CHAPTER-6

TRADE UNIONISM IN ASSAM: THE LEFT AND
THE TEA PLANTATION WORKERS

In India, 'the trade union movement attracted little notice until about 1918'. Before that year there were hardly any trade unions in the country, except the Printers' Union in Calcutta (now known as Press Employers' Association) which is said to have been founded in 1905 and the Postal Workers’ Union in Bombay (1905). The All India Trade Union Congress was formed in 1920 and the first session was held in Bombay. Lala Lajpat Rai gave a speech to colliery workers at Jharia (Bihar) in 1921: 'The final goal of the movement is supposed to be Bolshevism to be brought about eventually by what was called "Permanent Strike".'

The involvement of the nationalist leaders like Lala Lajpat Rai and C. R. Das in the rising trade union movement was a significant feature of the post First World War political situation in India. C.R. Das also presided over the third session of the AITUC which was held in Lahore (26-27 March, 1923) and gave a radical approach through his speech to the labour problems of the Colonial India where he stressed unequivocally: 'Labour represents 98% of the population of India when we consider that labour also includes the peasants. They need organisation... They are ill-fed. Their lives are long drawn struggle... Two percent population can’t win Swaraj. If it did so, I would emphatically refuse to accept such a Swaraj'; and he also remarked about the role of the middle class that ‘what might have the government and the middle class to say to the vast population of India; You will not be allowed access to knowledge and culture... If the middle class ever win Swaraj and I live to see that

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1 David Petrie: Communism in India 1924-27, edited by Mahadev Prasad Saha (Calcutta-1972); Quoted in A R.Desai and Sunil Dighe: Labour Movement in India (Documents) Vol.4, (Delhi-2004), p.142
2 Ibid., Pp. 142-143
they, it will be my lot to stand by the labourers and peasants and lead them to wrest power from the selfish classes.\textsuperscript{3}

The moderate nationalist press made a scathing criticism of the radicalism of C.R. Das and the \textit{Amrita Bazar Patrika} (28 March, 1923) commented:

The time may come when Mr. Das will be obliged to follow the advice he gives to peasants and labourers (viz. to steer clear of the Congress etc.) and we may find him perhaps the head of the labour party in India. At least that is the direction in which the wind is blowing.\textsuperscript{4}

The Indian National Congress also did take up a Labour Resolution at the Nagpur Congress session but the nationalists were not always enthusiastic to pay any serious attention to the labour problems. C.R. Das who moved a resolution at the Nagpur Congress said in his speech ‘given at the Lahore Congress that it was my misfortune to force the Labour Resolution at the Nagpur Session of the National Congress on unwilling delegates and I find it is not acted upon to this day.’\textsuperscript{5}

The attitude of other Congress leaders towards the trade unionism was always complex. The prime Congress leader, Mahatma Gandhi, always saw only the Ahmedabad mill workers and their organisation, Ahmedabad Textile Labour Association (1920) as the ideal type of trade unionism in India. Jan Breman writes:

As the most prominent member of the advisory Committee Gandhi set the agenda and saw to it that the new organization did not stray from chosen course. Gandhi would retain this pivotal position until his death.\textsuperscript{6}

In an interview given to the \textit{Bombay Chronicle} (March 24, 1929), when Gandhi was asked: ‘Comrade Saklatvala has asked you (Gandhi) to be the leader of Trade Union Movement in India. What is you answer to that call?’ Gandhi replied that he did not


\textsuperscript{4} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{5} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{6} J. Breman: \textit{The Making and Unmaking of an Industrial working class} (Delhi-2004), p. 44
consider that he was qualified for leadership and he also said in the same interview that he had his own way of organising the labourers:

Throughout my experience both in South Africa and India, I have always laid the greatest stress on the principle that labourers must evolve strength from within. Then capital will become a real servant of labour.\(^7\)

Gandhi also wrote in a letter sent to Saklatvala showing the reasons why he kept the Ahmedabad Labour Union aloof from joining in the political struggle:

Labour in India is still extremely unorganised. The labourer have no mind of their own when it comes to matters of national policy or even the general welfare of labour itself, labourers in various parts of India have no social contact and no other mental ties. It is provincial and even in the same city it is highly communal.... Leaders in different provinces have no single policy to follow. In the circumstances, an all-India union can only exist on paper. I hold it to be suicidal therefore for Ahmedabad to think of belonging to it.\(^8\)

Gandhiji’s philosophy regarding the labour affairs had always been fraught with a deep fearful sense of the workers’ propensity to take up violent methods to achieve their aims and which he thought to be totally against his principles. Gandhi believed in a self-evolutionary nature of the consciousness among the labour force, which he thought might have changed the material livelihood. Gandhi wrote hopefully about the progressive evolution thus:

The indirect result of this evolution, when, if even it becomes complete, will naturally be tremendously political. I have not therefore the remotest idea of exploiting labour or organising it for any direct political end. It will be of itself a political power of first class importance when it becomes a self existing unit. Labour must not become a pawn in the hands of the politicians on the political chessboard. It must by its sheer strength dominate the chessboard.\(^9\)

\(^7\) CWMG- Vol. XXXIII (Delhi-1994), p. 189
\(^8\) Letter to S. Sakatvala – May 10, 1927, Ibid, p. 301
\(^9\) Ibid.
In fact, Gandhi’s political philosophy regarding the workers struggle was not the exception among the nationalists. The nationalist leaders always thought of their direct or indirect connections with the labour problems as a burden upon their own political activities and they never did think of the possibility of bringing any radical thoughts among the labourers. Even some of the Congress personalities, with some socialistic leanings, also refused to be any part of the trade union movement, although, the labourers on the other hand, deeply showed their faith upon those leaders. Jawaharlal Nehru, one of the prominent leaders of the so-called left wing camp in the Congress party, when, he was elected as the President of the AITUC in 1929, expressed his discontented attitude towards the selection, thus in a letter written to his opposite candidate (D.B. Kulkarni):

...I accepted the presidency of the T.U.C. much against my will. If I had been present at Jharia on the day of election I would certainly have retired on your favour. I feel that the presidency should go to an active unionist and worker like you and not to a person like me who has not been connected with trade unionism before .... I am glad however that my period of office is coming to an end.¹⁰

This dichotomy of integrating themselves (nationalists) within the paraphernalia of the trade union politics and with their own bourgeois perspective regarding the labour affairs, had remained the enigmatic issue both for the leftist and the rightist leadership of the Congress up to the independence of the country. So, the labourers in some specific instances, had made their own efforts to achieve their demands.

The labour movement in India as well as in Assam had some peculiar characteristics. In the urban based factories,¹¹ the rule of the outsiders was strong in organising the workers but in the ‘semi-civilized’ areas, the workers took their own

¹¹ A. R. Desai writes about the growth of trade unions besides the textile mill workers organisations: ‘Trade unionism extended to other sections of the working class in railways and docks, to municipal workers, the workers in match factories, ordnance factory and tanneries, flourmills, employees of oil companies, tram-ways, bus and taxi drivers, peons, hawkers and even clerks. Between 1927-30 more than 80% of the total membership was claimed by unions having more than 200 members, where as in the earlier years membership between 100-300 was the highest. The largest membership among the registered unions was in the Railways. In 1929-30, it had a membership of 1, 85, 444 workers.’
A. R. Desai: Labour Movement in India, Vol-6 (Delhi-2003), Introduction, p. XI
initiatives against the oppression of the capitalists. In the tea plantations there was no such political twist like the bourgeois led nationalist politics. But, the plantation labourers protests were no less infrequent and the style of their unity for a common agenda which was though ill-conceived rather symbolised the elementary form of the resistance of the oppressed people against the capitalists.\textsuperscript{12} The pre-capitalist characteristics of their socio-economic set up never did become an obstacle.

The finance capital which was invested in the tea estates was largely foreign and the purpose was chiefly export oriented. The share of the indigenous capitalists was minimal. Above all, the growth of capitalism in India, (what Lenin said in the context of Russia) was largely ‘forced’ and ‘artificial’ product of foreign capital and reliant on a foreign market. But what capitalism performed in an independent country was quite different from the Indian economic set-up because of its colonial characteristics, which was ruled by the most powerful imperialist nation (Great Britain). In fact, capitalism in India during Colonial British rule failed to transform the ‘spiritual make-up of the population’ and failed also to ‘give a tremendous impetus to organisation’\textsuperscript{13} among the exploited classes. In a weak colonial economy, the workers faced huge economic strains to live and the employers’ lack of sympathy with the workers justified demands forced the workers to resort to strikes as the last weapon.

It would be quite impractical to assume that in colonial India, the workers did not show its matured form of class consciousness because of the weak structure of the capital formation unlike the fully developed economies. In fact, the truth was that the form of colonial-capitalistic exploitations had been overwhelmingly injurious to the full growth of a bourgeois culture among the workers, where in their working places the apathy of the employers towards providing the basic ‘civilised’

\textsuperscript{12} Marx was right when he observed that the contest between the capital and wage labourer started from the ‘very origin of capital’ and he referred further: ‘The masters and their workmen are unhappily in a perpetual war with each other. The invariable object of the former is to get their work done as cheaply as possible, and they do not fail to employ every artifice to this purpose, whilst the latter are equally attentive to every occasion of distressing their masters in to a compliance with higher demands.’
An Inquiry into the causes of the present High prices of provisions Pp.61-62. Author Rev. N. Nathaniel Foster; Quoted in Karl Marx: \textit{Capital- I} (Moscow-1986), p. 403

\textsuperscript{13} Quoted in Maurice Dobb: \textit{Soviet Economic Development since 1917} (Delhi-1995), Pp. 62-63
facilities was quite common. But the historians like Dipesh Chakraborty, in contrast says that the weak capital formation did become a great obstacle in the path of emergence of a fully developed working class consciousness and the pure bourgeois culture never developed in India:

In Marx's exposition of 'capital' as a category, it is quite evident that the figure of the worker involved was that of a person who could be produced only by society where the bourgeois notion of equality (before the law or the market) was ingrained in culture.... Marx thought that the logic of capital could be best deciphered only in a society where 'the notion of human equality was already acquired the fixity of a popular prejudice.'

Chakraborty has come to the conclusion in respect of the jute workers of Calcutta as well as about the whole workers (factory based) of India that 'they were largely pre-capitalist, inegalitarian which was marked by strong primordial loyalties of community language, religion, caste and kinship."

The notion of the pre-capitalist characteristics within the work-places was preserved and restructured at the initiative of the colonial rulers. The pre-capitalist characteristics of the labour force should have been deconstructed in the process of the evolution of the workers contribution to the colonial capitalist productive relations but it did never occur in India. The colonial capitalists tried to preserve those features because, they feared about the growth of radical ideas among the labour force. For instance, the colonial state and the tea-capitalists even took serious steps to separate the lower cast coolies from the 'upper caste' coolies in their

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16 Colonialism always preferred those features in order to a smooth running of their rule: 'There is, of course, nothing theoretically wrong with the notion that precapitalist modes and relations of production may continue to exist in a colonial society. But, in historical fact, colonialism does not in most cases preserve the precolonial modes of production and relations of production; it transforms and restructures them, rendering them integral parts of new colonial structure. Transformed by colonialism, these modes of production are no longer precolonial or precapitalist. In fact, in many cases what appear to be traditional elements or remnants of precapitalist modes are often creations of the colonial period.' Bipan Chandra: *Essays on Colonialism* (Delhi-2000), p. 5
respective tea estates. Even for the Chargola exodus, the colonial rulers thought that the import of 'lower caste' coolies (Chamars) and their habitation with the upper caste Hindu coolies, dissatisfied the labourers. In the context of Assam's tea plantation labourers, there was no such instance of the primordial ties or kinship or caste which did become a negative point in their culture of protests against the tea planters.

It is generally admitted that 'the economic structure of capitalistic society has grown out of the economic structure of feudal society. The dissolution of the latter set free the elements of the former'. In the context of colonial Assam, the dissolution of the former feudal set-up was brought about by the British rule and they also created colonial-capitalist nature of the economy since the beginning of the 1830s. But the workers, who worked in the tea industry since 1850s, were largely landless labourers, and they also aspired to get some land besides their work in the tea estates. The chief reason of their interests in acquiring a plot of land even after getting their jobs was that those workers were not earning a living wage to sustain their daily needs. By a crude mechanism of reducing the labourers to the slavery like conditions, the employers did not even give any chance to the poor labourers to seek job elsewhere:

On tea plantations of Assam a man gets 8d for eight hours a day a woman 6d and a child 3d; in tea factories the worker earn 9d for an eight hour working. The coolies suffer not only from this low level of wages but permanently from indebtedness to his employers in outlandish districts where he is dependent upon the shops provided by the employers for his food stuffs, fuel etc. This indebtedness, together with the isolation of the plantation, renders it difficult for him to seek employment elsewhere and this reduces him to a life of economic slavery. This treatment often borders on the inhuman and his chances of justice and redress chimerical.17

Another peculiar situation which prevailed in the industrial sectors of the colonial India, was the non-existence of the trade union culture in European controlled industries but a good number of trade unions which existed in the Indian

17 Dr. V.H. Rutherford in Modern India quoted by Hemchandra Barua in Tindiniya Asomiya- 19th Jan, 1930.
controlled industries. Bagchi writes, that ‘in industries or centers dominated by European employers, trade unions were weak’ because ‘the Employers had a greater homogeneity among themselves and did not have the need to talk the workers’ language to political purposes.’

Unlike the other factory-based workers of India, the tea garden labourers of Assam did not able to organise themselves nor did they get any external support from other agencies. During the colonial rule in Assam, the labourers were more or less quite untouched with any trade union culture right upto the 1930s. The tea garden managers were over-cautious in the entry of the outside influence into the tea gardens and they adopted strict provisions for restraining their labourers to get involve in any political agitations.

The planters community even up to the early 1930s did not think it wise enough to unionise their workers by giving free permission to the, outside leadership. During his visit to Assam with the Royal Commission on Labour in 1930, the moderate trade union leader, Diwan Chamanlal asked some important questions to the tea garden managers like Mr. D. S. Withers (Manager of Dessai and Parbattia Tea Company). Those questions relating to the prospect of the formation of the trade unions in the tea gardens reflects the planters psyche. Here is an example:

Chaman Lal: In order to create confidence in the minds of the public would it not be better that the roads on the tea estate should be thrown open to the public?
D.S. Withers: I do not think so.
Chaman Lal: I am asking you this question in connection with trade unions. It has been impossible so far to form a trade union on the tea gardens? Has anybody tried?
Chaman Lal asked without waiting for the manager’s reply, said, ‘yes, it has been tried, but the fear has always been that it is impossible because of the attitude of the employers who will not permit an outsider to come in and organize a union?’

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18 For instance, in Bombay and Ahmedabad where the Parsees and the Gujaratis dominated the industrial scenario, the unionisation of the workers was also large. But in contrast, in eastern India, where the Europeans were the prime leaders in the industrial field, the unionization of the workers was poor. In the cotton mills of Bombay in 1920s, about 42.50% of the operatives were organised in trade union. In Ahmedabad, it was 28.52% but in Calcutta, it was only 4%.  
Withers: I do not know of any one who tried to organize a trade union. We had a very unfortunate example of a man who came up here who said he was sent by an organisation of which Mr. Joshi was the president. On his word he was given facilities in every way to come forward to mix with everybody and to find out everything. But what happened! He turned out to be an undesirable man and an imposter. When Mr. Joshi was informed of this he wrote back to say that he regrets very much that the man was not sent up. How are we to know that the outsider of whom you are talking will not be of the same class. \(^{19}\)

The remarks of the manager as mentioned above has put the point clear that the workers would not get sufficient help in the formation of the trade unions without the concurrence of the tea plantation authority. The supposed volatility of the workers violent resistance frightened the tea-plantation authority. It was also conceded that ‘there is no organization representing the employed in tea estates as it is the established custom for the worker to represent his grievances to the manager’. \(^{20}\)

The ‘undesirable man’ who was sent to unite the labourers by the All India Trade Union Congress in 1928 was H.K. Sahu of Madras. Sahu visited the mines of the Assam Railway and Trading Company at Ledo and several tea gardens in Cachar. \(^{21}\) He was arrested and the Magistrate said in his judgement:

A criminal trespass into the coolie line of a tea garden in circumstances like those which are found in this case requires in my opinion, for obvious reasons an exemplary punishment. \(^{22}\)

N. M. Joshi, under whose suggestion, Sahu was sent to Assam, was a moderate kind of leader in the trade union movement of India, but he was sympathetic to the cause of the tea-plantation workers of Assam and appealed in 1921 (Sept) for the repeal of the notorious Penal Contract Act XIII of 1859.

\(^{19}\) Royal Commission on Labour in India, Assam part Vol-VI – (London-1930), p. 94
\(^{20}\) Ibid., p. 76
\(^{21}\) Dipankar Banerjee: *Labour Movement in Assam* (Delhi-2005), p.40
\(^{22}\) Quoted by Hem Chandra Barua in "Barmar Durdasha" in *Tindiniya Asomiya 1930* and reproduced in S. N. Sharma (ed.): *Tyagbir Hem Chandra Barua- Smritigrantha* (Guwahati-1971), Pp. 282-92; Cited in A.Guba: *Planter Raj to Swaraj* (Delhi-1991), f. n.76, p.188
The argument of the tea plantation authority against the unionisation of the workers was that 'our labour is not sufficiently advanced to form itself into a well organized trade union. Even in western countries when trade unions were first started in about 1894 the people were not sufficiently educated to receive them. If that was the case, then how can you deal with people here who are mostly ignorant.'

The preconceived notion that the labourers those who worked in the tea plantation industry were ignorant and so they ought to be protected and that was the view of the representatives of the tea industry in Assam. Mr. Travers, a member of the Legislative Council of Bengal wrote in the journal - *Review of India*:

Thus our labour begins the tea garden life fair and square, with no doubt unless, indeed he has applied to the agent and been given money in his country either to pay a Mahajan... A labourer can if he wills - and may do - send money to his parents almost immediately....Moreover, if he wants money for any need, such as purchase of a cow, for a marriage or a *poojah*, it is advanced to him free of interest to be recovered generally. This is the Ma-Baap system where the manager knows and cares for his people, attends to their well being and tries his best to keep them happy and contented.

*The Statesman*, which was the mouthpiece of the tea plantation industry, wrote in praise of the views of Mr. Travers thus: 'Not only interesting but faithful to facts ... the article ought to be reprinted and widely circulated as an antidote to the poison... which have recently been uttered about tea garden conditions.'

The visit of the British trade unionists, Purcell and Hallsworth and their published report regarding the appalling conditions of the tea garden labourers particularly shook the faith of the British Public upon the benevolent paternalism of the tea planters. The British trade union leader, Mr. Purcell in a speech given at the Curzon Hall, Gauhati in 1927(Dec.) said:

It was nearest approach to slavery than exists. Though the agreement system has gone, still the labour is not free. As long as he has to work for somebody, he may

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23 The Manager, Mr. Withers' reply to the question of D. Chaman Lai. Op. cit., Royal Commission-p. 94.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
change one slave driven for another. Generally speaking, the planters the Europeans have a common understanding as regard wages.\textsuperscript{27}

No doubt, 'the starting point of the development that gave rise to the wage-labourer as well as to the capitalist was the servitude of the labourer' but overall development of the capitalist forces generally never unleashed a strong force for substantial development in the colonial economy of Assam and the employers of the industry themselves had been under the surveillance of the managing agency houses, based at Calcutta, and most of the managing agency houses were registered in London.\textsuperscript{28}

The colonial state and the planters community became too rude towards the possibility of any organised form of protests among the labourers and since the strike wave of the 1920-22, the tea-planters were taking preventive measures, lest the neighbourhood political agitations jeopardise the existing relationship between the labourers and the managers. The entry of outsiders was duly regarded as the contraband in to their supposed peaceful territory:

What we object to is anybody coming to the garden and telling the labourer, you are really having a very hard time and you should agitate for more wages, why do you put up with your present conditions when you can get more in other places. By doing such things it cannot but create trouble, a position we all want to avoid.\textsuperscript{29}

In spite of the absence of the trade union culture, the plantation workers continued their protests. The demands of their protests never did change radically and it was a peculiar instance of labour militancy, where the absence of the organised trade unions never did create hurdle in the path of their protests, almost, since the inception of the industry, (particularly since the recorded evidences of the labourers' violent types of protests in the 1880s). Usually, the demands of the

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{27} Op. cit., \textit{Bamur Durdasha}, 19 January, 1930
\textsuperscript{28} The tea planters though were employed in the tea states but they had not developed any inertia for opening their own plantation. Bagchi writes: 'Indeed very few of the pioneering planters, apart from those who were involved with the early stages of the Assam Company and had managed to buy up larges amounts land suitable for tea cultivation, went to become industrialists.' Bagchi: \textit{Op. cit.}, p. 180
\textsuperscript{29} Quoted in Op. cit., Royal Commission- Evidence, Pp. 95-96
\end{footnotes}
labourers were related with unfavourable working conditions. For instance, one strike occurred in the Naharbari T.E. (Sibsagar sub-division) in 1928, where about 50 labourers struck work and they demanded a high wage. They invaded the office compound with lathis and threatened the staff with assault. Later, five coolies, the leaders of the batch were found to be responsible and they were arrested by the police and sent up under section 143, IPC. They were convicted and sentenced to pay a fine of Rs.10 each or in default one month’s rigorous imprisonment.  

The collisions occurred also due to the issues like the hoeing nirikh, working over time, and ill-treatments from the managers. Let us cite some examples:

i) About 80 Munda coolies appeared before the Deputy Commissioner of Darrang on the 5th September, 1927 and complained about the hoeing nirikh. The Deputy Commissioner asked them to approach the Manager in the first instance and persuaded them to return to the garden. On their return to the garden they at first said that they would not work until the task was reduced. They however, turn out for work next morning and the manager then granted their request and reduced the task.  

ii) There was a disturbance on Dibru-Darrang garden. The Manager of the garden was assaulted by the coolies. They alleged that they were made to work over time and were not fully paid. The offenders were tried under section 147, Indian penal code and sentenced three of them to six months’ rigorous imprisonment and six to three months rigorous punishment.  

iii) On the 16th March 1928, the new Manager of Taikrong T.E. gave one of the bungalow servants a box on the ears for work. The servant absconded. His relatives came to make enquiries about him and not finding him went up to the Manager’s compound with a number of coolies and made a disturbance. Six of the ring-leaders were arrested and released on security as a safeguard against any further disturbances.  

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30 Reports on Immigrant Labour in the Province of Assam for the year ending, the 30th June, 1928.  
31 Ibid.  
32 Ibid.  
33 Ibid.
About seven cases of rioting and disturbances occurred in the year of 1928. Though most of the protests continued only for a day but the government noticed an 'epidemic of strikes' in some districts (particularly in the Lakhimpur district). The demand for higher rate of wages created great disturbances in the tea estates. In the Rajmai T.E. (Sibsagar district), 'the whole labour force numbering about 2,000 struck work on 9th June 1927. The strike was partly due to the change in the management and partly because of strictest measurement of work and other minor alterations'.

One of the chief characteristics of the strikes of the tea garden labourers was that it lasted only for a very short period and the tea garden authority generally took help from the police and the judiciary to put down the riotious behaviour of the labourers very easily. The colonial state always gave their support to maintain the existing status quo in the tea estates. The role of the colonial state in safeguarding the interests of the expatriate capitalists was a significant factor for which the capitalists did able to expand their exploitative net over the poor Indian workers.

The tea planters did not want to let the workers inform about the visit of the Enquiry Committees or Commissions. They thought that 'if they (the management) told them a political man might have come in and we might have had strikes'. Diwan Chaman Lal asked the tea planters:

Q. Was there any discussion at all as to conveying to the workers the fact that a Labour Commission had been created to look in to the question of their conditions of labour?
A. I could not say; there have been no orders from headquarters.
Q. Some of you have said that you do not think the coolies should be accessible to outside influence which aims at organizing them into trade unions lest it should lead to strikes, and you also say that for the same reason you do not think information as to the existence of the Labour Commission should have been brought to their attention. If they are to be as carefully protected from outside influence as that because of the mere possibility of rioting or anything similar, of

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34 Reports on the Immigrant labour in the province of Assam for year ending the 30th June 1927.
which you may be afraid, how are they to get to know what legislation might exist or could be brought about for their greater protection?

A. I can't tell you. They may get it through the establishment who can all read and write English.  

The workers did not get any outside help for an organised form of struggle against the capitalist forces because both the colonial state and the tea plantation authority were not ready to grant any permission to the outside agencies, those could have helped. It was not that the labourers strikes suffered immensely due to the lack of outside help and but, the labourers on the other hand, continued their strikes, facing the ruthless oppression of the tea plantation authority.

After the strikes of early 1920s, the tea-planters tried to handle the situation tactfully and seeing the absence of any frightening strikes during the late 1920s, it was observed:

The strike and lockout as understood in industrial countries are unknown. Occasionally, the workers on the gardens refuse to work if the tasks are larger than they should be but a strike seldom lasts more than a day or so and is generally amicably settled. This does not of course refer to strikes which took place a few years ago in Assam, which were the outcome of political propaganda. Having consideration to the number of people employed in tea estates, the industry has been particularly free from strikes and this is attributed to the tactful and sympathetic handling of their labour forces by the managers.

It was very interesting to note the fact that the tea plantation authority generally blamed the illiteracy of the labourers and so they thought that the labourers were not efficient to form a trade union and they usually compared the situation with the development of the workers consciousness in the Western Europe.

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36 Ibid., p.76
37 But in the Western Europe too, state repression was quite widespread until the late nineteenth century: ‘Trade unions were commonly regarded as subversive organization and state repression was frequent (Unions in France faced illegality until 1884 in Germany until 1890.’ Tom Bottomore, (ed.): *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought* (Delhi-2000), p. 539
In the context of India in general and Assam in particular, we do not observe, so much precedence of the early formation of the trade unions. But the great change occurred after the First World War and it was duly recognised by the Royal Commission on Labour:

Prior to the winter of 1918-19, a strike was a rare occurrence in Indian industry. Strikes took place occasionally on the Railways and in other branches of industry, but to the majority of industrial workers the use of strike was probably unknown. Lacking leadership and organisation and deeply imbued with a passive outlook of life, the vast majority of industrial workers regarded the return to the village as the only alternative to the endurance of hard conditions in industry. The end of the war saw an immediate change.38

The Royal Commission analysed the pre-1917 protests of the workers as unorganised and so they used words like ‘riots’, ‘unlawful assembly’ etc. The culture of protests in some specific sectors of which the tea plantation sector was important, assumed a solid character after the economic depression of the post-First World War, when the workers had to face scarcities due to the curtailing of the concessions given to the workers, besides the wages.

Unlike the West, the development of trade union formation in India was sluggish and it has led to the rise of a belief among the labour historians of India, that the specific capitalist relation that was prevalent in India during her colonial period, might be responsible for the weak growth of the trade union led labour struggle.39

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39 Sabyasachi Bhattacharya writes: ‘The main characteristic of South Asian countries... in the colonial period was that capitalist relations were not sufficiently generalised. There was in this respect, a qualitative difference from the metropolitan areas of the world that are today called countries of the North, during the late 19th and 20th centuries, capitalist relations adequately, if not always exhaustively, defined and specified the class structure, in colonial South Asia, right up to World War II and perhaps even beyond that, pre-capitalist and capitalist organisation of economic life co-existed. The resultant stratification or class structure is inchoate, in the process of being formed, and the working class predominantly constituted an example of this incomplete transition.’ Sabyasachi Bhattacharya: *Paradigms in the Historical Approach to Labour Studies in Reading Material of the Workshop on Labour History Research Methods* (V.V.Giri National Labour Institute, NOIDA-2005), Pp. 1-2
In the political economy of Assam, the priority earned by the tea industry was the most significant and save that industry, there were no such profitable organised industries in Assam. In a report of the Chief Inspector of Factories, Bengal and Assam, it was observed that out of 591, registered factories in Assam, the tea garden factories comprised of 549.\(^{40}\) Numerically also, the deployment of the workers in the tea plantations did show a high rise but the actual number of factory workers was quite small.\(^{41}\)

The government, interestingly, recognised the fact that ‘although labour is not organized in Assam, the labour force is quick to resent anything which is regarded with or without reason as an injustice or imposition and to express that resentment by concerted action.’ In the Colonial Assam, the tea garden labourers protests always carried the possibility of a volcanic eruption, since their arrival in Assam to work as the labourers in the tea estates.\(^{42}\) The colonial state machinery as well as the tea plantation authority used the abusive term like the ‘coolie’ to describe about the wage labourer who worked in the tea industry itself showed the negligence of both the colonial state and the representatives of the industry towards their labour force. By using those terms like the ‘coolie’, the colonial authority generally tried to deny the existence of any identity amongst the workers. That matter was also raised

\(^{40}\) Op. cit., Royal Commission, p. 10

\(^{41}\) Sasanka Mohan Das, a member of the Legislative Council of Assam, in a very interesting debate, said: ‘Indian labourers are very weak and poor and the dignity of labour has not penetrated into the minds of the educated middle class and so the number is very poor indeed. France, which is three fourths of the size of Bengal and proportionately greater than Assam possesses 50 lakhs of labourers, while India with a population of three hundred million has only fifteen lakhs to her credit. And probably only five out of there fifteen lakhs can stand comparison with the workers of Europe - America in point of vigour, efficiency and self assertion. The weakness and backwardness of the Indian labour movement is traced to two causes - first the smallness of the number of labourers in India - that being in itself due to the backwardness of Indian industrialism and capitalism and secondly, the lack of compulsory, universal and the primary education in India.’ Speech by Sasanka Mohan Das in ALCP 1932. Das’s speech categorically has brought in to question the same analysis of the labour historians of India in the post independent India, regarding the negative features of the labour movement in India.

\(^{42}\) The use of the word ‘estate’ to describe the tea plantation area itself carried the label of the pre-industrial England. R. S. Neal writes: ‘The economic and social structure of this mode of production consisted of rentier landlords, capitalist tenant farmers and wage labourers. But the ‘precapitalist property relations’ declined in intensity as capitalist relations of production, including those of industrial capitalism spread.’ But the intensity of capitalist progress and production relation never occurred in Assam to revolutionise the pre capitalist premise of the economy.

during the visit of the Royal Commission on Labour to Assam and Miss Power, a member of the Commission asked:

Do you feel that the industry might gain by giving its trained some recognition of their skill by calling them by some terms which conveys a higher than that implied by the expression 'coolly'? 

To her question, Mr. T.C. Crawford who was also the Vice-Chairman of the ITA replied that 'that is a new idea'. The Chairman of the Commission also stressed the point and advised representatives of the ITA that 'you should completely eliminate the term 'coolly' from your literature and from ordinary use, if you can, throughout the tea gardens.'\textsuperscript{43} Mr. Purcell, the trade union activist of England during his visit to Assam also said in a speech delivered at the Curzon Hall, Gauhati in 1927 (22 December); "I am really sorry to find the word 'cooly' being used by the European and Indian in contempt for the tea garden labourers. You should remember they are an essential part of the mosaic of the community as anybody else."\textsuperscript{44}

The use of those terms, both by the natives and the colonial rulers amply proved that in the world of bourgeoisie, there would not be any civilised recognition of the labouring poor like the tea plantation labourers or 'ignorant' masses like the tea garden labourers. The overall composition of the colonial state and the society itself based upon the standpoint of a fiefdom where the intelligentsia and the colonial rulers tried to rule over the labourers, who had to spend their daily lives in poverty and squalor. The violent nature of the labourers had been termed as the main inherent form of their characters. In the colonial India, the state always purposefully and deliberately followed a line which determined the demands of the labourers protests as irrelevant, because their methods of protest were not in conjunction with the modern trade union led strikes:

Labelling individuals or whole social groups as 'violent' might presuppose the manipulative or at least, a partial reading of the evidence and it could serve to

\textsuperscript{43} Op. cit., Royal Commission on Labour (Evidence), p. 262
\textsuperscript{44} Quoted by Hemchandra Barua in Tindiniya Asomiya (12th January 1930)
justify measures taken by the distinct class of criminal ‘bad characters’ within the working class was sanctified by police. This loosely defined and easily generalized notion of the social threat which it harboured was, in the context of increasing working class militancy to prove increasingly convenient for the colonial state.\textsuperscript{45}

The colonial capitalist state in India always preferred to preserve the pre-capitalist formation of the society in order to continue their encroachment into the crux of the society and through the discovery of the new terms and labeling the workers as usually ‘violent’; the capitalists on the one hand tried to erase the real causes of the workers protests and on the other hand, they strengthened their hold over the ignorant workers.\textsuperscript{46}

In a weak bourgeois formation of the colonial Assamese society, the bourgeois intelligentsia’s role did not earn sufficient significance and despite, the efforts made by the philanthropists like Dwarkanath Ganguly to inform the educated Indians about the plight of the ‘cooies’, those suffered immeasurably at the hands of the tea planters. His attempt was not to arouse the class consciousness among the workers and the inherent bourgeois notion that workers were bound to be spending their lives in ignorance, did not led further to any concrete analysis of the situation. And the native bourgeoisie also thought that the ignorant ‘cooies’ must be protected under the umbrella of the native intelligentsia. The intelligentsia also played a ‘surrogate role in their relation to the working class and numerically the section was quite insignificant of the total population and further insufficiently desirable in terms of the categories of capitalism.\textsuperscript{47}

It has been emphasised by the labour historians of India with sufficient reason that ‘since the earliest days of industry, workers had to seek the assistance of agents outside the workplace for the provision of necessary, usually legal services,

\textsuperscript{45} R. Chandavarkar: \textit{Imperial Power and Popular Politics} (London -1998), p. 163
\textsuperscript{46} Marx is probably right when he has discussed about the caricature form of bourgeois development even in an advanced country thus taking different form in different societies. ‘Since bourgeois society is, moreover, only a contradictory form of development, it contains relation of earlier societies often merely in very stunted form or even in the form of travesties …’
\textsuperscript{47} K. Marx: \textit{A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy} (Moscow-1977), p. 211
\textsuperscript{47} S. Bhattacharya: \textit{Op. cit.}, p. 2
because of the costs of industrial action, to intervene on their behalf to seek redress
for their grievance and, as a corollary, to negotiate and conduct strikes but the
outsiders' role was heavily coming under surveillance of the colonial state and the tea
capitalist became over conscious in respect of the outsiders entry in to the tea gardens.

The outsiders like Sahu had to face immense difficulties when he tried
to make an entry into the tea estates and later his arrest showed how precarious the
condition had become for the outsiders. The police and the district administrators
always kept a close watch upon the labour affairs in the tea estates and in fact, it was
felt in other industrial sectors of the colonial India also, where the outsiders were kept
in strict surveillance.

The tea planters always took every possible measure to keep the
workers untouched of any outside influence and in a very interesting case, one
outsider who had himself come from the labour community, namely, Erena Telenga
was convicted for having tried to enter into the tea estate (Cinnamora T. E., Jorhat sub
division) and caused 'annoyance' to the Manager of the tea estate. The Manager in his
reply to the Royal Commission said that the alleged annoyance consisted of 'a rumour
that some people were trying to induce my workers to strike. To prevent that I wanted
to stop any outsider into my garden without informing me first'. But actually, the
'accused came for the purpose of speaking to the workers about their Deshar Katha,
the story of their own country'. Later, 'he was caught hold of by the Chowkidars and
the Mohurrie and taken to the police'. The Magistrate said in his judgment: 'That
there was no evidence or record to prove that this man was in touch with any trade
union or was sent(here) by any union'; but the magistrate did not lend any support to
the accused person, although he had no connection with any external agencies and the
judgment was declared thus:

I find that the accused entered into the Telenga line of Cinnamora T.E. at 7p.m. on
4th Aug 1928 with intent to cause annoyance to the garden authorities. I hold the

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49 For instance, B. Shiva Rao, who tried to unionise the textile mill workers in the Southern towns of the Madras
Presidency (like Madurai, Tuticorin) had to face harsh reality when the police put obstructions upon his
activities. Rao later wrote: 'The workers are so frightened and coerced that they will not come to a meeting
until after dark. I am trying to establish a Trade Union at every center but the influence of the employers is
very strong. The police seem to be on his side and labour is so plentiful that the workers are afraid of being
penalized.' Ibid., p.82
accused guilty of criminal trespass and convicted him accordingly... As a sentence of fine will not meet the requirements of the case the accused is sentenced to suffer rigorous imprisonment for a month under section 447 IPC.50

So, there was a marked disinterestedness and lack of sympathy towards the entry of the external agents in to the tea estates. The low ratio of the unionised workers in Assam was not the single phenomenon during the colonial period because in other industrial sectors of India, too, the unionisation of the workers was very slow indeed. In other industrial regions like in Bengal (Calcutta) and in Bombay in the 1920s-1940s,51 the development of the trade unions was not tremendous. The numbers certainly would be small in Assam, where formal trade unions were not organised right up to the 1940s.

There was another reason for which the trade unions took a fragile nature in the colonial India. No doubt, the repression of the employers worked as the great hindrance in the path of the healthy growth of the trade unions:

The fragility of trade union organisations, their tendency to collapse and disappear as suddenly as they formed, and their failure to entrench themselves within the framework of industrial relations were largely the consequence of the sustained attempts by employers to repress them at the point of production.52

The employers of the tea estates always took the help of the colonial state to suppress the protests of the labourers in order to humiliate the workers protests. Unlike the other factory-based strikes of colonial India, in the case of the tea plantation labourers protests, there was no such instance of importing 'blacklegs' to suppress the striking

51 B. R. Tomlison writes: 'The Calcutta factory workforce was much less unionised than was that of Bombay, no more than 4 percent of the late 1920s, as opposed to 42.5% in the Cotton industry of Bombay city.' The Economy of Modern India (Cambridge 1998), p. 125. Even as late as 1945, in Bengal, 'about 18% of workers some 47,697 of a total of 267,193 were members of any unions'. S.R. Deshpande - Report on an Enquiry into Conditions of Labour in the Jute Mill Industry of India (Delhi 1946), Pp. 6,34-5. Cited in Dipesh Chakravarty: Trade Unions in a Hierarchical Culture: The Jute Workers of Calcutta, 1920-50 in Sub. St.- III (Delhi 1999), p. 117
workers and there was also no 'strikebreakers' unlike in Bombay. The conflict of the workers usually took the form of assaults or threatening to the garden managers or his staff. The workers tried to attack their employers with *lathis* or stones. Those kinds of tactics always did not work to slow down the pace of exploitations of their employers.

Since the 1930s, some attempts were made to form trade unions in the tea gardens. Omeo Kumar Das, one of the prominent leaders of the Congress Party in Assam in a memorandum urged the government about the need of trade unions among the garden labourers. He wrote:

> The growing mass consciousness of labour throughout the world has also awakened the workers in Assam to their disabilities to the possibilities of their combination. It will not be wise on the part of the employers not to recognize the awakening or make any attempt to repress it. The Trade Union Movement has come to stay and the question now is how to direct it through proper channel. It will be unwise on the part of the employee to shut out genuine well-wishers of labour who intend to give a proper direction to this movement.\(^{53}\)

In the non-plantation sector also, some efforts were made to enlist the coal miners, the railway coach repairings, the plywood factory workers, particularly at Dibrugarh which resulted in 1934-35, the formation of the A. R. & T. Labour Union. The first president and secretary of the union were respectively, G Singh and Dr. B. Chakaravarty.\(^{54}\) Between the periods of 1938-40 about twelve unions were formed in the different industrial concerns and among these twelve unions, five were formed in the tea gardens. In the following table, the names of the unions with their head offices and date of commencement has been given.\(^{55}\)

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\(^{54}\) Dadhi Mahanta: *Asomat Communist Andolanar Janma* (Guwahati-1993), Pp. 35-36

\(^{55}\) Government’s reply to A.K. Chanda’s Question, ALAP, 1940
Table: 6.1

List of Labour Unions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Head Office</th>
<th>Date of Registration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Upper Assam Tea Company Limited Labour Union</td>
<td>Dibrugarh</td>
<td>27th April, 1939</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Rajmai Tea Company Limited Labour Union</td>
<td>Dibrugarh</td>
<td>27th April, 1939</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sylhet Cachar Cha Bagan Mazdoor Union</td>
<td>Sylhet</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greenwood Tea Company Labour Union</td>
<td>Dibrugarh</td>
<td>6th May 1939</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Makum(Assam) Tea Company Limited Labour Union</td>
<td>Margherita</td>
<td>30th May, 1939</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: A. K. Chanda’s reply in the Legislative Assembly (1940)

It was quite doubtful whether those unions had ever played any significant role in organising the workers for making any organised protest against the management. Those unions were just in name and there was no such proper function of the unions. Only in the Surma Valley, the members of the Congress Socialist Party (CSP), took some measures in the labour field and their activities were concentrated chiefly in Silchar and Sylhet. The Secretary of the Party (Surma Valley C.S.P.) wrote in a report: ‘During the period under review (1934-39) our Party Comrades had to set themselves to the task of regulating every strike of Tea Garden Labourers in proper channels wherever it had occurred in Cachar.'56 The CSP members also played an active part in guiding the labourers in the strikes, which occurred in the tea estates like Lallcherra, Mainagarh, Palainband, Cossipore, Bhanakhai of Cachar and Chatapore,

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Parbatpur and Gazipore Tea Estates of Sylhet. The number of membership of the party also showed a good figure (800). In the same report it was hopefully observed:

The establishment of the aforesaid member of labourers within a short space of time and in face of heaviest odds of adverse circumstances is quite hopeful. The Union has but settled to its work recently and it can’t be expected to attain the desired strength unless branch unions were formed in every tea estate in the valley.\(^{57}\)

There were some negative aspects also in their efforts of organising the workers. But the Party, in fact, felt the necessity of spreading their activities in the entire province of Assam and they took some steps to form the All Assam Coordination Committee though the ‘Committee failed to have any activity to its credit whatever might be the factors responsible for it be.’ The Secretary ruefully commented about the weakness of the Party thus:

We have carried an agitation on a mass basis but we have lagged behind in organising them to the same degree of propaganda made to awaken class consciousness in them and in educating them on the struggle for National Liberation.\(^{58}\)

In spite of their failures, the Congress Socialist Party in the Surma Valley even distributed handbills or leaflets as the medium of spreading the Party’s propaganda among the labourers and that issue of distributing handbills was also raised in the Legislative Assembly of Assam (1938).

The lack of the formation of trade union in post-Leninist form never did occur in the context of Assam and the organisers had to face serious stumbling block in the path of the organising the workers. The workers protests usually did slow down as soon as their demands were fulfilled or due to the repression made by the employees upon the strikers. The tempo of the strikes in the colonial period resembled

\(^{57}\) Ibid.  
\(^{58}\) Ibid.
closely, the type of radicalism which was prevalent among factory workers of England in the early stage of industrialisation, where 'as soon as the objective conditions of each crisis subsided; people seemed to slip back in to their old attitudes remarkably quickly.'\(^{59}\) After 1830s,\(^{60}\) a new kind of radicalism developed in England but in Assam, even after the development of nationalism among the peasants and the lower middle class, the same kind of radical thoughts never penetrated itself in to the midst of the garden workers. The slow growth of industrialism had been held responsible for the weak growth of the trade unions consciousness. The Colonial state's support to the industrialisation of the province was not adequate. Maulavi Abdur Rashid Choudhury, who was a member of the Legislative Council, in a very interesting speech, raised the need of a gradual industrialisation of the Country with the state support:

Sir, we are passing through a rapidly changing age, and the changes brought about during the last half a century due to many scientific discoveries and mechanical inventions and also due to the last World War (First World War) so rapid .... It is found from statistics that producing power now is fifty percent, more than the consuming power of the world. If we had our due share in this producing power in the power of manufacture, the condition of India would have been quite different than it is now... There is no rise in our producing power, there is no rise in our power of manufacture, there is no rise in our income, although our population is daily increasing. The result is that we are reduced to a state of ignorance and poverty unparalleled anywhere in the whole world.\(^{61}\)

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\(^{60}\) There was the unprecedented scale in the general unionism of 1830-4 in England and simply speaking, England was again in the verge of a new kind of revolution. E. P. Thompson writes: 'In the autumn of 1831 and in the 'days of May' Britain was within an ace of a revolution which, once commenced, might well (if we consider the simultaneous advance in co-operative and trade union thereby) have prefigured in its rapid radicalisation, the revolutions of 1848 and the Paris Commune .... The fact that revolution did not occur was due in part to the deep constitutionalism of that part of the Radical tradition of which Cobbett (urging the acceptance of half of a loaf) was the spokesman, and in part to the skill of the middle class Radicals in offering exactly that compromise which, might not be taken, but strengthen both the State and property rights against the working-class threat.'


\(^{61}\) ALCP- 1936 (March-June).
Chaudhury also discussed in his speech about the share of the indigenous population in the industrial sectors:

From the Census report in 1911, we find Sir, that the total number of people employed in industrial pursuits in India was 175 lakhs. In 1921 Census, it was reported to be 157 lakhs odd. And in the 1931 Census it was reported to be 153 lakhs odd. If the percentage is taken, we find that the percentage of people engaged in industrial concern in 1911 was 5.6 in 1921, 4.9 and in 1931, 4.4. This shows, Sir, that we, instead of making any progress in industrial matters, are going down everyday. 62

Chaudhury also cited examples of Canada and Soviet Russia where the state support made it possible to bring a huge success in the industrial sector.

The question of the prospect of a revolutionary situation in a less developed economy through the proletarian efforts much evoked controversy. 63 But in the colonial India, the picture of industrialisation showed 'the typical inverted economic development of a dependent colonial country'. 64 There were other issues of the slow growth of the trade union culture in the colonial India and the most important one was also the illiteracy of the workers for which it had been thought to be highly impossible in organising the workers.

The debate concerning the illiteracy of the workers actually centered in respect of the political education of the workers and some of the labour historians have observed that there is something fundamentally problematic about viewing

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62 Ibid.
63 Maurice Dobb has explained in the context of Russia prior to the October revolution that though the Country remained economically underdeveloped in comparison with other western European countries like England or France, but there also, 'the proportion of all workers in factories who were employed in enterprises with more than 500 workers reached the surprisingly high figure of 53%.' Maurice Dobb: Op. cit., p. 34
64 R.P. Dutt : India Today (1947), Pp.135-136; Quoted by G. Adhikari: The Question of Industrialisation of India and the Role of the National Bourgeoisie in the Independence Struggle at the Sixth World Congress of the Comintern in A.Farooqui (ed.): Remembering Dr.Gangadhar Adhikari- Selections from Writings (Delhi-2000), Pp. 278-279
organisation among the workers, simply as a matter of political education for the worker and ‘to do this is to sidestep certain issues of culture and consciousness.’

It can safely be assumed that ‘the fundamental reorientation’ of the demands of the workers of the tea gardens never did happen because there was no such ‘re-education in anti-capitalist assumptions’. The background of the workers’ violence and their protests can be assumed only from the forging of a unity among themselves in the process of their struggle against their employers. That unity-cum-consciousness was not always the negative aspect as it has been emphasised by the labour historians of the orthodox school of Marxism. Conversely the workers protests were the manifestation of the accumulated grievances of the people (tea garden labourers), because they faced ruthless exploitations at the hands of the capitalists.

**Rise of the leftist parties in Assam:**

Besides the deep connection with the world politics and the inspirations it had taken from the Russian Revolution, the left force developed in India, out of the dissatisfaction against the bourgeois led moderate nationalist politics and their (the Communists) unflinching war against the capitalistic forces.

Among the prominent leaders of the CPI in its early years, the names of Muzaffar Ahmed (Calcutta), S.A.Dange (Bombay), M.Singaruvalu Chetia

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66 Irfan Habib has defined the significance of the term ‘Left in the context of India thus: ‘What has come to be defined as the ‘Left’ in the historiography of the national movement and current political discourse is essentially the assemblage of all elements as owed allegiance to the socialist world outlook. It is an area in which Marxism exercised the dominant influence.’


67 Dr. Gangadhar Adhikari, an active worker of the Communist Party of India, has observed in a document submitted by him on the eve of the Seventh Congress (Bombay, 1964), thus about the rise of the left in India: ‘OUR PARTY CRYSTALLISED OUT of the revolutionary wing of the national liberation movement under the impact of the Russian Socialist revolution.... It is significant that Communist groups in India emerged only in Bengal, Maharashtra and Punjab, which were traditional strongholds of the extremist national movement under Lal, Bal and Pal (i.e. Lala Rajput Rai in the Punjab, Bal Gangadhar Tilak in Maharashtra and Bipin Chandra Pal in Bengal).’

(Madras) and, Ghulam Hussain (Lahore) were important. M.N. Roy, who played a controversial role later, was also one of the early founders of the Communist Party of India. The Peasants and Workers Party was established in Bengal in 1926. At the initiative of the Swarajists with leftist leanings, a journal was also published (Langal). In Bombay also, a similar Party was established bearing the same name in the next year. But the biggest feedback came from the writings of Rajani Palme Dutt, the Indian origin British Communist leader and Dutt’s ‘India Today’, and the ‘Labour Monthly’s’ ‘Notes of the Month’ chiefly acted as a catalyst for the new leaders of the Communist Party of India.68

The growth of the militant strikes in different parts of India (Jamshedpur, Bombay, Calcutta) created a havoc in the minds of the foreign Capitalists as well as in the Government and elaborate steps were taken to suppress the rising consciousness of the workers and the Trades Disputes Act69 was promulgated in the late 1920s.70 The Government took prompt action to repress the growing Communist influence among the factory workers by arresting 31 labour leaders and ‘many of them were communists’. P.C. Joshi was the youngest of the convicts – 22 years old.71

The Meerut incident (most of the 31 convicts were kept in Meerut jail) was ‘a blow aimed at not only crushing the Communists but also at isolating the rising

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68 Mohit Sen, has brilliantly analysed the impact of RPD (as it was fondly said of Rajani Palma Dutt) with certain circumspection, over the Communists of India thus: ‘He (RPD) was perhaps the most brilliant fundamentalist Communist and Marxist I have known…. He made a tremendous and perhaps, unsurpassed indictment of British Colonial rule in India, and was among those also first brought together the writings of Marx on India but inculcated a damagingly distorted approach to the freedom struggle the Congress and Gandhi.’
Mohit Sen: An Autobiography (Delhi-2007), Pp. 44-45

69 The Trades Disputes Act of April 1929 imposed a system of Tribunals, and tried to ban strikes undertaken for objects other than furtherance of a trade dispute as if designed to coerce Government and/ or inflict hardship on the community.’
Sumit Sarkar: Modern India (Delhi-2002), p. 271

70 G. Adhikari has explained behind the origin of the Act: ‘A shrewd representative of British monopoly capital in India, President of the Associated Chambers of Commerce (British) understood the significance of these developments (rising number of strikes). Speaking at the annual conference of the Chamber at Calcutta in December 1928, one Mr. James pointed to the Bolshevik danger, called for repressive action from the Viceroy who was inaugurating the session.’

71 Gargi Chakravarty: P.C. Joshi - A biography (Delhi-2007), p. 7
Communist led militant mass movement from the mainstream of the national movement.’ The trial of the Meerut convicts lasted for four years (1929-33) and heavy jail sentences were imposed but still the struggle of the labourers of Assam had not been touched with the development which occurred at the all India level. At the same time the CPI faced some tactical problems due to their commitment to the central wing of the Soviet Union’s Communist Party. A severe crisis also came with its relation to the national movement and its leaders. In the Sixth World Congress of the Comintern (1928), the Colonial thesis entitled Revolutionary Movement in the Colonies and Semi-colonies was passed and ‘the thesis served as the Marxist-Leninist guide to Communists and revolutionaries for almost two decades.’ It was a clear reformulation of the Leninist emphasis upon the role of the revolutionaries in a colonial country, by which the fight for freedom and democracy had been given utmost importance. Lenin observed that ‘in a dependent country where the fight for national independence from foreign imperialism is the central task, the fight for the national objective becomes the fight for democracy.’ But the newly formulated thesis created confusion among the Indian revolutionaries and ‘especially in the manner the analysis was presented that it could lead to sectarianism and on the basis sectarian tendencies could not be rooted out.’

The Communist Party throughout the colonial period (especially after 1920s) failed to seek out a correct path in their relationship with the Congress Party. The attitude of the Communists towards Gandhi and the Congress developed out of the analysis of RPD towards Gandhi and the Congress. Gandhi too had a total disenchantment with the Bolshevik methods of struggle: ‘Gandhi did not believe that socialism provided a path to the form of civilization that he advocated. He had a low opinion of the Bolsheviks in Soviet Russia.’ R. P. Dutt assessed Gandhi “as the ascetic defender of property, the mascot of the bourgeoisie, the general of unbroken

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72 The thesis ‘defined the national-reformist and national-revolutionary tendencies of the bourgeoisie in the national movement and carefully formulated the attitude which the proletarian party had to adopt towards the former in its struggle for hegemony in revolution.’


74 David Hardiman: *Gandhi in his time and ours* (Delhi-2003), p. 81
disasters and the Jonah of the Indian Revolution” and Mohit Sen writes that Dutt
‘literally pumped anti-Congressman in to the veins of the Indian Communists.‘\textsuperscript{75}

Gandhi’s concept and ideas about the Bolshevism grew also besides
his opposition to their methods of struggles, his disagreement with the philosophy of
communism because he thought that the communism was also a product of
materialistic civilisation\textsuperscript{76} and he expressed those things in his first text ‘Hind
Swaraj’.\textsuperscript{77}

The Communists through a wrong Party line towards the national
movement failed to give due support to the Civil Disobedience Movement (1930-34).
The Party hard-liners like B.T. Ranadive ‘denounced the existing national bourgeois
leadership’ according to the Comintern decision. P.C. Joshi writes “The historic price
for this infantile folly was the first spilt in the party during 1931...”\textsuperscript{78}

The ‘infantile folly’ which the CPI had performed towards the national
movement, later, was tried to avert but without much success. A closer relationship
with the Congress was developed between the periods of 1937-39. Jawharlal Nehru’s
radical speeches (more often influenced by the ideas of socialism) in the Congress
session and Subhas Chandra Bose’s election to the Congress Presidentship for two

\textsuperscript{75} Mohit Sen: \textit{Op. cit.}, p. 45
\textsuperscript{76} Partha Chatterjee in an excellent essay has explained about Gandhi’s inner critique of the modern
civilisation and its concepts: ‘Fundamentally, Gandhi attacks the very notions of modernity and
progress and subverts the central claim made on behalf of those notions, namely their
correspondence with a new organization of society in which the productive capacities of human
labour are multiplied several times, creating increased wealth and prosperity for all .... Gandhi
argues that far from achieving these objectives, modern civilization makes man a prisoner of his
craving for luxury and self- indulgence, releases the forces of unbridled competition and thereby
brings upon society the evils of poverty, disease, war and suffering. It is precisely, because modern
civilization looks at man as a limitless consumer and thus sets out to open the floodgates of
industrial production that it also becomes the sources of inequality, oppression and violence on a
scale hitherto unknown in history.’
Partha Chatterjee: \textit{Gandhi and the Critique of Civil Society} in \textit{Sub. St -III} (Delhi-1999),
Pp. 157-158

\textsuperscript{77} Gandhi’s \textit{Hind Swaraj} became the chief text of his later political activities: ‘In a way the impact of
\textit{Hind Swaraj} is not dissimilar to that of the \textit{Communist Manifesto}, despite the latter’s greater
reliance on a seemingly scientific argument .... Both manifestoes provide dismal portraits of a
world they felt to be self contradictory in its basic assumption and institutions, a world self-
doomed to destruction.’
Raghavan N. Iyer: \textit{The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi} (Delhi-2000), p. 30

\textsuperscript{78} P.C. Joshi: \textit{Rajani Palme Dutt and Indian Communists, in New Thinking Communist}, March 1,
times, generated a new hope among the revolutionaries of India but that too turned into a failure after the resignation and expulsion of Bose from the Congress and the further development in the international politics in the late 1930s.

Due to the peoples’ war front line as followed during the Second World War period and their stiff resistance from joining in the Quit India Movement and later also their wrong analysis of the ‘Nationality Question’ deeply embarrassed the sympathisers of the Communist Party. G. Adhikari later admitted that ‘our attitude of keeping away from the movement was both theoretically and tactically wrong’. Adhikari also analysed correctly the negative aspects of the Communist Party vis-à-vis its relation to the Congress led national movement during the eventful years of 1939-47:

Though we had corrected our attitude to the national movement and our stand on the role of the national bourgeoisie and the national leadership, we had not created the theoretical foundation for that policy by making a concrete study of the emergence and the development of the national bourgeoisie and the growth of the policy of the Congress leadership.79

The popularity of the Community Party deeply declined in that period. But the Party membership grew in spite of the crisis period of 1939-42, and the membership of the party increased from 5,000 in 1942 to 30,000 in June 1945 and the membership in the trade unions was at a quarter of a million. The Party also published ten weekly journals and its main organ, People’s War had a circulation of 25,000 to 30,000 copies.80

The growth of the formation of the leftist parties in Assam must be analysed from the background as it developed in the all-India level. But, it becomes very difficult to write about the role of the Communists in the labour front of Assam. As a whole, their impact was not such tremendous upon the large bulk of the tea plantation labourers and their penetration into the tea gardens was largely restricted by

the employers of the tea gardens. The Surma Valley branch of the Congress Socialist Party admitted frankly that in the Surma Valley, ‘they have not been able to do any substantial propaganda in organising labourers in gardens owing to the difficulty of obtaining entrance to the tea gardens.’ Tarun Sen Deka, one of the prominent Communist leaders of Assam writes that the British Capitalists did not give any permission to the political activists to enter in to the tea gardens.

There was another reason of the slow growth of the Communist Party and that was the overwhelming popularity of the Congress, which almost engulfed the politics of the province and there was no scope for the leftist leaders to propagate their views among the common folk of Assam. Also, as the Communist Party’s activities were banned throughout the period of 1934-42 by the Colonial government and so, the members of the Party only clandestinely propagated their aims and activities among its sympathisers. The colonial government justified the strong position they had taken against the Communists thus:

We have had this policy in mind for a long time and one of the advantages anticipated from the institution of the Meerut case was that it would establish the close connection between Indian Communist activities and the Communist International and prove their revolutionary aims and activities for dealing with the Indian Communist organisation under the Criminal Law Amendment Act.

In spite of those restrictions put upon the activities of the CPI, the growth of the left force in Assam was not less significant. As early as 1926, in the

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81 F.R. for Assam for the First Half of April 1938, Political Department (Home Poll.) No.18/4/38 NAL (PH-A-361)
82 Tarun Sen Deka: *Mukti Sangramar Adharat Jivan Katha* (Guwahati- 1993), p. 76
83 The Viceroy also mentioned about the necessity of taking such drastic step reiterating in a note written to the Secretary of State citing the famous judgment delivered by the High Court, where it was stated: ‘The members of the Communist Party of India had undoubtedly formed a revolutionary party with the professed object of overthrowing the present order of society and bringing about the complete independence of India by means of armed uprising of the proletariat and that this was not a distant but immediate object.’ Telegram R. No. 1462, dated 20th June 1934- From Viceroy to Secretary of State for India, London- (Extract taken from a Confidential file of D.C. Kamrup- 1935) D.O.F. 718154- Poll. Govt. of India- Home Dept. (Poll)- Simla- 1934
Pandu Congress, the prominent Communists from Bengal, like Bhupesh Chandra Dutta, presided over a large meeting simultaneously with the Congress session where leftist minded people gathered. Dutta characterised the Congress led movement as the 'elite class' movement and those who took leadership of the Congress, he called them as 'the armchair politicians.' In the Pandu Congress session (Gauhati), 'the CPI issued a manifesto' and 'unlike the previous manifesto issued for the Congress sessions at Ahmedabad (1921), Gaya (1922) and Belgaum (1924), the present manifesto was the first to be issued in the name of the 'Communist Party of India'. The manifesto was printed in London and Muzaffar Ahmed later recalled that 'Abdul Halim made arrangements for the distribution in Gauhati.'

A slow pace of development of the leftist thoughts occurred among the students of the Cotton College and, the socialist literature also became popular. In 1928, the Alliance Fraternal, a Communist front organisation issued a pamphlet and copies of the pamphlet were discovered in the Hostels of the premier institution of Assam, Cotton College. In the Brahmaputra Valley, the spread of the Communist influence was sluggish in comparison with its sister valley (Surma Valley). The left parties made their belated appearance in the Brahmaputra Valley only after late 1930s.

After the signing of the Gandhi-Irwin Pact (March 1931), the urban youth of the Surma Valley had become disillusioned with the Congress led national movement. The youth group called as the 'Tarun Sangha' made also armed robberies to collect fund. About the role of the Tarun Sangha, it has been observed: 'Innumerable mail robberies including the Tinsukia Mail Robbery, robberies in the houses of luxurious money lenders and 'execution' of police personnel, responsible for torturing Satyagrahis followed.' Later, 'some of the members of the Tarun Sangha, gave up the terrorist method of struggle and accepted scientific socialism through their erstwhile colleague in Calcutta'. Among the prominent leaders of the
'Sangha', the names of Chitta Das, Chanchal Sarma, Dinesh Chaudhuri, Rabi Das, Karunasindhu Roy etc were important.

In the Surma Valley, the branch of the Congress Socialist Party which was formed after 1934, held its third session of the Party at the Sunamganj Town Hall (1939-27-28 July). The Socialist leader Sajjad Zaheer gave a radical speech as the President of the third session of the C.S.P., (Surma Valley branch). Zaheer explained in his speech:

The capitalism had in one hand verged in to Imperialism leading the formation of imperialist state, and on the other hand employment and degeneration in the working class and the peasantry had become rampant as an act of shameless exploitation by the capitalists.... Lastly he urged the formation of Trade Unions and Labourers' Association all over the country.88

S.S. Batliwala, the socialist leader from Bombay also arrived at Silchar and in a speech he urged the members of the Party to call for a general strike.89

In the Brahmaputra Valley also, the hold of the Congress Socialist Party had become quite strong after late 1930s among the leftist followers. The provincial conference of the Party was held at Golaghat (Sibsagar district) in 1940 under the Presidentship of Somnath Lahiri, the veteran Communist leader and one of the pioneers of trade union movement.

The visit of the Congress leaders like Bose and Nehru, particularly inspired the sympathisers of the leftist parties. In 1938, Subhas Bose, who was also the President of the INC during that period, visited the Surma Valley districts and a meeting which was held at Silchar, Bose said about the tea garden labourers that 'he had heard stories of oppression in tea garden labourers by their masters, he did not know if these stories were true but it was the case that most of the managers lived in a style which even the Viceroy could not afford.'90 Jawaharlal Nehru who wrote about

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88 Abstract of Intelligence-Assam Police, 1939-1941, File No. 16 (PHA Record)
89 F.R. for Assam for the first half of March 1938—Home Poll No. 18/13/138 NAI(PHA-Re
90 F.R. for Assam for the first half of December 1937. Home Poll 18/12/1937 NAI(PHA-Re

the labour system in Assam in *The Discovery of India*,91 citing the report of Purcell and Hallsworth, came to Assam in 1937, but according to the official report 'the tour of the Pandit’s (Nehru) was moderate, apart from the not unfamiliar feature of ascribing most of India’s ills to the malign influence of British imperialism. The Pandit also visited European club at Jorhat and the European Oil Company at Digboi, where relations were reported to have been friendly.'92 Nehru’s visit particularly made a deep impact upon the Congress activities and his visit only made an indirect but forceful influence upon the members of the leftist parties.

In the Brahmaputra Valley, the Communist group was constituted and the nucleus of the future Communist party in the Brahmaputra Valley came in to being in 1939 with the formation of a Communist group with seven members (Jadu Saikia, Nilimoni Barthakur, Dr. Benoy Chakraborty, Dhiren Dutta, Pabitra Roy, Jagannath Bhattacharya and Bishnu Bora.93

The students of Assam did not also lag behind in emulating the examples of the senior leftists and in 1939 at Jorhat, a conference was held and where Mansur Habib, a prominent Communist leader of Bengal and Bishwanath Mukherjee, Joint Secretary of the AISF also attended. Tulsiarayan Sarma, who was one of the founders of the J.B.College at Jorhat also showed his sympathy and encouraged his students like Dadhi Mahanta, Bishnu Bora to form an active cell of the AISF in Assam. Humayan Kabir presided over the conference (1939 April).94

Saumen Tagore, a Trotskyte, who also, came to Gauhati and under his inspiration, the Communist League was established. Sudhamay Dasgupta, a Bengal revolutionary was put in charge of the organisation in Assam. During the same period,

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91 Nehru discussed the plight of the Indian workers those who were employed in the textile mills, coal mines and the tea plantation labourers of Assam (though very briefly) but he was not going to the extent of organising the workers under the banner of the vanguard party. He gave utmost importance only at the arrival of Gandhi in the Indian political scenario which Nehru thought as the great factor of getting mass support by the INC for the national movement. He wrote eloquently of Gandhi: 'He (Gandhi) was like a powerful current of fresh air that made us stretch ourselves and take deep breaths; like a beam of light that pierced the darkness and remove the scales from our eyes; like a whirlwind that upset many things, but most of all the working of people’s minds.'

J. Nehru: *The Discovery of India* (Delhi-2002), Pp. 357-358


a branch of the Forward Bloc was also opened in Assam with the active cooperation of leaders like Devendra Nath Sarma. In the Surma valley also, the Communist influence grew after some of their leaders' contact with the leaders of Calcutta. A branch of the Party was established with leaders like Barin Dutta, D. Dasgupta etc. in 1938.

The first provincial conference of the Communist Party was held in Golaghat in 1943 and 'the Conference elected the Assam Valley District Committee under Bengal provincial Committee of CPI with Jadu Saikia as Secretary'. The Communist League, which transformed itself into the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCPI) in the early 1940s, took active role in popularising Marxist ideology chiefly among the tribal peasants. To popularise Marxism among the intellectuals of Assam, the group also established a publishing concern namely, 'Pragati Prakash Bhawan'.

The Party also brought into its fold, the Congress leaders but like Kedarnath Goswami, who was the president of the Lakhimpur District Congress Committee but he later renounced his Congress connection, and established an organisation called, Krishak Banuar Panchayat. Haridas Deka, a close companion of Goswami says that K. N. Goswami and along with another leftist leader, Nilomoni Barthakur were compelled to resign from the Congress posts due to their sympathy and active involvement in the labour affairs. At that time, the D. C. C. of Dibrugarh was controlled by the local Assamese tea planters. Goswami also worked as the editor of the Panchayat.

During the Digboi Oil Workers strike (1939), the Communists were very active in leading the strike and due to their efforts to spread radical ideas in that area, the leaders like Sudhindra Pramanik, Dr. Binoy Chakraborty, Nilamoni Barthakur, Sadhu Singh, K.N. Pradhan and Jadu Bhuyan were branded as Communists by the Bardoloi ministry and were either arrested, interned or externed.

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95 Ibid.
98 Haridas Deka's article in Jaykanta Sarma (ed): Kedarnath Goswami (Guwahati-1997), Pp. 22-23
from Assam. In the meanwhile, in the Surma Valley tea garden, labour unions were formed in Maulavi Bazar and in Karimganj sub-division of the Sylhet district.

After the devastating famine of Bengal in 1943, the Central Cultural Squad of the CPI, was organised by the General Secretary of the Party, P.C. Joshi to raise funds for famine victims and the 'Cultural Squad, with its songs on freedom, patriotism, hunger as well as a play on the Bengal famine, toured the entire country. The campaign through this Cultural Squad helped the party reach out to the masses.' The movement was named with the slogan Bhooka Hai Bangal. With the formation of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) in May 1943 and its simultaneous efforts to take the hunger and famine of Bengal with its emphasis and with its aim of reviving the folk art of India, the branch of IPTA was also opened in Assam, first at Sylhet and later also at Shillong. Hemango Biswas, became the leading organiser of the People’s Theatre Association in Assam. ‘The IPTA through its technique of shadow play brought to light’, the heroes of the anti-British uprisings and ‘leading artists from Assam, like Jyotiprasad Agarwalla and Bishnu Rabha also joined in the IPTA.’

After the rupture of the CPI with the Congress, for which the Congress leaders like Nehru ‘bitterly criticised’ the Communists for ‘their role during the 1942 revolution’ and also in due course, the members of the CPI were suspended from the AICC and thus ‘ending close to two decades of a fruitful relationship.’ In Assam also, the Communist Party members were despised as agents of the British imperialism and in some places the Communist Party members were attacked physically. In a Communist Party camp at Golaghat, some local Congress leaders instigated a group of students to attack the members of the camp and in that attack; two comrades of the party, Prasanta Sanyal and Jadu Saikia got severe injuries.

The Communist Party failed to make any deep inroad into the tea gardens even during the eventful period of 1940s, and only after the end of the Second

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99 Ibid.
100 Gargi Chakraborty: Op. cit., p.32
World War, they tried to make desperate attempt to organise the tea gardens workers of Assam.\textsuperscript{104} Due to weak Party organisation, and their ambivalent role during the Quit India Movement, they did not earn much sympathy from the workers and the peasants and from the provincial leaders of the Congress Party. The British Colonial government and the employers of the tea industry took the opportunity of not to give any permission to the Party (CPI) members to make an entry into the tea estates. The theoretical line was not clear among the party members about there exact duties and responsibilities in respect of the war against imperialism. Uma Sharma, a member of the RCPI in Assam, later wrote in self retrospection: ‘They (Communist) knew that there must be an all-round struggle against British imperialism but it was beyond their thought that who would lead that struggle and who would guide their tactics in that struggle.’\textsuperscript{105}

Although, the members of the Party tried to propagate their antipathy against the bourgeois leadership of the INC but it became an Herculean task for the Party to reduce the ideological impact of the Congress and Gandhi from the common public of Assam.\textsuperscript{106} The Communist Party members faced insurmountable hurdles in the path of spreading the Party’s view points among the indigenous population.

The theoretical aspects of the Marxism was not so strong among the members of the Party in the early stage of its formation because of the heavy proscription of Communist minded literature during the Colonial period in Assam. For instance, save the Marx’s \textit{Capital-III}, other volumes of the \textit{Capital} (I & II) were unavailable in Assam.\textsuperscript{107} The Radical Institute was established at Panbazar (Gauhati) with the active cooperation from the people like Upen Sarma, an advocate of Gauhati, Deven Sarma, who was expelled from the Congress, Devanchu Sengupta, manager of a small bank of Gauhati and other young members like Haren Kalita, Haridas Deka, Gokul Medhi etc.\textsuperscript{108} The Institute played a significant role in influencing the young

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{104} Police Intelligence Report.1947. File No.69 (PHA Report)
\item \textsuperscript{105} Uma Sarma: \textit{Bai Bai Buli Bhogari Parile} (Guwahati-1989), p. 90
\item \textsuperscript{106} Tarun Sen Deka: \textit{Op. cit.}, p. 81
\item \textsuperscript{107} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 43
\item \textsuperscript{108} Uma Sarma: \textit{Op. cit.}, p. 55
\end{itemize}
minds of the educated persons.\textsuperscript{109} When the official ban over the CPI was lifted after 1942, the Party office was opened in Gauhati and some students with leftist leanings also went to the office.\textsuperscript{110}

There was another reason for which the CPI or the leftist parties did not able to expand their ideological and political influence among the people of Assam and especially among the workers. The Party members were facing deep financial crisis in their personal life, when they were busy in propagating the Party principles, and out of compulsion, they also took up independent business venture or accepting jobs in a private banking concern or doing service as school teachers to run their families. For instance, Uma Sharma worked as a manager in the ‘Indian National Bank Limited’ to survive\textsuperscript{111} and Tanushyam Goswami,\textsuperscript{112} a local level Communist Party member ended up his career as the Headmaster of a lower primary school in the Sibsagar district. Even, Jadu Nath Bhuyan, the Joint Secretary of the Digboi Labour Union, who played a significant role during the Digboi Oil Workers strike, was reported to join as an agent of the International Provident Insurance Company.\textsuperscript{113} Jagannath Bhattacharya, who was the first member from Assam to join in the Congress Socialist party, later joined as a teacher in the Amguri School, Amguri (Sibsagar district).\textsuperscript{114} There are ample examples of the Communist leaders (at the international level also), those faced personal problems, but followed the Party line.\textsuperscript{115}

\textsuperscript{109} Amalendu Guha writes about the Radical Institute that ‘the Institute played a significant role in drawing the cream of Assamese students towards Marxism and the broad front of “left” nationalism.’


\textsuperscript{110} The Communist Party’s office at Panbazar became the ideal ground for discussing the political problems of that time and some bright students of the Cotton College like Gaurishankar Bhattacharya, Bhabananda Dutta, Amalendu Guha also went to the office for political discussions with the Party leaders.


\textsuperscript{111} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 161

\textsuperscript{112} Tanushyam Goswami who was an active member of the Party and he played a great role during the Quit India movement and due to his underground revolutionary activities, he was immortalised in the award winning Assamese novel ‘Mritunjay’ by Birendrakumar Bhattacharya.


\textsuperscript{113} Abstract of Intelligence- Assam Police (1939) (PHA Record)

\textsuperscript{114} P. Mishra: \textit{Op. cit.}

\textsuperscript{115} For the strict Party regulation during Stalin’s regime and effects of the orders from Moscow- See- Eric Hobsbawm- \textit{Interesting Times (Autobiography)} (London 2005)
It would be too naive to opine that such personal problems did slow down their revolutionary zeal but on the other hand, it was also true that the moral effects of such financial problems upon their activities were also important. Most of the members of the Party were coming from the lower middle class background and they did not able to earn sufficient financial support from their homes. Also, the Party faced crisis due to the shortage of fund to implement all programmes of the party. Interestingly, some private business firms helped the workers of the party in some specific areas of Assam.\footnote{Mishra mentioned such a firm in Cachar G.B.S. He wrote: ‘The owner of the firm extended unstinted help to Students Federation, Trade Unions, Communist party and anything that was good and progressive.’ P. Mishra: \textit{Op. cit}}

The funding of a revolutionary party, like the Communist Party during its revolutionary struggle period to sustain its political activities was also an important factor for a smooth and unproblematic function of the Party. Even, Gandhi sought help from the capitalists, like Birla to sustain the programme of the Congress in difficult hours. The same problem was also faced by Russian revolutionaries.\footnote{Lenin went ahead with the expropriations or ‘exes’ which meant armed robberies of banks. Both Mensheviks and Bolshevists criticised Lenin for that step. Ironically, Stalin was one of the Chief organisers of the ‘Exes’. In Russia also rich sympathizers like ‘Auntie’ Kalenykova who financed the party or the textile tycoon, S.T. Morozov, a pro-Bolshevik. Morozov’s nephew, N.P. Sehimdt left his estates to the Bolsheviks. Still more finances were urgently needed. So, Lenin goes ahead with the expropriators or ‘Exes’ armed robberies of banks. Both Mensheviks and Bolshevists criticized Lenin at the Stockholm and London Congress for the armed robberies of banks. Lenin said nothing. He only chuckled with somewhat a cryptic expression. Richard Appignaarsi and Oscar Zarate: \textit{Introducing Lenin and the Russian Revolution} (U.K.-1997), Pp. 100-101}

In spite of those shortcomings, the chief reasons which terribly weakened the hold of the Communist Party among both the workers and the peasants was their wrong understandings about the exact role of the Congress and its leaders regarding the national movement.\footnote{The debates and the political rivalry between the INC and the CPI have been discussed in the later chapters (particularly chapters 5th and 7th) of the dissertation.} The bitter opposition and repressive policies of the colonial government and the lack of active support from the premier leaders of the Congress Party much weakened the Party’s base and brought negative aspects to its programme. Even, Gandhi was indifferent to the claims of the Communists regarding the political role of the CPI in the national movement, and as he was totally in opposition to the Communists’ methods of struggle, he could not believe that a
parallel political organisation, outside the INC would be feasible enough for the liberation of the Indian nation.\textsuperscript{119} Perhaps, what was desirable for the Communist Party, a systematic exposure of the whole system of capitalism before the workers and peasants; and in a colonial country like India, where the state played the omnipotent role in the negotiation and repression in any eventual rise of the conflicts, only the resistance by organising workers would not have succeeded before the potent powers of the representatives of the colonial-capitalist regime.\textsuperscript{120} But, in India as well as in the context of Assam, this had never happened and there was no such systematic exposure of the capitalistic forces before the workers and the peasants.

The tea planters did not give much emphasis in the need for organising the workers, even for some petty purposes. Instead of the formation of trade unions, they emphasised before the members of the Royal Commission on Labour, that there should be a movement for starting co-operative societies. One of the representatives of the tea industry replied:

\begin{quote}
 If my workers came to me and said, ‘we want to organise co-operative stores or a co-operative bank or anything of that sort’, we would only be too glad to give them all possible help.\textsuperscript{121}
\end{quote}

Perhaps, the idea of the co-operative movement developed among the employers in the tea industry out of its close resemblance of the co-operative movement which developed in England in the early part of the 19th century.\textsuperscript{122}

\textsuperscript{119} ‘During a talk with Prof. Ranga, Gandhiji ruled out the necessity of a parallel, independent, class organization, outside Congress and he appealed to those who indulged in such activity to leave the Congress as soon as possible.’

\textsuperscript{120} Lenin emphasised that point succinctly in a letter written to his friend Maxim Gorky thus: ‘Resistance to Colonial policy and international plunder by means of organising the proletariat struggle, does not retard the development of capitalism but accelerates it, forcing it to resort to more civilised, technically higher methods of capitalism. There is capitalism and capitalism…. the more we expose capitalism before the workers for its greed and cruelty, the more difficult is it for capitalism of the first order to persist, the more surely is it bound to pass in to capitalism of the second order. And this, just suits us, this just suits the proletariat.’

\textsuperscript{121} Op. cit., Royal Commission (Evidence), p. 94

\textsuperscript{122} Harold Perkin: \textit{The Birth of Class} in R.S. Neale (ed.): \textit{Op. cit.}, p. 179
But at last, the unions were formed among the garden labourers since 1947 when India got its independence from the Colonial rule and the preponderance of the trade unions like the INTUC came to the horizon and the overwhelming power of the INC was crucial in the functions of the INTUC.

The eventual birth of the INTUC was the result of the gradual evolution of the policy which had been followed by the INC against the prospect of labour mobilisation against the colonial capitalist system. The INC had their own motives behind their controlling of the labour in the post Second World War phase and they had a very pragmatic perception about the strength of the labour:

...the Congress leadership was not aiming for the despotism of capital but for wresting initiative away from labour and placing it with the state instead. Labour could not be trusted with the power to articulate and fight for its own interests, not so much because the party was anti-labour but because the latter was, in the eyes of Congress, not yet mature enough to take a sufficiently balanced view of the situation. Its demands would thus have to be tempered by the hand of the state.\(^\text{123}\)

The Labour legislations such as the Industrial Disputes Act of 1947 was not exceptional from the BIDA of 1939. Those legislative attempts were made in order to curtail the independent spirit of the labour forced and in Assam, also, the case was not different and industrial truce was established with the tea capitalists’ organisation, the ITA with the active support of the Assam’s Premier, Gopinath Bardoloi.\(^\text{124}\) The constitution of the INTUC discouraged any sudden rise of strikes and ‘with the

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\(^{123}\) Vivek Chibber: Locked in Place- State-Building and Late Industrialization in India (Delhi-2004), p. 122

\(^{124}\) Robin Kakaiti, from the INTUC (Assam branch) gave promise that “the speeches made by his labour workers would be directed solely to the purpose of organising labour for the eventual introduction of Trade Unions, and would contain no material of any subversive nature that might upset the present relations between management and labour.” ITA circular to Garden Managers, 21 July 1947 in Guha: *Op. cit.*, Appendix-12, p. 352
formation of the INTUC and the split in the labour movement, the threat of strikes and
direct action rapidly receded from the industrial scene."125

So the labour movement in India as well as in Assam was moulded
according to the needs of the bourgeois political party and the independent form of the
workers protests was flatly denied.

125 The INTUC’s constitution particularly stressed: “Every affiliated organization shall offer to submit
to arbitration every industrial dispute in which a settlement is not reached by negotiation and shall
not sanction or support a strike unless avenues of a settlement have been exhausted and a majority
of its members vote by ballot in favour of strike.”
Quoted in “Postwar Developments in the Indian Labour Movement”, Report # 5 by Office of
Intelligence Research, U. S. Department of State; Quoted Vivek Chibber: Op. cit., notes-33,