the tea estates 1924-29**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sex and Age of Labourers</th>
<th>1924-25</th>
<th>1925-26</th>
<th>1926-27</th>
<th>1927-28</th>
<th>1928-29</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>15,468</td>
<td>17,175</td>
<td>24,411</td>
<td>20,794</td>
<td>31,198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>6,280</td>
<td>6,374</td>
<td>9,304</td>
<td>8,436</td>
<td>13,279</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>5,603</td>
<td>5,003</td>
<td>6,922</td>
<td>2,387</td>
<td>11,996</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Reports on Immigrant Labour in Assam for the year 1929

It was also observed by the Government of Assam in a discussion with the representatives of the tea industry on 25th September 1931, that the number of

\textsuperscript{11} Resolution on Immigrant Labour in Assam for the year 1931-32, Govt. of Assam.
\textsuperscript{12} Reports on Immigrant Labour in the province of Assam for the year ending 30th June, 1929
immigrants actually imported was much larger than the representatives of the Tea Districts Labour Association anticipated.\textsuperscript{13}

But the slump brought an ‘all round decrease in the cash earnings of labourers’. For instance, in the Assam Valley, the average earnings of men, women and children fell from Rs.14-0-11 to Rs.12-8-5, Rs.10-12-7 to Rs.9-8-7 and Rs.7-4-7 to Rs.6-15-8, while in the Surma Valley, the average wages fell from Rs.9-3-2 to Rs.7-4-11, Rs.7-10-5 to Rs.6-1-1 and Rs.5-3-1 to Rs.4-9-1 respectively.\textsuperscript{14} The wages of the labourers decreased even further in 1933. In a question asked by Sarveswar Barua, a member of the Legislative Council, from the Government side, A.J.Lair replied by showing a statistics of wages.\textsuperscript{15}

\textbf{Table: 5.2}

\textbf{Statistics of wages in the tea estates}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assam Valley Division</th>
<th>Surma Valley Division</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rs. - a - p</td>
<td>Rs. - a - p</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Man</td>
<td>11 12 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>8 15 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>6 6 9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Assam Legislative Council Proceedings- 1935

The labourers did not earn a living wage even throughout the 1930s. Lakheswar Baruah, a member of the Legislative Assembly and himself a petty tea planter of the Dibrugarh sub-division said in his speech:

I beg to submit that if the parliamentary Committee were apprised of the fact that the lowest living wages as we find from Government report are Rs.6-13-6 per

\textsuperscript{13} Op. cit., Resolution on Immigrant Labour, 1932
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid
\textsuperscript{15} Assam Legislative Council., 1935, p.935
month for men, Rs.5-10-4 for women and Rs.4-0-6 for children in the Assam Valley and Rs.5-11-0 per month for men, Rs.4-1-0 for women and Rs.2-13-7 for children for Surma Valley.\textsuperscript{16}

Baruah in his speech also cited the examples of the death rate of the children in the tea gardens. He continued: ‘If the Parliamentary Committee were aware of the fact of the high death rate of the children of the tea garden population 9,500 in the Assam Valley and 11,887 in the Surma Valley of a total population of children of 3,21,000 in the Assam Valley and 1,49,000 in the Surma Valley’.\textsuperscript{17} The decreasing rate of wages also did mean backwardness among the labourers.

The cultural backwardness among the workers:

It was not only in respect of wages, but in other concessions also, the labourers did not enjoy large benefits from the tea capitalists. Above all, the ‘cultural backwardness’ of India and in particular of Assam was quite appalling. In 1931, ‘only 9\% of the population was returned as literate’ and ‘which reflected the cultural backwardness from which India suffered after some 150 years of British rule.’\textsuperscript{18}

The situation was much worse in Assam, which was reflected very beautifully in the speech of Maulavi A. Rashid Chaudhury, a member of the Legislative Council and who said thus:

Sir, in the course of three years our revenue has increased from one crore 22 lakhs to 2 crores 4 lakhs or by 82 lakhs and I should say by 68\% what has been done with the increased revenue? If we taken an account what Government have done with this increased revenue we find that the credit of Government lies in spending a few lakhs here and there in schemes, such as the College at Sylhet, the two technical schools in the two valley and a series of incomplete buildings for the

---

\textsuperscript{16} Assam Legislative Assembly Debates (Proceedings) henceforth ALAP – 1938
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., p. 9
radical school at Sylhet. Beyond these we do not find any trace of this increased revenue.\textsuperscript{19}

Then, Chaudhuri, continued after taking into account of the literacy rate in the Province:

Sir, in 1911 we had a population of 70 lakhs, I speak in round figure and our number of literate people was 3 lakhs, only 4\% of the people was literate in 1911. In the 1921 Census, our population rose to 80 lakhs and literacy by only 5\%. In 1931 our population has gone to 92 lakhs and what we find-less than 7 lakh only are literate! Leaving out infants we find that 80 lakhs of the people, out of 92 lakhs are still illiterate. Then what has been done with the increased revenue?\textsuperscript{20}

In the tea gardens, the literacy rate was abysmally low. The total number of children who were going to schools did not cross the figure of 2,000. The Government replied showing the number of schools in a question asked by Omeo Kumar Das in the Legislative Assembly in 1937.\textsuperscript{21}

Table: 5.3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of school going children calculated upto the 31st March 1937:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Both the valleys</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assam Valley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surma Valley</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Statistics in O. K. Das’s speech in the ALAP

\textsuperscript{19} ALCP 1934, Pp.131-32
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{21} Three types of primary schools for the education of the children of the tea garden labourers, etc.
A Class- Government primary schools, maintained on or near tea gardens
B Class- Schools maintained by Garden Managers with the help of a monthly grant from provident funds.
C Class- Schools maintained entirely by Garden Managers.
Cited in ALAP, 1937
The condition of the ex-tea garden labourers was also the same. Binode Kumar Sarwan, a member of the Legislative Assembly, said in anger, citing the Census Report of 1931, prepared by Mr. C.S. Mullan and where it was observed:

Indeed, from many points of view, the social position of coolies and ex-coolies is worse than any class in the province; they are educationally terribly backward: they have no recognised leaders or association to present their claims or to work for their social advancement, they are foreigners to the country, and as a class, they are much addicted to liquor.\(^\text{22}\)

Housing and sanitary conditions were also very miserable in the tea gardens. According to the Government reports, the latrines were not popular in the tea gardens. The Royal Commission on Labour observed that ‘the tea estates are not required by law to provide latrines or urinals for their labour force. It is unnecessary to insist on such provision in all cases as these estates are in rural areas and many contain stretches of waste land to which the labourers can resort without danger to the general health’. The Commission also stated that the ‘provision of latrines is required by law only in the case of a factory or a mine’. The government considered the possibility of building latrines in the tea gardens by consulting with the Chief Inspector of Factories in 1912. An Inspector was appointed to enquire into the affair and submitted a report where it was observed:

With reference to the factories in Assam where latrines or urinals are not provident, I made it a matter of special enquiry during my inspection there last month to see if any offence existed in or around the factory compounds but in no case could I find just case for complaint or for the necessity for altering the sanitary arrangements.\(^\text{23}\)

On receipt of that report the Chief Inspector said that ‘the erection of latrines in the factories of Assam at present was needless and to enforce them would mean an unnecessary waste of money with no corresponding benefit.’ The

\(^{22}\) Speech given by Binode Kumar Sarwan (Labour, Thakurbari : Darrang District) cited in \textit{Ibid}

\(^{23}\) Royal Commission on Labour in India. Vol.-VI (Assam Part), Pp.8-9
Government agreed with the views of the Chief Inspector and the position remained unaltered since that decision.24

It is very interesting to note here that in respect of the Indian owned factories in Ahmedabad, the Royal Commission on Labour took a very sharp and critical attitude towards the condition of the labourers, who worked in the textile mills and the Commission ‘issued a strong criticism which present pictures of terrible squalor and wrote that nearly 92% of the houses are one roomed, they are badly built, insanitary, ill-ventilated and over-crowded, while water supplies are altogether inadequate and latrine accommodation is almost entirely wanting’.25 It would it be very important to compare the fact of Assam case with Ahmedabad that whereas in the case of health condition prevailed in Assam’s tea gardens, the Royal Commission had bothered only to mention cursorily a report of an inspector and excused the employers and agents of the managing agency houses of the responsibilities but in respect of Ahmedabad, their attitude was quite critical and argumentative. No doubt, the condition of the labourers of Assam was more typical unlike the other city based factory workers of India but it did not mean that the factory workers like the jute workers of Calcutta, spent their days in much luxurious fashion and there, also, the labourers, infact, had to spend their fruitful years of their life in much poverty.26

The debate about the living-condition of the labourers in the factories (both foreign owned and Indian owned), particularly again brought the resemblance of the late nineteenth century debate led by the critics of the colonial economic policy regarding the foreign owned industries.27

---

24 Ibid. p.9
26 Nehru, perhaps, very beautifully observed the living condition of the jute workers of Calcutta in comparison with the Bombay textile mill workers: ‘The conditions in Bombay were bad enough, but perhaps even worse was the lot of the jute workers, within an hour’s drive of the palaces of Calcutta. Semi-naked women, wild and unkempt, working for the barest pittance, so that a broad river of wealth should flow ceaselessly to Glasgow and Dunder, as well as to some pockets in India.’ Jawaharlal Nehru: An Autobiography (Delhi-1997), p.188
27 For an excellent analysis of that episode, see Bipan Chandra: The Rise and Growth of Economic Nationalism in India (Delhi-1991), especially ch. Viii.
The tea garden labourers got the treatments of a ‘Nomad population’ (to use Marx’s description of the labourers of England who worked under the Contractors), who were imported from other poverty and famine stricken areas, and spending their lot in utter pestilence and squalor and in fact, those labourers were but ‘a class of people whose origin is agricultural, but whose occupation is in great part industrial. They are the light infantry of capital thrown by it, according to its needs, now to this point, now to that.’

The condition which prevailed in England during the period of 1846-1866, exactly bore a close resemblance with the condition of the tea garden labourers. The conditions of the labourers remained unchanged and even deteriorated during that period under study, but, simultaneously, with the economic deterioration of the country’s economy, the political events took a sharp turn under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, inspite of the fact that the bourgeois nationalist leadership did fail to pay any attention to the interests of the poor workers.

**The Lahore Congress, the Civil Disobedience Movement and its impact:**

The Lahore Congress (1929), held under the Presidentship of Jawaharlal Nehru, where in a historic speech, he openly declared that there was no turning back to the past and ‘the main resolution on independence, declared, carried by a curious coincidence at the stroke of midnight on December 31st, as the old yielded to the new.’ The anti-imperialist struggle of the Indian people entered in a ‘radically new phase’ after the Lahore Congress, when Gandhi’s ultimatum to Lord Irwin, failed to get response, and immediately, he declared the decision of starting a new movement.

---

28 Marx further writes: ‘A flying column of pestilence it carries into the places in whose neighbourhood it pitches its camp, smallpox, typhus, cholera, scarlet fever & c’. Regarding the inherent characteristics of the capitalist class and their attitude towards the welfare works among the labourers, Marx has brilliantly put the point thus: ‘In the construction of the cottages, only one point of view is of moment, the “abstinence” of the capitalist from all expenditure that is not absolutely unavoidable…. In conflict with “public opinion” or over with the officers of Health, Capital makes no difficulty about “justifying” the conditions partly dangerous, partly degrading, to which it confines the working and domestic life of the labourer, on the ground that they are necessary for profit.’


There were certain compulsions which forced Gandhi in taking up a bold decision of starting a more powerful movement than the Non-Cooperation movement. The world economic slump particularly also influenced the political event of the colonial countries and it has been rightly observed by Hobsbawam:

In most of the Colonial world the slump marked the effective beginning of indigenous political and social discontent, which could not but be directed against the (colonial) government even where political nationalist movements did not emerge until after the Second World War. In both (British) West Africa and the Caribbean social unrest now made its appearance. It grew directly out of the crisis of local export crops (cocoa and sugar) ....even in countries with already developed anti-colonial national movement, the depression years brought a sharpening of conflict...30

After the early 1930s, in India, the 'Salt' suddenly became a mysterious word, a 'word of peace'. The decision of taking the 'Salt' issue as the main issue of the movement created bewilderment in the minds of some of the nationalists. No doubt, the salt tax was an entirely regressive tax, its collection in 1929-30 amounted to Rs.6.70 crores a sum equal to two-fifths of the realization from income-tax. The salt duty not only fell upon the poor but it also harassed the small local salt makers. And obviously, 'it was a cause with which the poor would identify'.31 The choice of the 'Salt issue' greatly irritated the Marxists like Rajani Palme Dutt who in his classic 'India Today' ventilated the grievance of the Indian Marxists towards that proposal thus:

.... it was not a strategy intended to lead to the victory of independence, but to find the means in the midst of a formidable revolutionary wave to maintain leadership of the mass movement and yet place the maximum bounds and restraints upon it, it was a skillful and able strategy. This was shown already in his brilliant choice of the first objective of the campaign and the method of conducting it. He decided to lead the fight against the salt monopoly of the Government. This diverted the fight from the possibility of participation by the

31 Habib: op. cit., p.54
industrial working class, the one force which Gandhi had made clear in every utterance that he fears in India...  

The political tactics of Gandhi beautifully enmeshed itself and succeeded in retarding any possible violence around the economic situation and in some industrial pockets, the situation was really grim. Judith Brown writes:

Both the issue of salt and the technique of the long march to Dandi and illegal salt making were typical of the Mahatma’s political style. Moreover they solved the problems of possible violence, communal hostility and popular participation which were disturbing him.

The Dandi march and breaking of salt making law electrified the whole atmosphere of India. So, then ‘the localisation’ of ‘national agitations’ gave a new momentum to the movement. It was also true that baring some exceptional cases, the local grievances of the people had become nationalised grievances. Also, the local leaders interpreted Gandhi’s movement in their own terms:

Gandhi’s hope for the salt Satyagraha of 1930, to take a prime example was that through the local and illegal manufacture of salt a dramatic defiance of the Raj could be mounted in innumerable local areas. His initiative was faithfully followed on the Maharashtrian Coast, in Malabar, in Tamil Nadu, in Andhra, in South West Bengal, in parts of UP and elsewhere. But in many other areas (like in Assam) however, it was technically very difficult to effect the illegal manufacture of salt since the necessary ingredients were not locally present.

In Assam, the controversial circular of the D.P.I., J.Cunnigham contributed greatly to the spread of the spirit of Civil Disobedience among the...
But the Civil Disobedience movement manifested itself in Assam with rather a sordid ideological crush. During the early part of the movement, the main leaders were unenthusiastic towards the movement. Even the prime leaders of the Congress Party in Assam like, Tarunram Phukan and Gopinath Bardoloi, due to their differences with the Lahore Resolution resigned from their posts in the Provincial Congress Committee. Phukan resigned from the Presidentship of the Provincial Committee and Bardoloi from the Presidentship of the Gauhati Congress Committee. It was very ironical that Phukan who was hailed as the most brilliant leader in the Congress organisation of Assam later decided to join in the Madan Mohan Malavya led, the United Nationalist Party, and filed his candidature against the Congress nominee in the elections. Bardoloi also did join with Phukan and prior to 1937, his political activities were inglorious.

The main items of the movement of Assam were as given in a report of the Assam Provincial Congress Committee (APCC):

(a) boycott and striking at the source of Government revenue

(b) violation of the Excise law

(c) boycott of foreign cloth.

Immediately, thereafter, repressive measures were fully used by the government and the open use of ordinance created organisational disabilities because of the arrest of leaders like Bishnuram Medhi left the movement in a deep crisis. Later, Jadav Prasad Chaliha came to the Office as a Congress President.

---

35 According to Krishna Sarma who was an active Congress Party worker of Assam, wrote about the circular which brought success to the popularity of the movement in Assam that 'out of evil cometh good'. Krishna Sarma: Diary (Guwahati-1972), p. 180

36 'A contemporary of Bhagawati (Bijoy Chandra Bhagawati a prominent Congress leader of Assam, then a student leader) recalled how the latter was incensed by the sight of Bardoloi playing tennis in the Guwahati Tennis Club when, within eye-sight, students picketed schools and colleges to oppose a British Circular (Cunningham circular) that sought to control political activity.' Sanjay Hazarika: Strangers of the Mist (Delhi-1995), p. 47

37 Civil Disobedience Movement Report: Packet No. 41 (I-A), APCC. (PHA Record) ASA
In spite of the growth of the mass consciousness and the national movement, the organisational credibility of the Congress in Assam was never strong and that became evident when an observer was sent by the Congress office at Allahabad to enquire about the Congress activities and organisational discipline of the provincial Congress Party in Assam; the observer noted after seeing the situation and wrote in despair after not witnessing any permanent provincial office in Gauhati that the Congress organisation in Assam was a 'bogus' organisation.

The enrolment of the Congress members never did cross a lac, even in the whole history of the Congress Party in Assam. As late as 1937, the 'total number of members enrolled up to September 1937 in the whole province was 15,646 against 2,620 in 1935-36.'41 Also, no representative from Assam had been selected for the representation in the All-India Congress Committee. The General Secretary of the Party in Assam, Sidhinath Sarma, sent a letter to the President of the AICC, indicating the grievance of the APCC members for not selecting a member to represent in the AICC. Sarma wrote in his letter:

It has been a standing grievance in our province that although Assam has always given a good account of herself in the National Struggle, yet no Assamese has been taken on the working committee of the AICC. Moreover there are various knotty and difficult problems that confront Assam and that require constant attention of the Working Committee. It is needless to say unless we have a representation on it, the Working Committee will not be able to do us full justice.

38 Asomiya 29 November 1929.
39 Lakshmidhar Bora: Muktijujar Sowaran (Guwahati–1984), p.71
40 The weakness of the Congress party in Assam did become more apparent during the early 1930s, when in an executive meeting of the party held at Gauhati, out of 207 members, only 14 members were present and among those were present, the members from Gauhati was highest (13) and other was from the Nowgong District.
41 Assam Pradesh Congress Correspondence, Report of the General Secretary 1937, File No.316 (PHA Record)
42 Letter to the President, AICC: May 1939 and signed by Sidhinath Sarma, General Secretary in Ibid
Jawaharlal Nehru during his visit to Assam in 1937 also pointed out the negative aspects of the Congress organisation in Assam in his correspondence with the President of APCC:

The Congress organisation in Assam is not as strong and as widespread as it should be and every effort should be made to push it one.... I have seen that the organisation side here is weak, although the material is good. In one district, the District Congress Committee was itself a primary body and consisted of sixty members only. This was absurd. In these days, when we talk of mass contact, for a district to have sixty (60) primary members is extraordinary.43

Nehru with his usual insightful attitude towards the need of organising the peasantry and the working class for a common struggle against British imperialism also pointed out and advised the President that 'the basis of your organisation will be the peasantry and therefore you should keep the agrarian reforms even before you and discuss this with the peasantry and regarding the tea garden workers and the urgent need of organising the Congress Committee he wrote:

You have also the problem of the tea garden workers (I am told) that it is difficult for you to approach them and find out their grievances. Members of the Assembly should ventilate their grievances and try to remove the obstructions in the way of their approach and organisation. In all these matters there should be a coordination of the activities of the Congress organisation with the Congress Party in the Legislature. Members of the Legislature should not only press forward the demands of the masses by way of resolutions and bills, but should also move in their constituencies and organise Congress Committee there.44

The organisational weakness again manifested itself when Tarunram Phukan, instead of filing his application for candidature to the APCC, sent his application to the Central Congress Committee. Phukan was expelled from the Congress due to his anti-Congress activities. Gopinath Bardoloi, the future Chief Minister of Assam had debarred himself from joining in the two phases of the Civil

43 Letter sent to Bishnu Ram Medhi : by J.Nehru (Nov 1 1937) Ibid.
44 Ibid.
Disobedience Movement by citing his differences with the radicalism of the newly elected Congress President, Jawaharlal Nehru.

Though, such negative feature of the Congress organisation in Assam had not become an obstacle in the path of the continuance of the Civil Disobedience movement, but no doubt, the lack of any deep coordination with the AICC and lower membership of the Party, certainly made the Party base weak. But, the response of the masses; basically the peasants and the lower middle class to the movement were immense and the APCC meeting, held at Sibsagar on 22nd Nov 1930, expressed its gratitude to the people of Assam for their ‘wonderful response to the present India-wide movement’. The violation of the forest laws was also rampant in the Kamrup district and Sylhet ranked highest in the number of arrests (892).

The effects of the Civil Disobedience movement upon the Indian Nationalist Politics were great. The Civil Disobedience movement also dramatically politicised the Indian masses and it increased the strength of the Congress Party enormously. No doubt, the Non-Cooperation movement ‘seemed to have been much more mutli-faceted, but less widespread, than the Civil Disobedience movement.’ The support of the general masses, particularly, the peasantry, ‘gave it its real strength’ and ‘the lower middle class formed the backbone of its fighting ranks.’ Nehru wrote about the effects of the movement thus:

Even the upper bourgeoisie, troubled by this new atmosphere thought it safer to be friendly with the Congress. The great majority of the textile mills in India signed undertakings prescribed by the Congress and were afraid of doing things which might bring in them the displeasure of the Congress.

The official estimate of the total number of imprisoned was 23-24,000 and the total number of those who had been through jail was put at 60,000. It was Gandhi’s

---

45 A. Guha: Planter Raj to Swaraj (Delhi-1988), p.174
46 Ibid
47 D. A. Low’s Introduction in Low (ed.): Op.cit., p.16
49 Ibid
unique style of handling the mass consciousness and which also gave a shock to the British colonial administration. Claude Markovits writes:

Gandhi’s strongest point was his capacity to innovate, to catch his opponents by surprise and convince public opinion of the validity of his decisions. It can be said that Gandhi was greater as a tactician than as strategist, for he never assured his retreat or prepared a position of withdrawal. But he knew how to exploit all the possibilities offered by a given situation, combining agitation and propaganda in most effective way.\(^{51}\)

The movement even was able to bring to its line government officials such as Morarji Desai, Sub-Divisional Officer in the Bombay presidency, who did resign his government post seeing the Dandi march.\(^{52}\)

From the autumn of 1931, the movement became slow and the negotiation began with colonial officials to end it with due honour. The process of negotiation began from the early part of February 1931. Sumit Sarkar, has shown in one of his articles, the business pressure upon the Congress leaders to come into compromise with the colonial government and he convincingly explains that ‘business pressures played a crucial point in bringing about a change in Gandhi’s political stance in mid-February 1931.’ D.P. Khaitan, one of the representatives of the big business in his presidential address at the Indian Chamber of Commerce said that ‘we all want peace’.\(^{53}\)

Irfan Habib on the other hand has analysed the decision of the Congress to come into negotiation with the Viceroy, differently:

It is yet possible that the principal factor motivating a compromise lay elsewhere, in a appreciation that the Satyagraha as conducted till hitherto was losing stream, and neither Gandhi nor the Congress were either ideologically or organizationally

---

\(^{51}\) Markovits further writes: ‘Gandhi proved to be a genius of ‘agitprop’; he was good at attracting the attention of the media upon his actions and on the movements he led’.
Claude Markovits: *The Un-Gandhian Gandhi* (Delhi-2006), p. 108


preparing to harness the vast reserves of peasant unrest over rent that Nehru had spoken of.\textsuperscript{54}

It was also true that the repressive pressure of the colonial state upon the Congress members was very strong and it emphatically proved also that beyond a certain point the movement could not hope to progress because every radical move for further progress of the movement had been thwarted due to the fear of the indiscipline among the masses or due to the heavy colonial onslaught upon the Congress activities. The British officials had already informed the Congress leaders about the decision of the Government to crush the movement. Nehru wrote:

I remember being told (during his discussion with Government officials in UP) that the Government had been in a position in February 1931 to crush the Civil Disobedience movement absolutely within three months at the most. They had perfected their machinery of repression and only a push had to be given to it; a button pressed. But preferring, if possible a settlement by argument to one imposed by force, they had decided to try the experiment of mutual talks which had led to the Delhi agreement.\textsuperscript{55}

It has been also explained by some historians that ‘the Indian Capitalists’ attitude towards Civil Disobedience movement was very complex; ‘while on the one hand, they were afraid of protracted mass Civil Disobedience, on the other hand, they clearly saw its utility even its necessity, getting crucial concession for the nation’.\textsuperscript{56} Aditya Mukherjee writes:

However opposed the Capitalists may have been at some point of time to mass Civil Disobedience, they never supported the Colonial government in repressing it. In fact the capitalists throughout pressurised the government to stop repression, remove the ban on the Congress and the press, release political prisoners, and stop

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{Habib: \textit{Op.cit}, p.61}
\footnote{Nehru: \textit{Op.cit.}, p.284}
\footnote{Aditya Mukherjee : \textit{Imperialism, Nationalism and the Making of the Indian Capitalist Class} (especially Ch.2), (New Delhi-2002), Pp.56-57}
\end{footnotes}
arbitrary rule with ordinance as a first step to any settlement, even when the Congress was at the highest of its non-constitutional mass phase.\textsuperscript{57}

Even then, the role of the Indian big business group was not above criticism and with the liberal leaders like T.B. Sapru pressurised Gandhi to come in to terms with the government.\textsuperscript{58} Nehru, himself, later said about the role of the Big Business group in the Civil Disobedience movement, in a speech delivered at a students meeting in Bombay (20 May, 1936):

“Big Business” during the Civil Disobedience was against the movement and sided with the Government and asked for suppressive measures. They may not have done it as a group, but individually did it.\textsuperscript{59}

Nehru, also analysed the characteristics of the big industrialists of India very succinctly:

The “Big Business” people are very sensitive. They do not like to be reminded that they have not supported the fight for freedom. The big bourgeoisie can’t think in terms of the masses and look for support of the British Government. They will join hands with the government when the struggle starts again.... One of the representatives of 'Big Business' said in the Legislative Assembly that there should be no labour legislation for 20 years to come.... They never think in terms of the workers and the peasants they always think in terms of their dividends.\textsuperscript{60}

It showed the duplicity of the business group in the decisive moment of the national movement and the Indian bourgeois leaders as well as the big industrialists were terribly afraid of the mass consciousness which might be able to jeopardise their industrial and commercial interests. The Bombay industrialists were the most

\textsuperscript{57} \textit{Ibid.}

\textsuperscript{58} Brown: \textit{The Role of a National Leader} in Low (ed.): \textit{Op. cit.}, p.138

\textsuperscript{59} Speech at a students’ meeting in Bombay 20 May 1936 in S. Gopal (ed.): \textit{S.W.J.N. Vol.7}, Pp.252-53

\textsuperscript{60} \textit{Ibid} (emphasis added)
vociferous critics of the further continuance of the struggle and there were certain reasons behind their policy of opposition:

... the Great Depression affected Bombay with particular severity and caused a high level of unemployment. Nor could the unemployed be easily re-absorbed into the mofussil, as it too was suffering from depression. This unemployment was of significance because the labour force was highly volatile – a volatility built up from years of inflation, recession, wage cuts and retrenchment and because of the failure of the local government to solve the city’s pressing social problems. Almost from the outset therefore, labour began to bring an element of violence into the Civil Disobedience Movement in Bombay.

Secondly, the Congress movement brought with it the boycott of foreign firms and goods. The boycott, it was argued, tied up much needed capital and so deepened the depression in Bombay. Moreover, it was also blamed for the high level of unemployment in that it was thought to be causing retrenchments in boycott.61

The Congress again depended on Gandhi for the conclusion of the pact with the Viceroy Irwin and in the discussion with the Viceroy 'surprisingly little disagreement seems to have occurred over the scope of the next Round Table Conference with Congress participation.'62 Even Nehru got a tremendous shock over the clauses of the Delhi Pact and Nehru wrote in anguish after the Delhi Pact was signed:

There was nothing to be said. The thing had been done, our leader had committed himself, and even if we disagreed with him, what would we do? Throw him over? Break from? Announce over disagreement? ....I saw in that Clause 2 of the settlement that even this seemed to be jeopardised. Was it for this that our people had behaved so gallantly for a year? Were all our brave words and deeds to end in

61 A. D. D. Gordon: *Businessmen and Politics* (Delhi-1978), Pp. 200-201
this? The independence resolution of the Congress, the pledge of January 26, so often repeated! 63

All political prisoners were released according to the term of the Gandhi-Irwin talks. The Karachi Congress, ‘hastily convened’ under the Presidentship of Sardar Ballabhai Patel, unanimously passed the Delhi Pact, but even then, Nehru said that ‘the Delhi pact though accepted by the great majority, was not popular or liked and the whole Congress was dominated by Gandhi.’ 64

Gandhi, who, along with Sarojini Naidu went to London for special talks with the British Government returned to India in deep anguish and dissatisfaction and ‘Gandhi returned meeting Mussolini on the way’. 65 Immediately, the second phase of the movement started and this time the movement became also widespread.

In Assam, the leaders like Nabin Chandra Bardoloi and Dr. Bhubaneswar Barua played a prominent role 66 and total jail goers in the second phase of the movement stood at 1700 and about 80 women participants were arrested in that phase. The Civil Disobedience was sustained in Assam with the active cooperation of the youths.

The Government in the second phase of the movement became much more ruthless towards the Congress and the Government followed their policies towards the movement ‘with a resoluteness which had not been seen hitherto. Whilst there would be no deliberate slaughter’ and, ‘there would be no equivocation either: there would be no negotiations with Gandhi for ‘peace’ or on any other matter, and

63 Clause 2: As regards constitutional question, the scope of future discussion is stated, with the assent of His Majesty’s Government’s to be with the object of considering further the scheme for the constitutional Government of India discussed at the Round Table Conference. Of the scheme, there outlined, Federation is an essential in the interests of India, for such matter as, for instance, defence; external affairs; the position of minorities; the financial credit of India and the discharge of obligations.

64 Ibid., p.265


66 During the second phase of the movement, the leaders like Tarun Ram Phukan, Gopinath Bardoloi, Rohini Choudhury were abstained themselves from joining in the movement but, leaders like Dr. Bhubaneswar Barua and Nabin Chandra Bardoloi came forward to take the leadership.
Gaurishankar Bhattacharya: Bhumiputrar Marmavedana (Guwahati-1999), p. 88
Congressmen would be sent to prison for as long as it took to break their Commitment to Civil disobedience. ....By late 1933 it had even drained Gandhi himself of everything but a largely unrelated initiative.67 At the same time, the British Prime Minister Ramsay Mac Donald announced the ‘Communal Award’ and after a crucial discussion, the Poona Pact was emerged. By 1934 (May), the AICC decided that the forthcoming election should be contested, not by a motley of Swarajists68 but by an official Congress Parliamentary Board.

The Congress, after an eventful but heavily disciplined form of non-violent movement against the colonial government, got ready to take the taste of power of a ruling class though in subordinate form.

The Civil Disobedience movement and the workers:

Curiously enough, ‘the high points of labour militancy and general nationalist upsurge somehow never coincide — a disjunction of possibly quite considerable significance for the modern history of our country’.69 But, the intensity of the strikes never broke down even at the height of the movement and in fact after 1929, it showed a steady rise right upto 1934. The number of strikes and lockouts in 1929 was 141 and in 1933 it was 146.70 The issues of the labourers and the demands of their strikes never became the main items of any of the Congress led movements, which occurred during the colonial period since 1920s. The Congress tried to take up some socio-economic steps only after 1929 and the Karachi session held in 1931 (29 March) took the resolutions on the ‘Fundamental Rights’ and the ‘National Economic Programme’.

For the peasants and the workers, the Karachi session marked a big advance and it provided in its resolution ‘substantial reduction in rent and revenue,

68 Swarajists: After the frustrated continuance of the Civil Disobedience Movement in 1933, leaders like Jannadas Dwarkadas (Bombay), Satyamurti (Madras), Seth Jamnalal Bajaj (Central Provinces), Dr. B.C.Roy (Bengal) talked among themselves to create a Congress Swarajists to contest the forthcoming election. Ibid., p.187
exceptions from rent in case of uneconomic holdings and relief of agricultural indebtedness and control of using better condition for workers, including a living wage, limited hours of work and protection of women workers, the right to organise and form unions to workers and peasants, and to state ownership or control of key industries, mines and means of transport.\textsuperscript{71} The Government of India, even suspected the ‘mild’ and ‘prosaic’ resolutions passed at the Karachi session with a serious look and ‘they even pictured, with their usual perspicacity, the red gold on the Bolsheviks stealing its way into Karachi and corrupting the Congress leaders.’\textsuperscript{72}

Although, in the conventional nationalist historiography, those resolutions taken at the Karachi Congress, has been regarded as the milestone but Nehru himself, who with Gandhi drafted those resolutions frankly said that there was ‘in reality precious little of socialism’, and he denounced any deep socialist tone in those resolutions:

In the Karachi resolution it took a step, a very short step, in a socialist direction by advocating nationalization of key industries and services, and various other measures to lessen the burden on the poor and increase it on the rich. \textit{This was not socialism at all and a capitalist state could easily accept almost everything contained in that resolution}\textsuperscript{73}

The practical impact of the Karachi Congress resolution concerning the living condition of the workers and their wages was not dramatic.\textsuperscript{74} In Assam for instance, the socio-economic resolutions of the INC failed to bring any change over the tea plantation labourers aspects and the tea capitalists also did not show any concern to those Congress programmes and on the other hand, the strikes in the tea gardens of Assam still continued without any trace of it even during the 1930s. The

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{71} Bipan Chandra et. al.: \textit{India’s Struggle for Independence} (Delhi – 2001), Pp.284-285
\textsuperscript{72} Nehru: \textit{Op. cit.}, Pp. 266-67
\textsuperscript{73} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 266 (emphasis added)
\textsuperscript{74} Hiren Mukerjee writes of the Congress resolutions: ‘To placate, perhaps, the injured left wing, the Karachi Congress, at Jawaharlal’s initiative, adopted a resolution on Fundamental Rights and a National Economic Programme. …. K. M. Munshi, then in Congress discussing it tauntingly says: “It shocked the bourgeoisie but did not placate the ardent Marxists.” Gandhi, he says further, approved of the draft after some hesitation since “it was the pet child of the impetuous Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru”.’
Hiren Mukerjee: \textit{The Gentle Colossus- a study of Jawaharlal Nehru} (Delhi-1986), p. 61
\end{flushright}
local leaders of the Congress Party gave a different but peculiar version to the original resolution of the Karachi Congress resolution, especially in respect of their dealings with the poor tea garden workers. For instance, it was reported in 1931 that when a group of Congress volunteers under the leadership of Liladhar Baruah, a provincial level Congress leader arrived at Dibrugarh by walking on foot, the volunteers faced a rare situation when they met a 'group of tea garden labourers' in the Trunk Road. The labourers asked the Congress volunteers about 'Gandhi Bhagawan' and then asked with much impatience about the 'Swaraj', whether it had been achieved and they also asked to the volunteers when their poor conditions would be ended. The Congress volunteers (like Golakchandra Pathak, Lakshmi Kanta Saikia, Dhiren Chandra Dutta, Lakhidhar Burman) pointed out the resolution of the Karachi Congress and they tried to simplify the main Clauses of the resolution and they also spoke about Gandhi that the 'Gandhi Bhagawan' had not been living in a bungalow but in a poor hut located at the Bardoli-Borsad area and shortly he would leave for London to join in the Round Table Conference. The volunteers appealed to the 'coolies' to abstain from using intoxicants like the cigarettes or opium or liquor. They also assured that if the 'coolies' would give up those bad things, then, Gandhi would definitely come to Assam to see them.\[75\]

The culture of the protests of the workers continued in the early part of the 1930s due to the effects of the depression. The labourers protested against the low wages because, it became impossible for themselves to maintain their living standard. The workers made violent reprisals against the depressing economic situation and for instance, 'in a Chargola Valley Tea Estate (Sylhet district), a riot occurred where a European Assistant Manager was knocked down and beaten. Luckily his injuries were not serious'.\[76\]

The cause of the above riot was: 'while the coolies were being paid in consequence of one 'coolie objecting' to his pay being out, and the coolies pulled down kutcha payshed so as to use the bamboos as weapons. The following day the whole labour forces of 3,000 persons remained absent from work and were in an

---

\[75\] *Sadiniya Asomiya*, 16th August, 1931 (translation ours)
\[76\] F.R. for the second half of January 1931, Home Deptt. Poll. F. No. 18/31 NAI (PHR Record)
excited mood shouting ‘Gandhi Maharaj ki jai’. Later, the Additional Superintendent of Police arrested all the ‘ring leaders’ of the riot.77

In the Lakhimpur district (1931, 4th April), about 220 labourers in the Ananda Tea Estate ‘struck work and left the garden’.78

Another interesting feature of the labourers’ protests in the tea gardens was the ‘haat looting’. This was particularly conspicuous in the Sibsagar district. In a fortnightly report of 1931, it was observed:

From one District, Sibsagar, reports have been received that save all of the large “hats” held on or near tea garden on Sundays (the weekly leave day) were looted by several thousands of people. Confidential enquiries are being made as to whether an account of the present depression in the tea industry, the coolies earning capacity has been reduced.79

The Deputy Commissioner of the Sibsagar district stated that the ‘Congress volunteers are at the bottom of the “haat” looting but economic causes may be also at work. Action is being taken to check this “haat” looting epidemic which is very infectious’.80

The Deputy Commissioner’s statement was not altogether wrong, because in the same year (1931 April), ‘manuscript notices in the Assamese have been found posted on trees near tea garden bazaar announcing the orders of Congress that both Hindus and Mohammedans will be traitor to their religions if they go to tea garden bazaars. New bazaars have been started in some places ostensibly to protect traders from running the risk of being looted if they go to garden hats’.81

The establishment of rival markets in the neighbourhood of the tea gardens had been the most obvious feature of the attempts made by the local Congress

77 Ibid.
78 F.R. for first half of April 1931. Ibid.
79 F.R. for the second half of February 1931, Ibid.
80 Ibid.
81 F.R. for the first half of April 1931, Ibid
leaders to show their protests against the tea planters. The 'haat looting', on the other hand, at best can be correlated with the depressing economic condition of the workers' livelihood, which forced them to take recourse to 'haat looting'.

The workers' protests also turned into violent kind of protests against their employers and in 1930 for instance, in the Laina Tea Estate (Lakhimpur district), there was a riot and it was simply violent. The European Manager, Mr. Arbushnott was severely assaulted and 'he succumbed to his injuries the following day'. The exodus also occurred in some of the gardens and in a Jorhat sub-division tea estate (Sotai T. E.) labourers left the garden and although the District Officer tried to settle the issue with the garden management but he failed to convince the labourers.

The imposition of fines upon the labourers also led to strikes. For instance, in a tea estate of the Darrang district (Singri T.E.) there was a strike and a riot in which the European Manager was badly beaten'. The Deputy Commissioner of the Darrang district stated in his report that 'the trouble on this garden both this year and last year in due to the manager imposing fines'.

The tempo of the Strikes in the tea gardens did not slow down during the 1932-33. Protests became too serious, leading in some cases to the death of strikers. This was most notable development after the strikes of 1920-22 because, though the strikes occurred more frequently in almost majority of the tea gardens in both the valleys of Assam, but, it did not led itself in to the death of strikers or the death of the Managers. The striking development of the post-1920s strikes was that the workers became much more determined to achieve their objectives.

In 1932, the strikes occurred in the Assam Valley tea gardens and about 21 tea gardens had been affected due to the workers strikes. In 1933, (April), 'there was a serious riot at Bordubi T.E. (Lakhimpur district) in connection with payment of labourers when five European besieged in the estate office and pelted with stones, fired about sixteen revolvers shots seriously wounding one labourer. Three of
the Europeans received cuts and bruises and the crowd was not dispersed till the arrival of the local police reinforced by fifty Europeans from the Doom Dooma Club. Subsequently, the Superintendent of Police with armed police arrested 46 labourers on the estate...’

84 The labourer who got serious injuries succumbed to his injuries. Minor strikes also occurred in Dhomai (Sylhet district), Mohkhuti (Sibsagar district), Dakhin Hingra (Sibsagar district), Joyhing Tea Estate (Lakhimpur district).

The militant nature of the labourers and their ideology was not always in conformity with the conventional Communist party led struggles with scientific criticism of the colonial capitalist system. There was no deep penetration made by the labourers into the citadel of the capitalist exploitations. Their consciousness emerged only, when they had to face the severe economic crises or cultural indignations at the hands of the tea planters.

Nehru observed that the labour movement became much organised and ideologically intact during the 1930s: ‘The labour movement was becoming class conscious, militant and dangerous both in ideology and in organisation.’

85 But, considering the larger and broad aims of the establishment of classless society, no doubt, those strikes had not influenced or attacked the vital aspects of the capitalist system but the significant feature of those protests was that it emerged out of the workers’ self-perceived notion of class consciousness in which they had debunked the notion of any help from the outsiders.

The involvement of the Congress leaders in those strikes was remarkably inconspicuous. The Congress leaders too absorbed in the Gandhian form of struggles and they hardly studied the requirements and feelings of the labourers. Even, Nehru’s socialistic vapours against the bourgeois domination over the Congress party did not alter the situation radically and he too confessed about his socialist leanings: ‘I was by no means a pioneer in the socialist field in India. Indeed I was rather backward and I had only advanced painfully, step by step, where many others had gone ahead blazing a trail.’

84 F. R. for the first half of April 1933 – Home Poll. No. 18/5/1933 NAI.PHA-Rec\(a\)\(b\)
85 Nehru: Op. cit., p.188
86 Ibid. Pp. 182-83
The problems of the labourers did not earn sufficient attention from the nationalist leadership and the idea of nationalism in the colonial context failed to touch positively the ever-increasing discontentment of the workers. Even in the context of the agrarian problems of the country, the idea of nationalism failed to give any satisfactory solution:

Nationalism as such, though inevitable under the present conditions, offers no solutions of the basic economic problems of the country. The greatest problem today is probably the agrarian problem and nationalism has no solution to it. It is more or less based on maintenance of the status quo with minor amelioration. Socialism on the hand directly tackled all such problems.87

The middle-class domination over the Congress Party did obstruct in the growth of a real class-conscious struggle against the capitalist giants and this has been the view of the followers of the traditional Marxist historiography. But it seemed that the Congress leadership did not want to jeopardise the existing relationship between the labour and capital because of their extreme concern regarding the main objectives of the National Liberation Movement, which they wanted to achieve by the cooperation of both the exploiters (indigenous) and the exploited. Their struggle was against the colonial rule and not against the capitalist system. Gandhi in a discussion with Romain Rolland, answered to the question put forward by Rolland:

I think it would be possible to establish a harmony between them (labour and capital) but if it were proved that such harmony were impossible in one factory or another, I should not hesitate to increase the power of labour (that is to say the original workers) to such an extent that the destruction of Capital would result, or its complete transference into the hands of labour. In this case as in every other, Satyagraha would force capital to the wall so that it would destroy itself on the day when its destruction would be judged to be inevitable. And even if capitalism should come into the national struggle, I should not consider its interests if they were proved to be an opposition to those of the community. But I do not wish to

87 Nehru remarked in an interview with students in London that ‘it (the Congress) is moving toward socialism though it might be vague and utopian’. Op. cit., S.W.J.N. Vol.7, p.37, p.33
raise a quarrel with capital at this juncture, unless it becomes absolutely necessary to do so. It would make the difficult problem of the moment still more difficult.\textsuperscript{88}

Gandhi’s deep antipathy against the mixing up of the nationalist struggle with the working class struggle was remarkably a peculiar feature of the Indian national movement. Certainly, the bourgeois leadership of the Congress Party, never wanted to avoid the sympathy of the lower middle class professionals and Gandhi was the most valuable representative of that movement to match up the radical ideas of some of the nationalist leaders with the rising capitalists of India. The big Indian capitalists like G. D. Birla played the most brilliant role of a mediator between the leaders of the nationalist movement and the British colonial officials:

For over two decades, between 1927 and 1950, he (Birla) remained one of the most influential spokesmen of Indian big business as well as its chief strategist. He led a dogged fight against British capital and was responsible for forging much of the solidarity which Indian big business displayed before 1947.\textsuperscript{89}

Nehru admitted also about the hegemony of the middle class over the Congress organisation thus: ‘The backbone of the INC is the lower middle class and that it has got mass support from the peasantry’ and he also stressed that ‘the nationalist movement in India, like all nationalist movements was essentially a bourgeois movement and Gandhi represented that movement and the Indian masses in relation to

\textsuperscript{88} Romain Rolland and Gandhi Correspondence (Delhi-1990), Pp. 216-17, (emphasis original).

Romain Rolland’s question was: ‘Let us admit, with you, that for a people under a foreign domination the necessity for first freeing themselves from the invader forces them into a provisory union of classes and to the formation of one single national bloc. But events move quickly, and a native bourgeoisie and capitalism are developing. Your good advice to the Parsees (23 March 1921) will not stop capital from becoming concentrated, in your land as elsewhere, in the hands of a small number. The fight against the British oppressor will be followed inevitably by the fight against the Indian oppressors. Will you then continue to ask the workers to “further the interests of their employers?”’.

\textsuperscript{89} His triumphs (Birla’s) often lay in his varied role as a lobbyist: in England pleading for great concessions for India; within the Congress working for right-wing solidarity, within wider nationalist politics promoting the constitutionalist viewpoint, and in business circles working for solidarity to fight foreign capital’.

Medha Malik Kudaisya: \textit{G. D. Birla, Big Business and India’s Partition} in D. A. Low and Howard Brasted (eds): \textit{Freedom, Trauma, Continuities} (Delhi-1998), Pp. 215-216
that movement to a supreme degree and he became the voice of the Indian people to that extent.90

The efforts of the Communists to bring into focus the real issues of the working class movement too suffered, because of their total miscalculation to read the exact mass base of the bourgeois Congress leadership and the Congress Party. The vituperative outbursts against each other never came into its end throughout the nation’s struggle for freedom. Gandhi, even, wrote cynically about the Communists:

I had made the working man’s cause very own long before any of the young Communists here was born... You claim to be Communists, but you do not seem to live the life of Communism. I may tell you that I am trying my best to live up to the ideal of Communism in the best sense of the term. And Communism does not, I fancy, exclude courtesy.91

And about the capitalists he mildly said:

I must warn you that I do not bear any ill (will) to the Capitalists, I can think of doing them no harm. But, I want, by means of suffering, to awaken them to their sense of duty. I want to melt their hearts and get them to render justice to their less fortunate brethren. They are human beings and very appeal to them will not go in vain.92

Gandhi’s writing has so far, cleared the point that he would not go for a struggle against the capitalists and he would try only to ‘melt’ their hearts in favour of the dispossessed population of India. The ideological squabbles between the Congress and the Communist Party had its far-reaching effects at a crucial moment of the modern Indian history and it had certainly paralysed the possibility of a united common struggle against the vestiges of the colonial-capitalist fabric of India.

91 Speech at Labour Meeting, Parel March 16 1931 and this appeared in the Young India as ‘A word to the Communists’ (26-3-1931) in CWMG – Vol.45, Pp.298-99
92 Ibid.
The intellectual Communist personalities like, Mohit Sen writes about the characteristics of the national movement and its leaders:

The Congress was not a party of the bourgeoisie nor was Gandhi a bourgeois leader. It was a party of all the national classes in which the leadership was exercised by the national intelligentsia. Gandhi was a representative of that intelligentsia with an ideology that had its national roots in the rich peasantry.93

Sen has criticised the role played by the Communist Party during that period and he writes:

Its sacrifice and the intellectuals brilliance of its leaders notwithstanding, its contribution to this revolution was largely negative because it did not assess it as a revolution at all and concentrated on replacing the Congress leadership of the freedom struggle by its own instead of allying with it as none other than Lenin himself had advised as far back as 1920 in his controversy with M.N. Roy. The latter, in fact, was the founder of the wrong sectarian understanding of the CPI that was more Royist than Leninist.94

Thus the interests and demands of the workers protests had become subservient to the politics led in the interest of the middle class.95 Interestingly, the militant spirit of the Indian workers never slowed down during the eventful period of 1930s and the militancy did not confine itself to the tea industry only, but in other industrial concerns too, the crisis became too acute. The whole period from 1930-39 was the peak time for the growth and involvement of the Communist Party in the

94 Ibid.
95 The situation which developed in the Indian context also resembled the politics of the middle class in Germany during the period of 1815-30. Engels graphically described the situation thus:
'During the time from 1815 to 1830, the essentially democratic movement of the working classes was more or less made subservient to the liberal movement of the bourgeoisie. The working people, though more advanced than the middle classes, could not yet see, the total difference between liberalism and democracy emancipation of the middle classes and emancipation of the working classes; they could not see the difference between liberty of money and ... liberty of man, until money had been politically free, until the middle class had been made the exclusively ruling class.... The working classes are necessarily the instruments in the hands of the middle class as long as the middle class are themselves revolutionary or progressive. The distinct movement of the working classes, is therefore, in this case always of a secondary importance.'
labour movement of India and the influence of the leftist elements within the Congress Party, also, was a great factor for its growing strength.

The interests of the Congress leadership in the labour affairs developed out of the motives of securing the power to govern through the Govt. of India Act (1935). But, during the election of the 1937, the Congress party in Assam failed to show any remarkable progress in the labour field and it was frankly confessed by the Congress Party regarding the negative aspects of their campaign:

Though the party showed a good result in the last election of 1937 but it did not perform well in the labour constituencies... In respect of their contact with the tea garden labourers, it was observed that ‘the vast tea garden population practically out of touch with the outside world and guarded as “Close Preserves”, Congress influence in these areas and among these peoples is almost negligible. Congress dared not invade this citadel in the last general election... For obvious difficulties, there is still not attempt worth the name for establishing contact with it is being felt.

In a letter sent to the president of the AICC, the APCC General Secretary wrote:

A labour sub-committee was formed to enquire into the conditions of Labour in the Tea Gardens and other Industries beginning with the Sibsagar district and it suggest measures to organise them. The Committee has submitted preliminary report but for want of fund this Committee has not been able to push through the work of organisation amongst them.

---

96 No doubt, the atrocities of the colonial state were also harsh upon the CPI and the party did continue its activities clandestinely due to the heavy colonial administrative proscriptions and even the party journal, ‘National Front’ was banned also. After the starting of the Second World War, the workers had become more militantly started their protests against their masters and in textile mills, the workers became more active in their protests.

B. T. Ranadive: Bharater Swadhinata Sangrame Kommunistder Bhumika (Calcutta- 2005), p. 29

97 Report by General Secretary – 1937 – File No.316 (PHA Record)

98 Ibid
With its electoral aims after the passing of the Act of 1935 and the subsequent declaration of the election for provincial assemblies gathered a new enthusiasm among the bourgeois Congress leadership. The decision of accepting office by the Congress Party in accordance with the Government of India Act of 1935, in fact, ‘was the ambiguity institutionalised’ and the Act in reality, gave the Governors considerable ‘reserve’ powers over the public services, the rights of minorities, ‘the peace and tranquility of the province’ and not least under section 93 of the Act over any ‘situation...’ in which the Government of the province cannot be carried on in accordance with the provision of this Act’.  

The Socialist group of the Congress was vehemently against the Office acceptance and Nehru himself took the lead and in the Faizpur Congress session (1936), he said: ‘It would inevitably mean a kind of Partnership with British imperialism.’ But Nehru’s radicalism, as always, was ‘brought into line by Gandhi in the course of lengthy private discussion.’

After a considerable ‘horse-trading’ and ‘floor crossings’, the Congress Ministry was also formed in Assam, (1938 September-1939 November) where Subhas Bose played a prominent part. In the meanwhile, the dark horse, Gopinath Bardoloi, came to the forefront despite his political muddling during the eventful years of 1930-36.

The newly elected Congress representatives before the ministry formation, after all did not show a pale performance on the debates in the Legislative Assembly and as an efficient opposition party it played its role well. The main leader of the opposition Congress bench in the Assembly, Gopinath Bardoloi’s speech was a striking example, where he showed the much maturity of a leader capable of handling
the responsibilities, and ironically, it also showed that he seemed to have come into clear rapport with the independence proposal of the Lahore Congress (1929):

If the issue of independence was raised, it was raised at a time— it was in 1930, when it was found that there was no alternative for the amelioration of the conditions of the masses, no alternative for an alternative order of things for Indians besides fighting out the issue of independence.103

About the poverty of the masses, Bardoloi said:

We see that millions of our countrymen also live in the countryside want our help and support, that lakhs in this province alone die of malaria, we see that literacy in this province is only 7% of the entire population, and we also see that people lie under the burden of heavy taxation and die premature deaths of preventable diseases. Therefore the position of the Congress in this respect is that they will make use of this present constitution for doing such good to the masses as may be possible and the Hon’ble Chief Minister can take it from us that if they will move any proposal for the amelioration of the condition of the masses, if they will have any proposal for prohibition or any proposal for affording relief to the Harijans or the labouring classes…. the Government will not receive any obstruction from us and will receive all support from us.104

In respect of the fixed salary of Rs.500 for the member of the newly elected Assembly, the opposition Congress bench strongly gave their supportive opinions regarding the Assam Ministries’ Salaries Bill (1937) and advocated that it should be fixed at Rs.500. Deveshwar Sarma, one of the Congress members of the Assembly, interestingly compared the salary issue of the Ministers with the wages of the tea garden labourers and he appealed through his speech to the members of the Assembly to give a kind attitude to the labourers’ wages:

What is reasonable salary to the Ministers, the honourable members will honestly determine, but I think there will be hardly any men in Assam who will disagree as

103 Speech given by G. N. Bordoloi at the General Discussion of the Budget in op. cit. ALAP, 1937
104 Ibid.
to the inadequacy of the remuneration that is given to the employers in the tea estates.... Sir, I maybe permitted to say that a half fed, sickly, anaemic, half-naked woman in the tea garden carrying her child on her back bound with a rug, working day in and day out, in sun and rain, for the white masters (there are also our brown masters) falls in the same category, she is the tea plantation labour a sample of adequate wage. .... Sir, the miseries of the labourers of tea gardens demonstrate inhuman and scandalous in adequacy of wages and our conscientious employer must try to ameliorate the condition of this labouring class.105

Mr. Hockenhull, the European representative said about the inadequacy of wages that it was sheer nonsense to assume that the workers’ were inadequately paid.

The land revenue issue was also raised in the Assembly and the opposition Congress clamoured for the reduction of the Land revenue to 50%. Omeo Kumar Das, one of the Congress representatives of the Assembly with a certain sympathetic feelings towards the problems of the labourers tried to raise a bill entitled “Assam Tea Garden Labourer’s Freedom of Movement Bill” in the Assembly. The government gave enough importance to the Bill and observed: ‘It will be interesting to study the attitude of the Assembly to the Assam Tea Garden Labourer’s Freedom of Movement Bill if this comes up at the session beginning of September 7.’106 The members of the Indian planting community protested against bill. The Indian tea planters also did not wish to see any growth of workers’ organisation and they were afraid of any such situation which might have created the strikes in their own gardens and for instance, when, ‘the Chota Nagpur Association held one or two meetings in tea gardens and at one of them, a speaker perhaps at the instigation of some Indian tea garden owners told the ‘coolies’ not to misled in to strikes as they would eventually suffer.’107 Eventually, a Conference was held with the representatives of the tea industry and at which assurances were given by the tea industry that the supposed grievances did not really existed and that ‘led to the bill’s withdrawal’.108

105 Ibid.
106 F.R. for Assam for 1937 NAI.
107 F.R. for Assam for the first half of March 1938. Home. Poll. Deptt. No. 18/3/38 NAL (PHA Record)
The workers of the other industrial concerns like in the match factory situated at Dhubri (AMCO) became the most dissatisfied lot, when they witnessed the gradual curtailment of their wages. The strikes also began in the tea plantations and the AOC workers strike became a great culminating point for the labour movement of Assam.

Strike of the AMCO workers:

The strike at the Dhubri Match factory was one of the notable examples of the workers’ growing dissatisfaction against the management. The Swedish match factory management reduced the wages of the workers due to the world-wide depression and its effects also brought a retrenchment. A union was formed in order to defend the workers’ rights. Bepin Chakraborty, a veteran labour leader of Bengal, played a prominent part in organising the strike. He also organised for the first time in Assam, a huge May-Day rally at Dhubri (Idgah field) in 1936. Later, a compromise was reached between the Union and the Management in 1935-36 and the terms of the agreement were:

Firstly, that the propose cuts in wages will be withdrawn by the management.
Secondly, that further reduction of workers will be stopped by the management.
Thirdly, that no action will be taken by the Management against any of the strikers.
Fourthly, wages will be increased by the management in some of the Departments, and
Fifthly, that fine funds will be utilised by the management for the welfare of the workers.

But the management did not show any respect towards the compromise-settlement and so the workers stopped their work on 14th December 1936.

---

109 Dipankar Banerjee: Labour Movement in Assam (Delhi-2005), p.61
110 Quoted by F.A. Ahmed in his speech in the Legislative Assembly, 1937. Ahmad’s appeal for Adjournment Motion was lost by 47-51. ALAP, 1937
The management also hired ‘blacklegs’ from the United Provinces to break the spirit of the strikers. The chief leader of the strike, Bepin Chakraborty resorted to hunger strike to achieve the chief demands of the workers, but later at the request of the Congress leaders like F.A.Ahmed, Siddhinath Sarma, Bishnuram Medhi, he broke the fast at the assurance given by the Congress leaders that the ‘AMCO strike would be taken up at the forth-coming session of the Assembly.’\textsuperscript{111} F.A. Ahmed as the Congress Party representative of the Assembly gave a memorable speech in the Legislative Assembly in defense of the striking workers by stating:

The Government has a certain duty toward the workers on behalf of the Government, he has stated (Saadulla, the Chief Minister) that he was helpless. What does that mean, what does that amount to? .... this means that the workers are at the mercy of the capitalists and the Government have no means of control whatsoever to attend to the misery and to the needs of the poor workers. Sir, does the experience of England, Ireland or any other country justify that the workers will ever receives better or good treatment at the hands of the capitalists until and unless they are protected? Does anyone believe that once the capitalists are allowed to establish themselves in supremacy the workers will ever get any help from the employers?\textsuperscript{112}

After a heroic fight for one year, the strikers did not wish to prolong it further and the workers’ drifted back to work by December 1937.\textsuperscript{113}

**The oil workers’ strike at Digboi and its consequences:**

The Assam Oil Company’s workers organised themselves by 1938 (February) and formulated some demands. The Company refused to recognise the Union. The Union elected, Jagannath Upadhayaya as the President of the Union. The Government constituted a Court of Enquiry with) C. Higgins as Chairman (August 1938). Omeo Kumar Das, the Congress member, who was also in the Court of

\textsuperscript{111} Banerjee: \textit{Op. cit.}, p.64
\textsuperscript{112} Speech by Ahmed in \textit{Op. cit.}, ALAP
\textsuperscript{113} Guha: \textit{Op. cit.}, p.237
Enquiry observed some important points regarding the necessity of trade unions among the labourers. He stated in his observation:

I think that the claim of the union for its recognition could not be challenged and that the objection by the Company on the score of its members perhaps not representing a large body of the Company’s workmen is not tenable.\textsuperscript{114}

Regarding the necessity of giving leadership from outside, Das significantly observed that ‘in the present state of ignorance of the labourers it would be idle to expect that they are capable of forming and leading trade unions without proper and adequate guidance. They require assistance and advice, at any rate until such time as their lot is improved financially, educationally and socially.’ Das also observed regarding the low wages earned by the labourers and the capitalists’ lack of concern to the demands raised by the labourers:

So far as labour is concerned movements for the amelioration of their all the world over have for their object the prevention of a state of affairs by which the employer can claim to pay his men ridiculous rates simply because he can obtain labour under those conditions. If any one with money at his command finds a poor man and utilises the latter’s condition by offering him an unreasonably low wage and the latter is prepared to work for that wage on account of his poverty and helplessness it is called exploitation.\textsuperscript{115}

Though the AOC workers cooperated with the Court of Enquiry, large scale retrenchment of the workers led to the non-cooperation of the Union body with Court of Enquiry. In fact, in February 16th, 1939, eight workers of Tinsukia where tin container factory located were dismissed. The Joint Secretary of the A.O.C. Labour Union warned the management by giving a letter to the General Manager of A.O.C. and there he wrote:

It is extremely difficult to understand the real policy and attitude of the management as it appears in view of the continued offensiveness of the Company

\textsuperscript{114} Report of the Digboi Court of Enquiry – 1938. File No.130, 1939 (PHA Record)
\textsuperscript{115} Ibid.
if it be not the intention of the management to provoke the workers that if the management does not reinstate the dismissed hands immediately, but chooses to permit in its game of provoking the workers before any settlement could be arrived at amicably on the basis of the findings of Court of Enquiry, the Company will have to shoulder the whole responsibility of any partial or complete deadlock that may well follow if the discontent workers are goaded to take quite justifiably, an equally drastic action to meet offensive by offensive.\textsuperscript{116}

The Company recognised the Union on 20 March 1939, but the Union decided to go on strike from 3rd April 1939 against the dismissal of the workers which numbered around 74.\textsuperscript{117} The ‘worst incident occurred on 18 April 1939, when the police opened fire on the group of volunteers from the union side and resulting in the death of three persons’. Later, the dead body of a missing volunteer was also rescued on 25 Apr, 1939. Just before the incident, Gopinath Bardoloi, as the Chief Minister of Assam, visited the disputed place Digboi, on 16th April but there ‘he publicly disapproved of the continuous strike’.\textsuperscript{118}

The Digboi strike attracted widespread condemnation from the nationalist press and the newspapers like the \textit{Amrita Bazar Patrika} boldly condemned the handling of the strike by the management of the AOC.\textsuperscript{119} Though Bardoloi discouraged the strikers by his speech but ‘the strike attracted so much so of public attention for various reasons, particularly the completeness and determined nature of

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{116} Letter to the G.M. AOC Ltd. by M. A. Chaudhury, Joint Secy. AOC Labour Union. 17.2.39. Ref. No. /A-14/39 F. No. 130(PHA Record)
\item\textsuperscript{117} Guha: \textit{Op. cit.}, p.239
\item\textsuperscript{118} Ibid.
\item\textsuperscript{119} The \textit{Amrita Bazar Patrika} in its issues of 1939 (April 14) significantly outlined the characteristics of the relationship between labour and capital in the colonial India and in particular of Assam: ‘The dispute between capital and labour in India has been as old as elsewhere. But in every such dispute in India in the past especially where the capitalists were Europeans, the Bureaucratic Government in the provinces as also at the centre used to directly or indirectly side with them on or other pretext. In Assam itself, the grievances of labour were always left unredressed and even unattended to by the ruling authorities. The result is that having continuously secured such indulgent treatment at the hands of the Government, capitalists have come to regard it as their legitimate due in any conflict they might have with their workers and they read the skies in disappointment an anger whenever they do not obtain it’. \textit{Amrita Bazar Patrika}, 14-5-39
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
the strike and the firing incident, and the wide media coverage by the National press, that the Government now felt the necessity of taking some concrete steps....

The AICC under the Presidentship of Dr. Rajendra Prasad passed resolution supporting the strike. The AICC resolution categorically pointed out the fact that the new Congress government would fully implement the economic programme of the Karachi Congress. It was also emphasised that the state ownership of the key industries like the oil industry was the best way of solving the problems concerning the Labour. Dr. Rajendra Prasad, who was in the right wing of the Congress, by this resolution meant a radical approach to the foreign owned industries like the AOC. The Congress resolution maintained a sharp break with the attitude of the Chief Minister of Assam and it was clearly stated in the resolution:

In the opinion of this Committee no cooperation, however big and influential it may be, can be above public criticism and Government supervision and legitimate control. Moreover, as was declared in the Karachi session, the Congress policy is that there should be STATE OWNERSHIP or CONTROL OF KEY INDUSTRIES. The oil industry is undoubtedly a VITAL KEY INDUSTRY.\(^{121}\)

The Government of Assam formed two Committees to enquire in to the Digboi affairs one under M.N Mukherjee, a retired Chief Justice of Calcutta High court and other was under K.K. Hajra who was an ICS Officer. Under the Defence of India Rules, the disputed areas of Digboi-Tinsukia were protected. The strike collapsed when the official repression became too stern.\(^{122}\)

After the resignation of the Bardoloi Ministry, accordingly with decision taken by the Congress High Command in 1939 (November), the Saadulla Ministry accepted the Mukherjee report and there was no chance of getting any benefits to the demands of the strikers. Nine important leaders were extermed from

\(^{120}\) Banerjee: \emph{op. cit.}, p.107  
\(^{121}\) Quoted by J. Upadhyay, President AOC Labour Union 1938-47 in his letter sent to Gopinath Bardoloi on 31st March 1949 seeking compensation for the victims of the War Ordinance during the Strike of 1939. File No.171 (PHA Record)  
\(^{122}\) Guha: \emph{Op. cit.}, Pp. 240-241
Dibrugarh. Sudhindra Pramanik who played an important role in the organisation of the workers in the strike was also externed from Digboi.\textsuperscript{123}

The handling of the Digboi Oil Strike by the Bardoloi ministry has been severely criticised both by the historians and the Congress Socialists. The English press like \textit{The Statesman} was particularly too much critical of the role of Gopinath Bardoloi.\textsuperscript{124} \textit{The statesman} accused Gopinath Bardoloi, of not giving enough interest to solve the matter and the Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed then the finance minister of Assam himself repudiated those charges brought against the Premier, Bardoloi.\textsuperscript{125}

But in reality, Gopinath Bardoloi was the ideal representative of the bourgeoisie, and as a devout follower of Gandhian principles, he was not serious of tackling labour problems by dissolving the stronghold of the capitalist rule. He was just following the bourgeois notion of the maintenance of law and order, and when volatile problems arose out of the workers’ dissatisfaction against the factory management in Digboi, he tried to strictly adhere to maintain the statues quo in the labour-management relationship and he confessed the fact in a letter sent to the Congress President:

\begin{quote}
I would have the same bias if I were there and probably more, but I have been misunderstood by them for the reason of the fact that as Government I cannot exhibit the same bias in favour of anybody except through actions allowed by law.\textsuperscript{126}
\end{quote}

Interestingly, Bardoloi did not want to give his resignation supporting the workers’ strike or showing respect to the deceased person in the firing incident but

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{123} Interview with Nilomoni Barthakur by Dadhi Mahanta on 1.11.83 cited in his work — \textit{Communist Andolanar Jampa} (Guwahati-1993), p.36
\textsuperscript{124} Amalendu Guha’s \textit{Planter Raj to Swaraj} and Dipankar Banerjee’s \textit{Labour Movement in Assam} has vehemently criticised the role played by the Gopinath Bardoloi Ministry during the Strike. Nirod Kumar Barua’s views are significantly in defensive of the role played by Bardoloi during the crucial period — \textit{Mohini Kolar Chabi} (Guwahati-1997)
\textsuperscript{125} \textit{The Statesman} May 12, 1939.
\textsuperscript{126} Bardoloi’s letter to Dr. R. Prasad -30th May, 1939; Quoted in Nirod Kumar Barua (ed.): \textit{Bardoloi Dinlekha} (Guwahati 2001), p.100
\end{footnotes}
he wanted to give his resignation when allegation against his handling of the labour-problems in Digboi became too widespread.

One of the significant features of the Digboi strike was that it was fought on the banner of the Congress Party, although the policy of the Congress led Government was quite contradictory to the professed aims of the strike. The Congress Government’s policy after the formation of the ministries in various provinces of India was quite different from the Election Manifesto; they propagated during the election campaign of 1937.\(^{127}\)

Perhaps, the Congress ministry of Assam too was not immune from the developments in the all-India level, when the Congress policy took a swift turn after the acceptance of the Office. The provincial Congress ministries rather tried to refrain themselves from the labour disputes and even to minimise the occurrences of lightening strikes, the Bombay Industrial Disputes Act (BIDA-1938) was passed by the B.G.Kher ministry in the Bombay Presidency and there was no such significant protest from the Congress leadership and the leftist elements.\(^{128}\) The Act ‘enjoined compulsory resort to conciliation or arbitration, a fine of Rs.50/- for resorting to an illegal strike, three months’ imprisonment for instigating workers to an illegal strike, and a maximum fine of Rs.500 for obstructing a labour officer in the discharge of his duty.’\(^{129}\) Recent research has proved that the fear of the Communist union Mazdoor

\(^{127}\) In the election manifesto, about the industrial workers, it was written, ‘In regard to Industrial workers, the policy of the Congress is to secure to them a decent standard of living, hours of work and conditions of labour in conformity as far as the economic conditions in the country permit, with international standards, suitable machinery for the settlement of disputes between employers and workers, protection against the economic consequences of old age, sickness and unemployment and the right of workers to form unions and to strikes for the protection of their interests’.
Passed at the meeting of the AICC in Bombay, held on 23.08.1936. Correspondence Received from AICC. APCC – F. No.316 (PHA Record)

\(^{128}\) Nehru accused the Congress President Subash Bose of not giving enough importance to the passing of the Act and in reply Bose wrote in his letter to Nehru, about the Act: ‘I am surprised that without knowing the facts you have alleged that I did not do my best to prevent the enactment of the Bombay Trades Disputes Bill in its present form. ...If you desire to know what I did in this connection the best thing would be to ask Sardar Patel himself. The only thing that I did not do was to break with him...’
Bose also charged the Bombay branch of the C. S. P. for giving their support to the Bill and in the same letter he wrote: ‘By the way, do you know that the Bombay C.S.P. lent its support to the Bill in its present form’. Bose’s replied on March 28, 1939 to the letter of Nehru (February 4, 1939)
J. Nehru : *A Bunch of Old Letters* (Delhi-2005), Pp. 344-345

\(^{129}\) Cited in *S.W.J.N. Vol.9* (Delhi 1988), p.309
Sangh (Ahmedabad) where Muslim workers dominated, forced the Government to pass the Bombay Industrial Disputes Act.130

The politics at the Ahmedabad textile mills influenced the labour affairs in other parts of India, also, where the chief labour union was under the deep influence of Gandhi as well as his followers like G.L. Nanda. Nanda was interestingly, the Parliamentary Secretary of Labour in the Congress government in Bombay and obviously enough, he 'bore the political responsibility for formations and implementing the BIDA.'131

G.L. Nanda in his letter to Nehru, wrote about the feasibility of the Act in the prevailing labour situation: 'The Bombay Trade Disputes Bill was in best interests of the working class and consistent with the principles of Congress' and mentioned 'the steps that were taken to meet the criticism made against it.'132 Nehru, during a visit to London faced sharp criticism, concerning the promulgation of the Act by the Congress government and Nehru wrote to Nanda, pointing out also certain problems of the Act:

In effect, it seemed that under the bill it would be exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, to form independent trade unions. Employers or Company unions usually be formed, and as you know, the labour movement, has a horror of such unions.... But there is another aspect which deserves consideration. The fact is undoubted that large sections of labour opinions are intensely hostile to the measure and the Congress government has become very unpopular with such sections. Whether this hostility is justified or not, the fact that it exists is in itself highly important.133

Nehru suggested a measure in the Bill and wrote:

To avoid sudden or lightening strikes some clause requiring sufficient notice say a fortnight might have been introduced. In the event of such notice not being given

the strike is to be declared illegal. This would have given a great deal of protection against strikes.\textsuperscript{134}

Besides Nehru’s repugnance towards the ‘lightening strikes’, the Communist Party of India at that period maintained a close relationship with the INC due to their shift of Party policy. In 1936, the Communist party, operating illegally, had called for ‘an anti-imperialist people’s front with Communists, Congress socialites, trade unionists left Congressmen as the hard core.’\textsuperscript{135} During the same period Subhas Bose who was elected for two times as the Congress President, resigned after his political clashes with Gandhi.

Ironically, the Communists and the Socialists maintained a stoic silence during the process of the expulsion of Bose from the Congress party. J.P. Narayan even played a controversial role during that time. Also, the concept of a united front with the Congress debarred the left to criticise ‘the anti-labour and anti-kisan policies of the Congress ministries’.\textsuperscript{136}

The acceptance of the office and their functions during the eventful years was a positive one from the psychological point of view of the Indian masses but it also determined one aspect that it would be quite meaningless to expect any radical departure from the previous colonial regime in respect of the drastic re-evaluation of socio-economic set-up of the country. In fact, the provincial offices were occupied by some members who had no strong ideological base and it was observed by Nehru too:

It seems to be me that one of the chief dangers in the immediate future in the emergence into office and positions of responsibility of persons who are devoid of any sense of responsibility of any true appreciation of the situation and not conspicuous in possessing intelligence of a higher order.\textsuperscript{137}

\textsuperscript{134} Note by Nehru 14 Dec 1938. J. Nehru Papers. File No.150, PP.77-85 (NMML) Cited in Basudev Chatterjee (ed.): \textit{Towards Freedom 1938 Part-II} (Delhi ), Pp. 1976
\textsuperscript{135} Hiren Mukherjee: \textit{Bow of Burning Gold -A Study of Subhas Bose} (Delhi 1993), p.147
\textsuperscript{137} Letter written to Subhas Bose by Nehru on February 4, 1939. \textit{SWJN, Vol-9}, p.482
Though the bourgeois leadership of the Congress was busy in political debates about the solution or suppression of the labour strikes but the workers of the tea-estates had been continuing their strikes even in the midst of heavy repression made by the police. The saga of the Digboi oil strike gave huge boost to the workers' protests in the vicinity of the oil company. The involvement of the leftist leaders in guiding those strikes was another major development. Cachar and Lakhimpur districts were worst affected between the whole period of 1937-39.\textsuperscript{138}

The strikes in the tea gardens took a new turn after the efforts made by the C.S.P. (Surma Valley branch) to make an entry in to the tea gardens. Strikes occurred at Mainagarh (Cachar), Lacherra and Kunchur Tea Estates in June1938. Though the district officials tried to blame the management for those strikes but the garden authorities blamed ‘Congress Socialist Party activities for the general disturbance of the labour mentality.’\textsuperscript{139} The government reported that the Congress Socialist Party members particularly tried to create political consciousness among the workers. But the Commissioner of the Surma Valley asserted that ‘direction of the movement appears weak and its plans indefinite.’\textsuperscript{140}

The intensity of the strikes increased when a group of Congressmen with some socialist leanings joined in the labour movement in the Brahmaputra Valley. Among those Congressmen, the names of Dr. Binoybhusan Chakraborty, Kedarnath Goswami, Nilmoni Barthakur were important. A strike occurred at the Dibrugarh Steamer Ghat when ‘the Railway Traffic Manager of the Assam Railways and Trading Company Limited discharged the coal transshipment labourers of the Dibrugarh Steamer Ghat and entrusted their work to the Railway Contractor’. When the discharged labourers approached the President of the district Congress committee (Lakhimpur), Kedarnath Goswami about their problems then he took up the matter and at first he tried to arrive at a compromise with the management but the talk failed and later it was decided to launch the boycott movement against the management of

\textsuperscript{138} Guha: \textit{Op.cit.}, p.245
\textsuperscript{139} F.R. for Assam for the first half of June 1938, NA(\textit{China Dept})
\textsuperscript{140} F.R. for Assam for the Second half of August 1938 \textit{Ibid}. 
the Dibru Sadiya Railway.\textsuperscript{141} After a successful boycott of the Railway, General Manager of the Company agreed to accept all the demands put forward by the strikers.

The significant point about the strike at the Steamer Ghat was that ‘it was perhaps the only case where a public boycott of a railway had been organised and effectively carried out.’\textsuperscript{142} According to Goswami, the strike succeeded in creating among the labourers an interest for the Congress Party’s activities. ‘The success of the strike was regarded as the ‘triumph of the Congress’, and Goswami later observed:

In fact, the support of the labourers to the Congress even at the risk of losing their work and their refusal to be reinstated unless the labourers who had stopped work in sympathy with them were also reinstated were evidence of a high patriotic and moral sense which deserves emulation.... The strength of the Congress and the Labour Movement in the district appeared to have greatly frightened the European planting Community.\textsuperscript{143}

In a confidential report of the government it was pointed out that for the ‘Satyagraha Movement’ in Dibrugarh, Kedarnath Goswami was ‘personally responsible’.\textsuperscript{144} Due to his consistent attack against the government, he was also removed from the editorship of the newspaper ‘The Times of Assam’ which he was editing since 1929. The European Planting community boycotted the newspaper due to the pro-Congress and pro-labour articles, he printed in his paper. His commitment to the cause of labour was the most important aspect of his character. For instance, when the labourers of the Steamer Ghat started their strike at the initiative of Kedarnath Goswami, the district Congress committee offered to come into settlement with the management but he repudiated such offer and warned the Congress Ministry, the Deputy Commissioner and the police for not entering into a settlement. The Congress government under Gopinath Bardoloi, seemed not to take any particular

\textsuperscript{141} It was alleged by his contemporaries such as Gaurishankar Bhattacharya that Goswami’s lack of Collaboration during the strike period with the trade unions, eventually led to the failure of the strike in the Steamer Ghat strike at Dibrugarh. 

\textsuperscript{142} Bhattacharya’s article in Jayakanta Sarma (ed.): Kedarnath Goswami (Guwahati-1997), p. 8

\textsuperscript{143} Ibid

\textsuperscript{144} Confidential – Governor’s Secretariat (henceforth G.S.), File No. 16.C/39(C) ASA.
interests in the strike because the strikers and peaceful picketers were lathicharged by the police during the strike.145

In the Dibrugarh sub-division, as it was one of the most important from the point of view of the tea industry, the political activists like Benoy Bhushan Chaudhury became the chief organisers of the labourers. They delivered inflammatory speeches according to the district officials, against the European planters. The Deputy Commissioner of the Lakhimpur district stated: ‘On the 4th June 1939, a meeting of the ART & CO labour union was held at Margherita at which one of the speakers, Md. Safi of Digboi, is reported to have made a very inflammatory speech, the object of which was to excite his audience to continue the present agitation’, and ‘in those speeches Government officers are systematically vilified and attacked in the most objectionable and often-obscene language’.146

The participation of the labourers in those meetings was another significant feature of the post-1937 labour struggles in Assam. The speakers generally gave their lectures in vernacular languages (Hindi) and the speakers also targeted the Indian staff members of the Europeans owned tea gardens. Since the 1920-22 strike wave, it had been noticed that the so-called Indian babus like the Clerks, Mohurries, Jamadars etc. were equally responsible and cooperated with British tea planters in the exploitation of the poor labourers. When a meeting was organised near the Powai Tea Estate (Lakhimpur district) about 250 ‘coolies’ attended and among those, about 20 women also went to hear the lectures given by Nanda Mall and Ramjosh Singh (labour leaders from Digboi). One of the speakers, N. Mall severely criticised the attitude of the Indian Babus towards the labourers and he said: ‘Babus are “golam” they do not mix with you. Nothing can be done without majdoors…. The Sahibs and Babus oppressed you in many ways. They used to take you beautiful daughters for their enjoyment formerly but this meeting stopped this practice.’147 His anger also fell

---

145 Police Assault on some people at Dibrugarh – topic raised in ALA (1939). A member of the Opposition Party asked Bardoloi: ‘...May I draw the attention of the Hon’ble Premier to a report in the press that as a result of the lathi charges by the Police some 100 people were assaulted at Dibrugarh?... Is he not the President of the Congress Committee?’ Bardoloi : ‘Of course, it has been said that he is, but I am not in a position to say who is the President of the Congress Committee of Dibrugarh – (opposition laughter)’ in ALAP (1939)


147 Ibid
upon the Christian 'padris' and said against them: 'The coolies who have come from Ranchi and those who are Christians are getting instructions from “Padris” not to join the Congress. I instruct those Christian coolies to demand from the Padris to give them in writing that, when they will have to leave India, they will also take those black Christians with them to Europe.'

Mall also spoke in his speech about the Enquiry Committee which was formed by the Congress ministry to enquire into the causes of the strikes in the tea gardens. He gave instruction to the labourers. ‘When the Enquiry Committee will come, you will demand that every coolie should be asked in a meeting about their grievances. If the Committee only ask the Sahibs and Babus, you will not accept such Committee’s report.’ Ramjosh Singh, who also came with Mall, did pour his venom at the capitalists and said:

You have come from other countries and now you are in trouble. Nobody looks after you. The capitalists only see their own interests. They are living in bungalows with electric light and eating many kinds of foods. You are not getting food. Their dogs are getting better food than you get.

The district officials of the government became apprehensive of seeing such developments in the vicinity of the gardens. The Deputy Commissioner of the Lakhimpur in utter frustration wrote to the Chief Secretary (Government of Assam), H. G. Denneyhey:

You will ask what then is your remedy? It is this. Let Government, instead of issuing appeals for a peaceful atmosphere, follow the example of the Government of the Punjab and publish a communiqué in which it is made plain that Government will not hesitate to have recourse to the Criminal Law Amendment Act, if necessary in dealing with the labour and other agitators who are at present disturbing the place of this district.... The effect of such a communiqué would, I believe, be immediate.  

---

148 Ibid
149 Ibid.
150 Letter by D.C. Lakhimpur district to Chief Secretary (Govt. of Assam). Confidential – D.O. No. 244.C- Dibrugarh, the 22nd June 1939 ASA
The Deputy Commissioner felt that it was the political game of the Congress and Communist Party who tried to destabilise the existing harmony between the labour and capital and he also wrote in his letter to the Chief Secretary that ‘the mischief makers Congress and Communist, would then realise for the first time that they are not as they openly boast at their meetings, the Government of this province, or able to coerce by this threats and intimidation the Government established by law at Shillong and its representative the District Officer.’

In Surma Valley also strikes occurred in the various tea gardens and most important strike occurred in the Arunaband T.E. (Cachar). In the early month of April, 1939, the labourers struck their work and they were so determined that the strike continued for forty days. In the Assam Valley also, according to the government report, Dr. Benoy Bhusan Chakravorty, ‘incited the coolies of Ledo T.E. during April 1939 to go on strike without any ground’ and ‘submitted most preposterous demands on their behalf. Subsequently he incited the coolies to illegal activities as a result where of there were several acts to violence committed by them.’

The Government took a serious notice about the rapid rise of the strikes and the Tea Garden Labour Unrest Enquiry Committee was formed with the inclusion of members like Arun Kumar Chanda, Baidyanath Mukherjee, Deveshwar Sharma, F.W. Hockenhull and a retired High Court justice. The Chairman of the Indian Tea Association, in his memorandum to the Chief Secretary of the Government of Assam, vehemently opposed the inclusion of three leaders (Deveswar Sarma, Baidyanath Mukherjee and Arun Kumar Chanda) whose sympathy, according to him, for the labourers was well known.

151 Ibid.
152 Home. Poll. Deptt. F. No. 75/3/40, Poll. NAI (PNA-Recov)
153 Memorandum by the Chairman, ITA – 17.39 to the Chief Secretary (Govt. of Assam). The memorandum got huge support from the Assam Review and Tea News (1939 July); Cited in Padmanath Barthakur : Swadhinata Ramar Sansaprasat (Dibrugarh 2006), p.195; also in P. J. Griffiths: The History of the Indian Tea Industry (London-1967), p. 384
The Committee was later dissolved due to non-cooperation of the representative of the ITA. Seeing the rapid rise of the strikes, the tea capitalist organisation like ITA formed their own policies regarding the strikes:

In the first place, when a strike occurred on a garden, an inquiry committee consisting of senior planters appointed by the local branch of the Indian Tea Association would investigate the circumstances and if a genuine grievance were found to exist, the committee would make recommendations for its immediate redress. Secondly, in the event of an unjustified strike, the factory and garden would remain closed and the manager would not discuss any question of alteration in tasks or wags until labour returned to work. Thirdly, suitable publicity would be given to all cases of this kind.\textsuperscript{154}

But the Government under Sadulla, later, said that the main reason of dissolving the Committee was the war-time problems. After repeated questions asked by members like Nirendra Nath Dev, Rabindranath Aditya and Baidyanath Mukherjee, the government replied: ‘The other consideration (besides the War) is that the Committee was suspended for a long time because one of the important parties refused to cooperate’ and the Party was none other than the ITA.

The failure of the Enquiry Committee and the failure of the Assam Tea Garden Labourers’ Freedom of Movement Bill directly signified the point that before the combined power of the colonial state and the tea capitalists, the power of the elected provincial government could not go far. But the significant effect of the Congress ruled Government was that it gave an extra-boost to the labour movement and the leaders. For the first time, the outsiders showed its zeal to make an entry into the tea gardens. All the leaders of the labour movement enrolled themselves as the members of the INC even right upto the late 1930s and they tried to mobilise the labourers in the name of the Congress because, they were convinced that it would be impossible for them to root out the influence of the Gandhi and Nehru from the minds of the common folk (both the peasantry and the labourers). A great possibility also arose when the leftist minded Congress leaders like Subhas Bose, Jawaharlal Nehru

\textsuperscript{154} Griffiths: Ibid.
visited Assam. The visit of the Socialists, Sajjad Jahir, S. S. Bathwala, Dr. Z.A. Ahmed gave an extra confidence to the latent spirit of the labour movement and the intense zeal for the popularity of the trade unions among the labourers met its partial success only in the case of the factory based workers (e.g. AOC workers union and the strike).

The period from 1931-39 was truly important for the nationalist struggle for freedom and important breakthrough did take place in the historiography of the INC. The Depression gave the ultimate jolt to start a movement, seeing the wide spread dissatisfaction of the masses against the government. The Civil Disobedience was started by taking an issue which had been normally viewed as an insignificant issue. But that issue forged the unity between the different groups to start their movement and the movement, in fact, increased the prestige and influence of Congress among the common masses. Nehru correctly felt about the significance of the movement and wrote:

In 1930 the national movement in India fitted in for a while with the growing social forces of the country and because of this a great power came to it, a sense of reality, as if it was indeed marching step by step with history. The Congress represented that national movement and this power and strength were reflected in the growth of the Congress prestige. This was something vague, incalculable, indefinable but nevertheless very much present.\textsuperscript{155}

The later truce with imperial government and again starting of the movement during its second phase and again accepting the Government of India Act 1935 and thereby its decision for election to the provincial offices all such developments gave turning point to the parliamentary politics of India in her colonial days.

In spite of severe restriction on their activities, the Congress governments in India generally and particularly in Assam, tried to take up some

\textsuperscript{155} Nehru: \textit{Op. cit.}, Pp. 280-283
measures concerning the finance. F. A. Ahmed, as a Finance Minister of the Province tried to bring up five important measures,\textsuperscript{156}

(i) The Assam Sales of Motor Spirit and Lubricant Taxation Act, 1939,
(ii) The Assam Sales Act, 1939,
(iii) The Assam Amusements and Betting Tax Act, 1939,
(iv) The Assam Excise (Amendment Act, 1939),

Perhaps, the last measure was taken up in the Assembly at the suggestion of J. Nehru who during his visit to Assam in 1937, when he wrote to the President of the APCC and there he pointed out the lacuna of not paying enough revenue by the tea plantation industry to the state treasury:

I am told that the companies owning tea gardens pay a ridiculously low rental to the State, for less than the agriculturists. Further that by showing most of their processes as the agricultural process they escape much of their income tax which they might otherwise pay. I do not know much about this but it seems to me a very unfair arrangement.\textsuperscript{157}

Despite the curious antipathy shown by the major Congress leaders towards the labour problems but some sympathetic Congress leaders like Hemchandra Barua and Omeo Kumar Das wrote important articles and showed their anger against the appalling situation prevailed in the tea gardens. Barua wrote a series of articles in the Assamese newspaper called \textit{Asomiya} (weekly) since the May 1929-1930. In the nationalist political scenario, the unanimous declaration of war against the fascists forces in Europe by the Viceroy of India and the resignation of the Congress ministry against that decision of the Viceroy brought a political stalemate. The relationship which was forged between the British colonial state and the Congress ministries in different provinces of India was subsequently curtailed. The post-1939 was particularly significant also from the stand point of the political gambling of the bourgeois Congress party and the eventual maturity of the working class organisations

\textsuperscript{156} Guha: \textit{Op. cit.}, p.233
\textsuperscript{157} Nehru’s letter to B.R. Medhi. File No.316 (PHA Record)
due to the efforts of the leftist parties like the CPI. But it also became evident that the bourgeois Congress leadership would not bear the solidarity of the workers before the disciplined form of Gandhian ways of labour strikes and the workers would not be able to organise or led their strikes without the consent of the bourgeois government. The most important saga of the period was the development of the trade unions and the leftism in the Indian politics which contributed greatly to the labour movement of India inspite of the many negative features in their methods of functioning.