CHAPTER-7

TEA-PLANTATION WORKERS STRUGGLE: THE FINAL PHASE, 1939-47

The war in the European front started by the Nazi Germany and the joining of the supreme colonial powers like the Great Britain in the Second World War, singularly changed the whole World Panorama. The effects of the Second World War upon the Indian political scenario, was simply tremendous. Hitherto, a relationship was forged between the provincial Congress Ministries and the British governors, but that relationship came to an abrupt end after the colonial British Government’s unanimous decision of providing full war time support to the efforts of the imperial government in London. Lord Linlithgow, the erstwhile Viceroy of India, took the ‘fateful step’ without any consultation with the representatives of the Indian public opinion, which meant obviously the prime political party in India; namely the Indian National Congress. The Viceroy used his reserved powers fully to justify his preemptive action regarding the issue of India’s participation in the War. And another reason of using his power regarding the India’s participation in the War was that the ‘question of war and peace for India were still matters that constitutionally lay solely in the hands of British rulers, so that once Britain had gone to war with Germany it was his duty on his own authority to declare that India was at war with Germany too’.  

The Congress ministries resignation and the constitutional stalemate:

What definitely endangered the relationship of the Congress with the colonial government was the fact that the Indian nationalist leaders would not help the government without the colonial government’s offer of giving real sovereignty to the Indian people. This was a complex issue which ultimately provoked both the counterparts

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1 D.A. Low: Britain and Indian Nationalism (Delhi-1999), p. 298
to adopt a non-negotiable position. The Congress regarded the war as the imperial war and Jawaharlal Nehru, thus, thus echoed the sentiment of the average Indians:

War was declared in Europe and immediately the Viceroy of India announced that India was also at war. One man and he a foreigner and a representative of a hated system, could plunge four hundred millions of human being into war without the slightest reference to them, there was something fundamentally wrong and rather in a system under which the fate of these millions could be decided in this way.$^2$

The initial procrastination of the Indian political leadership later definitely took a shape of non-cooperation with the imperial government. In the very beginning, the provincial Congress led governments decided to resign as per the decision of the High Command of the INC. The ministry of Gopinath Bardoloi, also, submitted the resignation by November 1939. Gandhi urged the Congress ministers to show the ‘hollowness’ of autonomy by giving resignations.$^3$ But many were reluctant to offer their voluntary resignation and ‘some were of opinion that instead of resigning they should carry on and thus invite dismissal by the Governor.$^4$

The controversy that Gopinath Bardoloi was the last Chief Minister among the Congress ministers, who had submitted the resignation according to the decision of the Congress Working Committee (Wardha, 12 October) is rather frivolous.$^5$ Bardoloi also, himself wrote in his letter to Sardar Patel, “…. Our sitting of the Assembly is fixed for the 30th November. It is absurd to think that we shall be waiting till then… you must therefore allow us to tender our resignation without the resolution passed in the

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$^2$ J. Nehru: *The Discovery of India* (Delhi-2002) p. 298

$^3$ Harijan 18 November 1939, CWMG 70, p. 344; Quoted in Low *Op. cit. Britain*, p. 301


$^5$ Even Gandhi treated the case of the Assam Congress Ministry as a ‘special case’ and Gandhi later said that Bardoloi had made a mistake by quitting: ‘Although I was the author of that scheme of boycott, I said Assam should not come out, if it feels like it. But Assam did come out. It was wrong.’

Assembly." The matter of resignation was taken up by the Congress Working Committee, giving its due preponderance to the war-aims of the imperial government and stiff opposition of the Congress leaders towards the policy of the colonial government to declare India's participation at the war without giving importance to the Indian public opinion.

Also, the Congress provincial ministries as a whole did not understand fully the international situation and they were more concerned with the provincial issues and even the Bardoloi ministry had embroiled itself in the labour troubles. It was very ironical that the Defense of India Rules was openly used in the labour-troubled areas to put down any possible occurrence after the strike in Digboi. The Congress ministry did not show any pro-active labour policy to solve the labour problems and they were earnestly co-operating with the colonial officials in putting a stumbling block before the mobilization of the labourers. The prejudicial attitude of the provincial Congress government towards the labour cause and their failure to adopt any radical measure in respect of the workers livelihood had put an ignominious blame upon the record of the activities of the Congress ministries.

The provincial Congress ministries during their rule, gave more concern towards the maintenance of the existing relation between the labour and capital and in the Chapter-5, it has been described about the diabolical role of the Congress ministries in labour affairs and certainly, "The ministries increasingly faced the problems of alienation of Workers, Kisans and all left elements within the party, while not really pleasing landlords or business groups…"

There were some obvious reasons which compelled the Congress party to adopt a stringent opposition against the colonial government but some of their leaders were not thinking of severing the cooperation with the colonial state. They hoped that

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7 Sumit Sarkar: Modern India (Delhi-2002), p. 375
despite the ‘tactless obstinacy’ of the Viceroy, a way out would be emerged from the fiasco. Nehru, the most conscious of the Congress leaders about the international politics but, also, reiterated the demand of a national government in spite of his personal desire to help ‘in the prosecution of the war’ and said:

Congress wanted a clear declaration that (India) should be free to determine her own destinies after the war... (that in the meanwhile) the two countries (should) fight the war together as equal partners (which in turn meant) that India should be... free to determine the extent of her war effort... 

The Congress Working Committee also in 1939 (14th Sept.) clearly pointed out:

Cooperation must be between equals by mutual consent for a cause which both consider to be worthy. The people of India, in the recent past, faced grave risks and willingly made great sacrifices to secure their own freedom and establish a free democratic state in India and their sympathy is entirely on the side of democracy and freedom. But India cannot associate herself in war said to be for democratic freedom when that very freedom is denied to her and such limited freedom as she possesses taken away from her.

But the British government replied negatively to the offer, put forward by the Congress and the imperial government after several discussions with Lord Zetland, then, the Secretary of State for India, and Winston Churchill, the First Lord of the Admiralty ‘decided to create a “consultative committee” of Indians to assist the Viceroy in holding India in subjection and promoting the prosecution of the war’. This declaration ‘led to the resignation of all the Congress ministries in Oct. 1939.’

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9 Nehru Op.cit.: The Discovery, p. 42
10 R.P.Dutt: India Today (Calcutta- 1997), P. 553; and also in Johannes H. Voight Co-operation or Confrontation? War and Congress Politics 1939-42 in D.A. Low (ed.): Congress and the Raj (Delhi-2006) p. 353
11 Dutt Ibid, p. 554
So, the decision of resignation came only after the negotiation with the imperial authority failed to get any positive response. Even the offer of negotiation and hope for compromise without sacrificing the issue of the national government continued right up to August, 1942.

After the initial failure of getting any positive reply from the British, the Congress again made an abortive effort to win the heart of the imperial government by making a fresh bid of offer of cooperation in the war effort if the imperial government would see to the justification of the Indian peoples’ demand for freedom and the formation of a national government. Nehru analysed the position of the Congress during that crucial period thus:

It was no easy matter for the Congress to put forward this proposal after all its past declarations and experiences. It was felt that a national government built up and circumscribed in this way would be ineffective and rather helpless. There was considerable opposition in Congress circles and it was only after much difficult and anxious thinking that I brought myself round to agree to it. I agreed chiefly because of large international considerations, and my desire that, if it was at all honourably possible, we should identify ourselves completely with the struggle against fascism and nazism.\(^\text{12}\)

Later, the voting pattern showed ‘an explicit approval of the offer which undeniably ignored the Gandhian from of non-violence struggle in respect of the country’s defense. The voting showed 91 to 63 for the rejection of non-violence and 95 to 47 for the offer of conditional co-operation’.\(^\text{13}\)

But that offer was again turned down by the British government in their reply to the Congress offer and said that ‘the government “could not contemplate transfer of their present responsibilities for the peace and welfare of India to any system of

\(^{12}\) Nehru: \textit{Op.cit.}, \textit{The Discovery} p. 436

\(^{13}\) Dutt: \textit{Op.cit.}, p. 555
government whose authority is directly denied by large and powerful elements in India’s national life” i.e. that the Muslim league and Princes should be empowered to veto the formation of any Indian national Government.14

Gandhi, desperately, hoped for a settlement but the imperial government, as always was reluctant to grant the demands of the Congress and so the individual civil disobedience was started since Oct. 1940. One conscious reader of the Indian national movement says about the main issue of the movement: ‘It was to be no struggle for freedom but a symbolic Satyagraha for asserting the right to free speech.’15

In Assam, Gopinath Bardoloi offered the individual Satyagraha and he had to offer ‘Satyagraha’ twice to qualify for a jail term.16 Jadav Prasad Chaliha, Kuladhar Chaliha were not enthusiastic of joining in the Individual Civil Disobedience movement, and they decided to refrain themselves from taking part in the movement.17 All total, 334 Satyagrahies were sent to the jail by 31st May 1941. By the end of December 1941, even at the all India level, the movement lost its fervour among the people and the figure of arrested persons reached at 20,000.18 The movement ‘was really in the nature of a great moral protest.’ Lord Linlithgow faced no problem in obfuscating the demands of the civil disobedience movement.

The war in the eastern frontier and the dilemmas before the colonial state:

During the early 1940s, the course of the war changed rapidly after the invasion of Russia by Hitler and the Japanese attack of Pearl Harbour brought the war situation just at the door of the Indian subcontinent. The geo-political importance of the subcontinent became the vital key for the Allied force in order to put a defense front

14 Ibid
15 Ibid
16 A. Guha: Planter Raj to Swaraj (Delhi- 1991), p. 266
against the Japanese aggression. The delicate moment in the history of the Second World War in South Asia has been observed by one historian:

The Japanese 'blitzkrieg' on the South East Asian mainland, the war to India's eastern borders. India was the main missing link between the German occupied area of the Soviet Union and Japanese controlled South East Asia; it was the key to a Japanese domination of the Indian Ocean area ...India was the only base from which China could be supplied through by an airlift only, and a base from which the vital supply route through Persia to the Soviet Union could be protected.19

The British government thought itself to be prudent to send a mission to root out the shortcomings from its relationship with the Congress and the war on the Eastern border, compelled the government to rethink its policy towards the Indian public opinion more practically: 'Rangoon fell on March 8 and on March 11, the Cripps Mission was announced.'20 Historians like, J.H. Voight has also supported the significance of the eastern warfare which ultimately compelled the government to send the Cripps mission. The mission had two primary objectives: '(i) to stabilize the internal situation in India in order to strengthen the defence of the Indian subcontinent and, (ii) to demonstrate to the other allies that there was no lack of British concern to solve the Indian problem.'21

The fear of the Japanese attack of the eastern frontier of the subcontinent had become hysterical and the prospect of Japanese attack even forced the Congress leaders like Gopinath Bardoloi to send a letter to J. Nehru, because Bardoloi also heard that at the same time in China, Chiang Kai-shek, the Chinese leader tried to put a stubborn resistance to the aggression of the Japanese invasion in Chinese soil, and so, during the Chinese leader's visit to New Delhi, Bardoloi requested Nehru to make an arrangement for the visit of Chiang Kai-shek to Assam. He (Bardoloi) thought that Assam should be also a partner with China and he hoped that China might help Assam if

19 Voight: Co-operation or Confrontation in Low (ed.): Op. cit., p. 381
the Japanese would ever attack Assam. Through his letter, Bardoloi made some different directives of defending the position of Assam in any eventualities that might come because of the war and he said that the non-violent tactics would not be sufficient in that matter and very interestingly he was afraid lest the tea plantation workers of Assam would join in the war:

The British were constructing roads connecting Manipur to Burma which would provoke the Japanese to attack which otherwise afforded to them no attraction. He asserted the need to prepare the province against invasion, on lines different from non-violent directives. He was afraid that the semi-starved plantation workers and peasantry might join the Japanese like sheep.22

Nehru wrote in his reply:

It was not possible of course for Marshal Chiang Kai-shek to visit Assam, though it would have been a good thing if you had met him.... I quite realise the situation in Assam and a possibility of invasion and its consequence. None of us can possibly forget this. Because after all we shall ourselves be affected tremendously by what happens in Assam.23

Nehru offered ‘Guerilla Warfare’ in any eventual attack by Japan and emphasised the importance of organising the self defense committee against any possible occurrence of the Japanese invasion but ‘he was not hopeful about the viability of the self defence and sufficiency in Assam due to the existence of outside elements.’ Nehru’s reference to the ‘outside elements’ in Assam is very difficult to assume.

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23 Nehru’s letter to G.N. Bardoloi- (March 6, 1942) in Ibid
The contribution of the tea plantation labourers to the war efforts of the colonial government was great indeed and it was duly recognised also in a report of the ITA:

From practically every estate in North East India labourers volunteers for work on the projects – roads, aerodomes, etc. – and in many cases where either the estates buildings or parts of their tea bearing land were requisitioned for military purposes, or where an estate was situated adjacent to a project for which very large numbers of labour were required, almost the whole of the estate’s labour force was so employed. .... It was extremely difficult, indeed, impossible - for the Committee to remedy matters, the work of the projects was of primary importance and brooked no delay.24

The grave situation at the eastern frontier probably forced Nehru to make a visit to Assam in the month of April 1942 (21-24 April). Nehru also noticed the plight of the tea garden labourers when they had been employed to do war-time works like the building or repairing of the roads. He cited one example of the harsh situation, the tea garden labours had to face, due to the war-efforts of the imperial government:

An incident which brings out the officialdom functions in Assam was brought to my notice by a friend. Some weeks ago, about 700 tea garden labourers were impressed for work on the Ranipur road and were being taken to Dimapur. They reached Pandu and remained there for two or three days waiting for the train to carry there. There were no arrangements for their food or shelter. No one had given thought to this matter.25

But, the plight of the tea plantation labourers did not touch the inner cords of the provincial Congress leaders of Assam and they did not make a bold attempt of recovering those unfortunates from the clutches of the colonial state.

**Failure of the Cripps Mission and the Quit India movement:**

In the meanwhile, the imperial government played the political game by sending the Cripps mission and which according to Nehru ‘dealt with the future after the cessation of hostilities...’ and though some vague post-war proposals were prepared to satisfy the demands of the nationalist leadership but for the present there was no such well thought out plan and, the Cripps mission failed to offer any concrete solution. The hypocritical attitude of the British imperial government has come into light after a close scrutiny of the British documents after the independence of the country and it has been claimed by the historians: ‘Both Churchill and Linlithgow, acting under pressure from labour party constituents of the National government and President Roosevelt of the United States, wanted to see the Cripps mission fail.’ The Congress demand for the Defence Portfolio was given a ‘ludicrous form’ when the government only agreed to hand over the duties of control over the canteens, stationeries, printing etc. The failure of the Cripps mission came as a surprise to the Indian leaders and in one sub-heading of the chapters of Nehru’s *Discovery of India*, it was termed as ‘Frustration’.

But still, Gandhi had not lost his hope over the attitude of the government towards the solution of the tangled problem and it has been analysed:

His (Gandhi) speech at the All-India Congress committee expressed his earnest desire for a settlement and his determination to approach the Viceroy for this. Neither in public nor in private at the meetings of the Congress Working Committee did he hint at the nature of the action he had in mind, except in one particular. He had suggested privately that in the event of failure of all negotiations he would appeal for some kind of no-co-operation and one day protest *hartal*, or cessation of all work in the country something in the nature of a one day general strike symbolic of a nations protest.

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Even this was a vague suggestion which he did not particularize for he did not want to make any further plans till he had made his attempt at a settlement.29

The Congress began to make its sharp break from the negotiation process only after the 1942 (Aug) and at last, the Congress session at Bombay adopted the ‘Quit India’ resolution. There was another factor which compelled the Congress Party to take up an uncompromising stand with the colonial government, was the growing unrest among the population and an increased resentment against the Raj since the failure of the Cripps Mission beside the economic strain over the general population of the country: ‘Frustration within Congress was complimented by frustration within the population at large. The impact of the war became more and more physically felt and intensified existing economic and social problems.’30

The vague suggestion to the people in the ambiguous form of declared struggle against the colonial government through the famous speech (Do or Die) of Gandhi made the local Congress leaders of the different provinces of India to implement the resolution in their own languages. D.D. Kosambi, has brilliantly put the dilemma, the people had to face after the Quit India resolution and he has suspected that the Congress leaders had known the arrest warrant against themselves before the midnight (9th August):

When the All India Congress Committee met at Bombay, the members knew that arrest was imminent and most of them had prepared for the event by setting their family affairs and personal finances in excellent order against all contingencies that might cause for the next year or two. What strikes this writer as remarkable is that not one of these worthy and able delegates though aware that the British adversary was about to strike, even thought of

29 Ibid.
a plan of action for the Congress and for the nation as a whole. The general idea was 'the Mahatma will give us a plan', yet no especial impression was made by the Mahatma's speech just before the arrests—though that address to the assembled delegates on the eve of an anticipated popular explosion is not only not revolutionary in character, nor a plan of action of any sort, but secures when objectively to be on the same level as a comfortable after dinner speech. Why it is that knowledge of popular dissatisfaction went in hand in hand with the absence of a real plan of action? Does it mean, for example, that the characteristic thought then current among the Indian bourgeoisie had in effect permeated the Congress leadership? One may note that on a class basis the action was quite brilliant, no matter how futile it may have seemed on a national revolutionary scale.31

Be that as it may be, the response of the people towards the movement was tremendous and it took a form of revolt against colonial rule. The spontaneous response of the masses towards the call for the Quit India movement was widespread in its totality. Almost all the major leaders of the INC were arrested and sent into the jails by the second week of August. In Assam, leaders like G.N. Bardoloi, Sidhinath Sarma were arrested when they just arrived from Bombay session of the Congress. The Government of Assam declared the AICC and the APCC as unlawful bodies on 10 August.32

The police unleashed ruthless oppression upon the masses, who joined in the movement and the movement had become leaderless after the arrest of major leaders of the Congress. In Assam too, 'never before were so many people killed or arrested in the province either during the 1921-22 movement or in the civil Disobedience movement of 1930 and 1932.'33 The toll of police and military atrocities in 1942 'was no less then twenty seven deaths from gunshots—all in the Brahmaputra Valley. About three thousand

33 Ibid, p. 274
people were arrested. Of four death sentences passed for alleged sabotage activities, that on Kushal Konwar was confirmed by the Governor General.\textsuperscript{34}

The impact of the Quit India movement was most spectacular in the Nowgong District\textsuperscript{35} and there, mass participation in the movement gave a revolutionary character and it was termed as 'the mass rebellion'.\textsuperscript{36}

The spontaneous outburst of the popular anger against in a Correspondence- 'by far the most serious rebellion since that of 1857, the gravity and extent of which we have so far conceded from the world for reason of military security.'\textsuperscript{37}
The government deployed around a large batch of battalions (around 57) to crush the rebellion and the basic reason of deploying such battalions:

British could make them available and afford them, because of the war situation Congress chose an unfavourable moment for a confrontation. The British strategically vulnerable to invasion, were militarily strong against the challenge of an internal uprising.\textsuperscript{38}

Churchill, out of rejoice, remarked in the House of Commons:

The August disturbances, which had been checked within a month by repressive measure, were a deliberate Congress plan to help the Japanese... the Congress is a party which does not even represent the Hindu masses. It is a political organisation built around a party machine and sustained by a certain manufacturing and financial interests. Outside that Party and fundamentally opposed to it, are 90 millions Muslims

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid

\textsuperscript{35} R.C. Majumdar writes : 'The movement was most intense in the Nowgong district, the Midnapore of Assam, where the number of arrests was 1600, convictions, 1200, and security prisoners 60'.


\textsuperscript{36} Arun Chandra Bhuyan : \textit{The Quit India Movement : The Second World War and Indian Nationalism} (Guwahati-1993), p. 78


\textsuperscript{38} Voight; Co-operation or Confrontation in Low (ed.) \textit{Op. cit.}, p. 368
in Britain India who have their right of self determination, 50 millions depressed classes or untouchables, as they are called and 95 million subjects of the princes of India with whom we are bound by treaty.39

The Home Member in a speech blamed the Congress members for the August rebellion and said ‘they knew and approved of what was likely to occur’ and, their plans did contemplate ‘an organization which would be brought into play when they launched their main movement.’40 Azad, in his letter sent to the Viceroy, Lord Linlithgow, drafted by Nehru, stated very clearly citing the speech of the Home Member:

For many months prior to our arrest we had been pointing out in Working Committee resolution and otherwise, that public feeling in the country had grown exceedingly bitter against the British Government in India.... Responsible Congressmen tried to divert this feeling in to peaceful channels and largely succeeded in doing so..... In your letter of Feb 5th, in referring to the AICC resolution, you drew attention to the concluding put in it which authorised all Congressmen to act for themselves in the event of interference with the leadership of the movement. This has appeared significant to you and you have drawn certain conclusions from it. You are evidently unaware that similar instructions were given when previous civil disobedience movements were started. Even during the individual civil disobedience movement of 1940-41, these instructions were repeated by us on many occasions. It is of the essence of civil disobedience or Satyagrahi that individuals should become self sufficient units, should need arise, as leaders are always likely to be removed and isolated at an early stage.41

But in the popular usage, it was showed later as the Congress success and many prime leaders of the Congress Party in their speeches earnestly cited the sacrifices of the masses and warned the British administration to take lessons from the level of mass

39 Prison Diary- Nehru- Sept. 12, 1942 in S.W.J.N. Vol. 13- p. 10
40 Speech by Home member- 15 Sept., 1942, in Ibid, p. 57
consciousness. The widespread participation of the masses gave it really the nature of a revolt. R.P. Dutt explains about the hypocrisy of the Congress leaders:

It was only later that the somewhat disingenuous attempt was made for the purpose of a temporary sectional political manoeuvre to treat confused leaderless events of August 1942 and subsequent months as the “August struggle”; to that this struggle which was disowned and repudiated by the only authorised Congress leadership as a Congress Struggle; to treat actions of petty anarchist violence in contradiction to the Congress creed as Congress actions; to treat the propaganda which ran completely counter to the August Resolution, supporting Bose and the Japanese camp and denouncing the United Nations, as equivalent to a breach of Congress discipline, when Congress discipline had enjoined that no struggle should be launched until Gandhi had given the word and Gandhi made it clear that he had not given the word.  

But the indirect effect of the movement was tremendous and ‘for Britain the August uprising was a signal that the days of the Raj were numbered.’

The Communist Party and the Quit India movement:

The Communist party’s decision of not to join in the Quit India movement in spite of the popular character of the movement had become a tactical blunder for the Communist Party and it created a rift between the INC and the CPI, which was irrefutably continued and not evanescent from the politics during the last phase of the colonial period in India. That fateful decision of the Communist Party created a chasm with the Congress Party. Primarily, the Communist Party had set their opposition to the Quit India resolution basically on two perspectives:

The first was that the Quit India struggle would be seen as helping the Axis powers enabling the British Colonialists to repress it without international protest.

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44 Nehru’s various speeches after the release from the Jail since June 1945 in- S.W.J.N. Vol. 14
The second was that the Congress should settle with the Muslim League and present a united national demand for a national government for national defence immediately and a free India after the war that would accept the principle of the self determination of nationalists.45

Gandhi ‘admonished the Communists for being wrong at a crucial time.’ The shifting of the line from its oppositions to the imperial war since the beginning of the war up to the autumn of 1941 was an extraordinary episode both for the Communists of India and the world. The Indian Communists decision of giving extra importance to the international events by ignoring the nationalist struggle at that crucial juncture of the modern Indian history, ultimately isolated their own struggle from the masses and the nationalist intelligentsia particularly adopted sharp critical attitude towards the Communist party members activities both during that period and even after the independence of the country.

At the very beginning of the movement some Congress leaders tried to persuade the Communist party members to join in the movement and for instance, Vallabhbhai Patel requested some of the Communist leaders to join in the Quit India movement. Mohit Sen writes ‘much later we learnt that S.A. Dange, S.V. Chitalo and some other leaders had proposed that while expressing disagreement, the CPI should have joined the movement. Sardar Patel, no less had sent Shankar Rao Deo to S.G. Sardesai with the offer that the Communists organise the participation of the workers in the movement putting aside their political differences with the Congress. It was turned down.’46

The ‘ideological guru’ of the Communist Party, R.P. Dutt had justified the Communist Party’s stand by putting a scathing remark about the August resolution that ‘the August resolution must be judged a disastrous blunder alike in its effects within India and in its effects on world democratic opinion.’47

45 Mohit Sen: An Autobiography (Delhi-2007), p. 25
46 Ibid, p. 27
In Assam, though the influence of the Communists party was not so strong but the decision of the central committee of CPI, certainly forced the small section of the party to follow the party line. But the RCPI duly followed the Congress line and they jumped into the Quit India movement with great enthusiasm. The Communist party sympathizers of the Assam Student Federation under the leaders like Dadhi Mahanta, Gaurishankar Battacharya, Nandeswar Talukdar decided not to join in the movement and a full-fledged branch of the CPI was opened at the provincial level in 1943, (January). The political activities of the Communist party in Assam grew only after the lifting of the ban on the Party in 1942. In several places, the Communist cells were opened to strengthen the base. But the local leaders of the Congress began to see the Communist party members as the enemy of the country because of the CPI’s opposition to the movement and the Party leaders were despised and attacked physically.48

It was also true that earlier the CPI reiterated its stand against British imperialism because of Russia’s pact with Germany had bound the fatherland of communism not to make a war against Nazism. At first the CPI was also against the war but once the policy of the Party since, they made their efforts to give support to the war. The CPI leaders like G. Adhikari, vehemently criticised the moderate attitude of the Congress leaders towards the imperial war thus:

Once Gandhism held the fate of British rule in its land ....Today it pursues the logic of “unconditional cooperation” with the same Government and that at the time when an unjust imperialist and predatory war is raging in the world. Gandhism has entered in to its decadent phase. At the most critical time of our national history is acting as a fetter on the national struggle.49

The nationalist Congress leaders used sharp words against the Communists and the disunity and friction which had developed after the early 1940s did provoke the leaders like Nehru to use such words against the CPI and, for instance, Nehru said: ‘Their

48 Dadhi Mahanta: *Asomat Communist Andolanar Janma Aru Bikashar Sanmadhe* (Guwahati-1993), Pp. 82-83
49 G. Adhikari: *A Review on Gandhism*, Quoted in *S.W.J.N. Vol-14*, p. 531
influence was considerable except among some groups of young men. But because they gave aggressive expressive to a prevailing sentiment, they became a kind of ginger group.\footnote{Nehru: \textit{Op. cit. The Discovery}, p. 434}

Nehru took a serious view of the non-involvement of the Communist in the Quit India movement and their hostility to the force of nationalism and he expressed his sentiment in a press-interaction (1945):

The Communists missed the chance of a life time in India during the last two or three years. They could have had themselves an enormously powerful party if they had functioned somewhat differently. At a critical moment in Indian history it was difficult to be neutral, but they went to the other side. They may be right but the approach was the question.\footnote{Interview to the press Almora, 15 June later published in \textit{The Hindu}, 17 June 1945 in \textit{Op. cit. S.W.J N. Vol. 14}, p. 17}

The nationalists continued the debate and in a letter written to R.P. Dutt, Nehru pointed out:

You must realise that it pains me to see the gulf that has arisen between the Congress and Communists in India. That gulf at present is wide and deep and has all the passion of three years behind it. \ldots\ The gulf has arisen because of internal policy in India and the fact that the Communists ran down the popular leaders in India and at a time when there was bitter conflict between nationalism and the imperialist structure, they appeared before the people as acting on the side of the latter.\footnote{Letter to R. Palme Dutt- Palme Dutt papers, London, in \textit{Ibid}, p. 526}

The Congress Working Committee later decided to form a sub-committee to enquire into the charges brought against the Communist members during that eventful period by the various provincial Congress bodies and they were empowered to take their own decision in respect of the disciplinary actions to be taken against the CPI members. The subcommittee where G.B. Pant, V. Patel, J. Nehru took the sole decision regarding those charges and they came to the conclusion after their correspondence with P.C. Joshi, then
the General Secretary of the CPI, that the Communists ought to be expelled from the Congress party. The Communists also understood that 'the Congress leadership had acted out of anti-Communist Prejudices and that Pandit Nehru had compromised with his Rightist colleagues for opportunist measures.'

It has been generally overlooked both in scholarly debates and which was also ignored by the INC leadership about the fact that the Communists Party merely followed the Party line which was ordered from Moscow. The CPI worked according to the decisions taken at the Comintern and their instinctive loyalty, first to the Party and only then to the Nation was the chief cause, which constrained themselves not to join in the Quit India movement. This had become evident in all of the countries where the Communist parties played a pivotal role in the political decisions. Eric Hobsbawm, who was himself the Party member in England during his Cambridge years, has brilliantly put this point clearly, about the devotion and loyalty of the members of the Communist party of England (even throughout the world) to the Moscow:

The party (we always thought of if in capital letters) had the first, or more precisely the only real claim on our lives. Its demands had absolute priority. We accepted its disciple and hierarchy. We accepted the absolute obligation to follow the line it proposed to us even when we disregard with it although we made heroic efforts to convince ourselves of its intellectual and political 'Correctness' in order to 'defend it', as we were expected to .... We did what it ordered to us to do.

It seemed that the Congress leaders took a too much stiff stand point against the policy of the CPI. Nehru after his release from the jail in 1945 repeated the sentiment of the average Congress members against the CPI thus:

All my reactions are against activities and the policy of the Communist party during the last three years. I have heard charges and counter charges about the

53 M. Sen: Op. cit., p. 31
54 E. Hobsbawm: Interesting Times (London- 2005), Pp. 134-135
Communists...their general policy has not only been wrong, but injurious, both to India's cause and to the larger cause of world freedom, which basically cannot be separated from that of India... fundamentally, the Indian Communists policy is not adopted from the standpoint of the country where it functions, but from the standpoint of the Russian foreign policy.\textsuperscript{55}

The vitriolic attack of the Congress party upon the Communists became so bitter that in one of his speeches, Nehru openly advised the mill workers not to take recourse to strike to achieve their aims. He even mentioned the efforts made by Gulzarilal Nanda in the organisation of the labourers in tune with the Ahmedabad textile labour union. In his speech, Nehru said (2nd November 1945):

The right to strike is your last and the most potent weapon, but this weapon is not to be dangled always. In order to make effective use of it, strikes should not be resorted to for small causes. They should only be resorted to when all peaceful methods to arrive at a settlement have failed ....I warn the workers against Communist machination....There has never been any love lost between Indian Communists and the British Government. As the Communists supported the alien government in August 1942, when the country had risen against it a temporary alliance has come about between them.\textsuperscript{56}

The political tussle between the Congress and the CPI greatly harmed the interest of the labourers. Another very significant feature of the period was that the organised workers', (chiefly factory based), non-involvement in the strikes.\textsuperscript{57} The Government of India took relief at the absence of the militant strikes during the war time

\textsuperscript{55} Op. cit.- S.W.J.N. Vol. 14, p. 16 
\textsuperscript{56} Nehru advised the workers to join in the Hindustan Mazdoor Sevak Sangh. The Sangh was established under the influence of the Gandhi Seva Sangh in 1937 to organize workers on Gandhian principles. - Address to Mill workers, Delhi. November 1945. Based on reports from The Hindustan Times, 3 November and The Tribune, 4 November 1945, Ibid, Pp. 540-41
\textsuperscript{57} The chief industrial centres where the factory management encouraged the workers to resort to friendly strikes were Ahmedabad and Calcutta and ‘the government suspected that strikes in mills and factories were being engineered by G. D. Birla....’ In other industrial centre; Ahmedabad, ‘the mill owners took the lead and closed their factories for an indefinite period’. Bhuyan: Op. cit., p. 86
and particularly the Communist party’s decision not to put obstruction in the war effort of the imperial government, did lessen the spirit of the factory based organized workers. The People’s War, the mouthpiece of the CPI in its issue of August 22, 1942 declared: “The call upon the workers to go on political strikes is not to exert pressure upon the British Government but to disrupt the country’s advance ....continued production is a vital war necessity whatever the government might be."  

**Strangled economy and its effects:**

Another significant feature of the colonial economy of India between the period of 1939-45 was that the war had a devastating effect on the economy and ‘between 1939 and 1945 the Indian economy was subjected to enormous strains which left fundamental imbalance in many areas that lasted long after the coming of peace.’ The inflationary trend’of the economy continued due to rampant circulation of notes (money) and the money supply increased from Rs.2300 million in 1939 to Rs.12,1000 in 1945, ‘besides widespread corruption shortage and black market prices.’ It has been explained by the economic historians like B.R. Tomlison:

> Until the Japanese entry in to the war in late 1941, the costs of Indian defence for which Britain was responsible were relatively small, and were met by cancelling out India’s sterling debt bonds and railway annuities held on London. From 1942 onward Britain paid for her share of Indian defence expenditure by giving sterling credits (in the form of treasury Bills lodged with the London branch of the Reserve Bank of India), leaving the Indian authorities to issue currency notes against there reserve assets.

In reality, the industrial production was emphasised only for war purposes and the ‘savage increase’ in the consumer goods also occurred due to the unrestricted nature of consumption.

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58 Quoted in AICC File no. 4-23 (part-I) 1945-46, NMML S.W.J.N. - Vol. 14, p. 534
the capital market. Food supply was severely hit after the occupation of Burma by the Japanese army and the import of rice was totally cut off and 'nor could they readily be made good from elsewhere as the Japanese now controlled all the rice-growing areas of South East Asia.'

The effects of those anomalies in the economy were disastrous and great famine occurred in Bengal and 'in the terrible summer and autumn of 1943, lakhs trekked to Calcutta to starve to death on its streets, begging no longer for rice, but just for the water in which it had been cooked.' The Woodhead Commission which was appointed by the government to enquire into the possible causes of the famine, submitted its report in 1945 and in the report it was stated that the famine had a man-made characteristic and wrote candidly:

The public in Bengal or at least certain sections of it, have also their share to blame. We have referred to the atmosphere of fear and greed which, in the absence of control was one of the causes of the rapid rise in the price level. Enormous profits were made out of the calamity, and in the circumstances profit for some meant death for others. A large part of the community lived in plenty while others starved, and there was much indifference in face of suffering. Corruption was widespread and throughout the province and in many classes of society.

Certainly, the best analysis of the famine in Bengal has been provided in recent research of the economists led by Amartya Sen. The failure of 'exchange entitlements' to respond to the rising needs in times of crisis, has been chiefly accounted for the repaid rise of the mortality in Bengal in the early 1940s. Famine in a boom season like the heavy war production should not have occurred in India but it did come and Sen has put this point in one of his brilliant essays thus:

If economic expansion is particularly favourable to a large section of the population (in the case of the Bengal famine primarily the urban population including that of

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62 Perderel Moon (ed.): Wavell- The Viceroy’s Journal (Delhi-1977), Editorial note, p. 31
64 Quoted in Nehru: Op. cit., The Discovery, p. 499
Calcutta), but does not draw into the process another large section (in the Bengal famine much of the rural labouring classes) then that uneven expansion can actually make the latter group lose out in the battle for commanding food. In the food battle the devil takes the hindmost, and even a boom condition can lead to some groups losing their command over food because of the worsening of their relative position *vis-à-vis* the groups favoured by the boom.65

The effects of the famine did not confine itself in the territory of Bengal and the famine affected people entered into Assam. The exodus from the famine-affected areas of Bengal also created a new situation for the neighboring states like Assam. People started to enter into Assam from the districts of Bengal like Noakhali, Tipperah, Chittagong and Mymensing. They generally tried to settle in the districts; Cachar, Goalpara and Nowgong.66

The impact of the sky-rocketing prices of the basic commodities upon the tea garden labourers was also severe and the ‘soaring prices’ made their condition deplorable in spite of the concessionary rice provided by the garden management. The government gave the responsibility of controlling the prices to the private firms like Shaw Wallace and Co. Ltd and Steel Bro. Ltd.67

Through the rural population and workers suffered due to the price hike and food shortage, one section of the colonial Indian society made heavy profits in ‘food share-market operations and the black market in general.’68 Nehru also noted that dichotomy regarding the role played by the bourgeoisie and wrote in his prison diary in September 21, 1943:

Side by side with this starvation and death are reports of fantastic profits in the textile and jute mills and all war industries. After paying high super taxes and extravagant

66 File no. 18/9/43. F.R. September 1943. NAI; Cited in A.C. Bhuyan (ed.): *Political History of Assam-Vol. III*, (Guwahati-1999), f.n. 134, p. 161
expenditure on improvements, sometimes over 100% profit has been made in the course of a year! What a social and economic system we have to permit this and at the same time when famine on a vast scale. The profit makers give donations for relief and are lauded for their generosity.69

The response of the nationalists to these scandalous affairs concerning the war-profits or food shortage could not be ascertained fully because most of them were spending their days in jails during that period. The Communists organised relief work in Calcutta. But during the period of 1939-45, there was an 'apparent lack of resistance' against the destructive economic situation which developed particularly, after the Second World War. The INC discussed those problems about the agrarian situation in Bengal and elsewhere both before the war as well as after its commencement but Nehru said that it was 'rather vague, theoretical.'70

Another significant characteristic of the period was the lack of response from the peasantry as a whole and the peasantry as a class was apathetic to the depressive state of their living standard. Some historians have explained that the lack of response from the peasantry was due to their disastrous physical and mental condition:

...the long history of resistance by peasant labour up to the early stage of the 1943 famine and the resumption at the end of the war suggest that the absence of protest during the depths of the crisis is better explained in terms of the pulverizing physical and mental devastation brought on by large-scale mass starvation, the knowledge of the repressive capacity of the colonial state and the problems of political organization and leadership.71

The most significant episode of the period (1942-45) was that the workers non-involvement and their lack of starting any strikes during the war period. The Communist

70 Ibid
party's non-interference in the British war-efforts, also contributed to the factory based workers antipathy towards the strikes. Heavy use of War-Ordinance and of specific wartime emergency powers like the use of Defence of India Rules, made it more difficult for the workers to start a new kind of strike wave. The blatant performance of the state in respect of the Digboi Oil company workers amply proved that the state would not bear any kind of obstacle in the path of their war-efforts.

In the tea gardens, the lack of movement of the labourers made it impossible for the labourers and the outside political leadership to communicate with each other. The Rege Committee noted that 'there was virtually no improvement in such important matters as cash wages, real freedom of movement and association, education and organisation of work during the war years.'

But some important changes took place in the growth of the membership of the trade unions, after the lifting of the ban over the Communist party in 1942. The membership of the AITUC has been shown below (since 1942):

Table: 7:1

Membership of the AITUC (1942-44)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of Trade Unions</th>
<th>Registered membership</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1942 (February)</td>
<td>191</td>
<td>269,803</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1943</td>
<td>259</td>
<td>332,079</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1944</td>
<td>525</td>
<td>509,084</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Abstract from the table provided in *India Today* by R. P. Dutt

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72 Rege Committee Report- 1946, p. 70; Cited in Guha: *Op. cit.*, p. 294
The membership of the Communist party also grew and we can gauge it from the fact that ‘starting with a bare 4,000 in July 1942, it had jumped to 15,000 by May 1943, 30,000 by January 1944 and over 53,000 by the summer of 1946.’

In Assam, there was a gradual development of the trade union movement since the Second World War and the movement grew when the Communist party’s provincial branch was established in 1943. The number of trade unions registered in Assam ‘increased from 9 in 1944-45 to 19 in 1945-46 and 36 in 1946-47 and the corresponding number of membership from 2,486 to 3,680 and then 13,518.’

During the whole period, the British colonial government taking the connivance after the rise of a scruple between the Congress and the Communists fully exploited the situation and the colonial government became convinced that any possible uprisings against the state would be repressed cruelly. The Quit India movement (1942) which became the ‘biggest civilian uprising in India since the great rebellion of 1857’ was also put down by the state with extreme swiftness. The British Viceroy who were appointed after the Second World War, had convinced themselves: ‘We shall have to continue responsibility for India for at least another 30 years. We could not for the peace of the world allow chaos in India.’

The chasm which developed around the issue of Russia’s active role in the Second World War after 1941 and the consequent support offered by the Communist party of India to the war efforts of the Stalin ruled Russia has much confused the analysis of the historians towards the role of the Communist party in the national movement. The CPI’s tactic of using abusive terms towards the Congress leaders like Subhas Bose, Jayprakash Narayan (C.S.P.) much discredited its base among the intelligentsia. The Communists came to the conclusion later that their Party line was incorrect and Stalin also told in 1950 to a CPI delegation, ‘his country (Russia) could have done without it and the CPI should have looked after itself.’

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74 Ibid.
76 Wavell’s Diary entry on October, 19, 1943, in Penderel Moon (ed.): Op. cit., p. 33
77 M. Sen: Op. cit., p. 27
In spite of the deep-rooted anger of the Congress leaders against the CPI, in fact, the stand followed by the CPI during that period, it did not lead themselves either to cooperate with the imperial administration. The Communists did not become a faithful ally of the British imperialism in India and it had also been emphasised in some reports of the Government of India that the Communists never did abandon its anti-imperialist policy and in some respects it showed itself more as a nationalist party: 'It is clearly impossible to expect Communists to adopt a wholly loyalist attitude, as Communists and nationalists they are fundamentally opposed to Imperialist domination.'

It was also true the local level Communist Party members were not as wholly abstained themselves from joining in the Quit India movement and they also participated wholeheartedly. For instance, in Assam also, The RCPI members did take part in the movement and at the very beginning of the movement it became the all India phenomenon:

Though they (the Communists) sympathized with the strong anti-fascist sentiments of their leaders, yet they felt the irresistible pull of the movement and for at least a few days or weeks, joined in it along with the rest of the Indian people,

The Government of India also confirmed that viewpoint in a report:

Information from various sources shows that individual Communists, if not Communist Party of India as an organisation, are siding with Congress and either taking active part in present movement or inciting others to do so, Provincial Governments should have no hesitation in proceeding against any persons who may break the law.... Recent change of policy towards Communist Party of India confers no immunity on such individuals.

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79 Bipan Chandra, et.al.: *India’s struggle for Independence* (Delhi- 2001), p. 468
The Congress Party's stand point immediately after the release of the leaders was quite different from their earlier stand regarding their compromising position with the colonial government. During the period of 1944-46, the Congress was using all political tactics to tackle the problems concerning communalism, communist problem etc. After much political debates and discussions around the issue of the formation of an Interim government, the Congress's support led to the formation of an Interim government at the Centre and in spite of the fact that the communal forces became fully active due to the absence of the Congress from the active mass activities. Lord Wavell said about the situation in a letter to the Secretary of State:

The most urgent need is for a Central Government with popular support. If Congress will take responsibility they will realise that firm control of unruly elements is necessary and they may put down the Communists, and try to control their own left wing. ...81

Talking about the 'unruly elements' also Nehru, at a meeting of the provincial Congress committees evaluated the rapid rise of strikes and he also urged the Congress committees to review about certain peculiar incidents occurred after 1945:

... What we need is the capacity to keep pace with changing India and the changing World. For example look at the wave of strikes in the country. Some of them are justifiable, other are not. We have, however, the habit of putting the blame on others and complaining that the Communists are instigating the labour to strike. ....Some of us even go to the extent of saying that the fault lies with the masses. It is unworthy to talk like that. If there is a fault, the fault must lie with us.82

So, it could be safely observed that the political stand point of the INC had become totally tantamount to the broader interests of the labourers, when the INC leadership took the great non-compromising stand against the CPI.

The INA, the RIN Issues and its impact:

Between the periods of 1945-47, the country had witnessed the greatest eruption and also a golden chance of uniting the diffident forces against the imperial rule, but which was never utilised through a proper dynamic method of mass mobilization. But inspite of the lack of support by the nationalists, the cities like Calcutta, Bombay witnessed the mass rebelliousness against the national issues like the INA prisoners trial at the Red Fort and the mutiny of the RIN in Bombay, where although the Congress never urged the people to disobey the colonial law and jurisdiction but the response of the workers and the general population towards those incidents were tremendous and almost a revolutionary situation emerged. No doubt it was engulfed itself with certain haphazards and confusions, which ultimately also resulted in the outburst of communal rivalries against each other in a short interval. Nehru and Patel’s speeches, during the INA episode, particularly emphasised the need for a revolutionary effort to wipe out the last glance of the colonialism from India. Nehru said ‘revolution is inevitable’ and Wavell then Viceroy of India noticed:

He (Nehru) made it clear that he thought violence inevitable.... I believe that the Congress are counting on the INA as the spear head of their revolt, they would suborn the Indian army, if they could and they hope that their threats will impair the loyalty and efficiency of the police... Since the session of the all India Congress committee (21st 23rd September) the Congress leaders everywhere but particularly Vallabhbhai Patel in Bombay and Nehru and Pant in the United Provinces have been making statements and speeches which can only be intended to provoke or pave the way for mass disorder. They began by talking the credit of the 1942 disturbances, asserting that the British could be turned out of India within a very short time.83

The improper dealing of the INA trial issue, practically and for a moment, it was thought that the protests for the release of the INA prisoners would release a great wave of struggles against the colonial set-up, which never happened. The accused in the

trial episode later 'were sentenced to transportation for life, and to be cashiered and lose all pay and allowances while with the Japanese. General Auchinleck remitted the sentences of transportation.'

The campaign for the release of the INA prisoners was also intense in Assam and every part of Assam thrilled with the fervour of supporting the cause of the INA prisoners and the people ‘donated generously to the relief fund created for their defence.’

But the impact of the political events of that period was totally negative over the tea-garden labourers. As a class, they in fact represented the lower edge of the society and the idea of the involvement of the labourers in the freedom struggle was heavily excluded from the phenomenology of the nationalist politicians.

**Development of the trade union organisation among the tea plantation labourers:**

Some definite attempts were made by the leftist members of Assam to organise the tea-garden labourers since the late second half of 1940s. The visit of Nehru in 1945 was also important in this context, but his voice was not so encouraging towards the necessity of organising the workers for the freedom struggle and in one of the meetings he urged the students of Assam to sever all ties with the CPI and RCPI, due to their anti-Congress activities.

It has been observed that the Communist influence had been dwindled among the labourers and particularly that among the tea garden labourers, the influence of the party decreased. But in reality, the Communist influence was never strong in the labour field, because the colonial government and the tea capitalists used several coercive

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84 *Ibid*, p. 202
ways to obstruct the Party members not to make an entry into the tea gardens. A benign attempt was made to make the workers organised since 1945. Earlier also, the Congress Socialist Party tried to organise the tea garden labourers and guided some strikes in the Surma Valley but the CSP too failed to paralyse the planters’ domination through those strikes. Due to their Party line followed since 1941, the provincial conference of the AITUC which was held at Dibrugarh (1943 November), the conference laid emphasis upon the increase of the War production and only among the Railway workers the influence of the trade union seemed to be strong.

The provincial branch of the AITUC raised some new demands for the welfare of the tea garden labourers and since late 1945, they tried to communicate with the tea garden labourers. Those demands were for providing ‘old age pensions, ration to children, supply of cheap cloth, a minimum daily wage of Rs.1.25 and a dearness allowance of Rs.25 per month etc.’ P.M. Surwan, a labour sympathiser from the Chotanagpur region came to the forefront of the labour organisation and by dint of his efforts a new organisation was established namely the Assam Tea Labourers Federation and with it five other individual labour unions were affiliated.

The most significant characteristic of the period after the second World War period was that the joint efforts made by both the colonial government and the Congress party of Assam to restrain the forward march of the Communist Party’s activities in the labour front. The Indian Tea Association, the apex body of the foreign tea capitalists gave some new terms for the proper functioning of the labour unions in the tea garden.

The Communist Party’s activities grew during the late year of the colonial rule and intense propaganda works were done to mobilise the workers. The Communist Party tried to guide the workers in strikes in some cases. The tea garden labourers, for the first time, showed their unity, when the labourers of Naharkatia (Lakhimpur district)
struck work with the sole demand for victimisation of those who had given evidence against the two internees, Nibaran Borah and Mandalal Sarma in the Court. These two leaders were kept in home interment due to their agitations against the planters domination. The influence of the strike, which occurred at the Naharkatiya also spread to other areas of the district. In the Doom Dooma group of gardens, the labourers in deep anger murdered the Manager of the Hansara Tea Estate. In the official report, about the violent and life taking assault on the manager, it was observed thus:

The immediate cause of the murder of the Manager of Hansara T.E. ... had been ascertained as a petty assault by him the previous day on the factory Sirdar, although there can be little doubt that the campaign of Communist propaganda which has been spread amongst the tea garden population of Lakhimpur district must have had also an exciting influence.90

Later also the two leaders (Nibaran Borah and Mandalal Sarma) were extermed due to their ‘anti-British propaganda, quoting the coolie attacks on the Managers at Dangri and Hansara T.E. as glorious example of labour solidarity.’

To thwart the Communist Party’s intrusion in to the tea gardens, the Congress gave extra-importance to the labour affairs and the Congress leaders started to give some thunderous oratories to attract the tea garden labourers to the Party fold. In those speeches, the Congress members’ way of dealing with the labour problems had been closely emulated with an angle of the Communistic ideas to earn the support of the tea garden labourers. For instance, the President of the APCC, during a visit to the Upper Assam, said in a meeting at Negheriting (Sibsagar district) and the meeting was also attended by the tea garden labourers of that area and the speech was given ‘embodying nearly all the usual Communist items, there was a comparison of European luxury in houses and motorcars and general living with coolie standards, allegation that the British Tea Estate owners weighed fat on the toil of the labourers without any regard to the

90 Police Intelligence Report- 1947, 9 July, File no- 69 (PHA- Record) ASA
latters' interests and promised that when the British leave India, the Congress Government will buy up all the gardens which will than become the property of the labourers and there will then be all the cloth and food stuffs available that anyone could want as well wages at Rs.1-4 per day'.\footnote{Police Intelligence Report, 26th March 1947 (PHA Record)} The speech was given only to counteract the anti-congress speeches of the rival groups, chiefly the Communists.\footnote{Ibid}

The district level Congress Committees (DCC) even hired some semi-political-religious personalities to influence the tea garden labourers with Congress ideas. In Tinsukia (Lakhimpur district), about five thousand tea garden labourers assembled to hear the speech of a Sadhu namely Baba Bala Krishna who had been held in great reverence by the labourers of that area and ‘his speech was mainly concerned with prohibition and the abandonment of liquor and opium, but he also gave the advice that all should support Congress’.\footnote{Ibid, 7 May 1947}

The establishment of the INTUC (May 1947) heralded the new prospect for the Congress party to decisively bring in to its line the unorganized workers, like the tea plantation labourers. The Assam branch of the INTUC was established in 1947 (September). At the same time, the Assam Chaah KarmaChari Sangha was established in 1947, 9th February. The INTUC, was founded to run itself on a bourgeois culture which would not adopt any opposite culture of protests against the bourgeois democratic state.

It would be also important to remember that the period since 1946, also the number of strikes also increased. In 1946, about 1,629 strikes occurred in India and the total numbers of labourers, who participated stood at 19,61,948.\footnote{Sukomal Sen: Bharater Sramik Andolaner Itihas (Calcutta- 1976), p. 270} The country witnessed increasing number of strikes and the Postal employers strike, spread all over India and the Postal Workers strike spread also in to Assam (21st July 1946) and the Premier of Assam, Gopinath Bardoloi urged Nehru to bring out a solution of the strike.\footnote{Ibid, p. 273}
The Congress party was against the strike and chief spokesman of the party, Satyanarayan Singh at the Central Assembly, told that the strike was just 'senseless'.

So, it would not be amazing to comprehend that the formation of the INTUC in the trade union movement of India was not a sudden decision of the Congress party. It was formulated out of the aspiration of the bourgeois leadership, to control and bring under its political leadership, the entire bulk of the class of labourers. The followers of the Gandhian way of struggle, in the sphere of the labour affairs also played the most significant role in the early stage of the INTUC and even in the post Independent India, those leaders like G.L. Nanda, played the expected role of bringing a classified bourgeois solution to the labour problem. It was directly pointed out that the violent and sudden strikes of the labourers would not even occupy a prime consideration in the post independent India’s labour struggle.

During the eventful period of 1939-47, the workers solidly defended their position and they always, through their protests tried to convince their employers that the employers must have to give a careful hint to the workers demands. The intellectual justification and analysis of the real economic set-up was never done because the omnipotent paternalism of the plantation authority always did put a dark shadow over the workers intellectual development.

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96 Ibid.
97 For a fine analysis of the rise of the labour leaders with Gandhian ideology in particular Ahmedabad as well as in India, see Jan Breman: The Making and Unmaking of an Industrial Working Class (Delhi-2004), p. 82. Gulzarilal Nanda, who played a prominent role in the labour politics of Ahmedabad also later became the labour Minister and Deputy Minister of the planning Commission and eventually later Prime Minister.
98 Engels wrote very prophetically about the effects of the patriarchal rule over the workers: ‘In the patriarchal relations that hypocritically concealed the slavery of the workers, the latter must have remained an intellectual zero, totally ignorant of his own interest a mere private individual. Only when estranged from his employer, when convinced that the sole bond between employer and employee in the bond of pecuniary profit, when the sentimental bond between them, only did the worker begin to recognise his own interests and develop independently, then only did he cease to be the slave of the bourgeois in his thoughts, feelings and the expression of his will.’
The growing ideological clashes between the two conscious parties of India, i.e. the Communist party of India and the Indian National Congress jeopardized in fact, the interests of the workers. But the form of nationalist struggle which had begun since the 1942 had a clear message for the imperial government that they would not be able to rule over the Indian subcontinent, indefinitely without risking their foothold. It has been much emphasised in a recent scholarly work that some specific circumstances made it impossible for the British colonial government to leave India. Christopher Bayly and Tom Harper writes: ‘In India as almost everybody new war the Bengal famine and the Indian national army had made independence inevitable.’99 It would be highly impossible to observe from the hindsight the real effects of those events on the Indian political scenario, but it could be said that the international events with some national issues like the RIN strike in Bombay and INA issue certainly accelerated the process of the decolonisation in South Asia.

The fruitful conclusion of the compromise between the colonial government and the Congress party later led to the independence of the country on 15th August 1947. But during the last period of the transfer of power to Indians, the role of Gopinath Bardoloi was particularly significant in the context of Assam despite the Viceroy Wavell’s bad remarks towards Bardoloi’s personality. Gopinath Bardoloi when met the Viceroy Lord Wavell and in his meeting, he reiterated the Congress stand on the delicate political issue (Cabinet mission plan and the grouping issue) but Wavell did not think about Bardoloi positively and Wavell wrote in the diary (April 17, 1946):

In the afternoon we had Bardoloi, the Congress premier of Assam a more forcible and quicker intelligence than the Khan Shaib (N. W. F. P.), but not a very pleasant personality. He putout the general Congress thesis on a settlement- transfer of power at once, Jinnah must not be allowed to stand in the way, Centre should be formed a panel chosen by Provincial Assemblies, etc. He then launched into a history of

99 Christopher Bayly and Tom Harper: Forgotten Armies: Britain’s Asian Empire and the War with Japan (London); the same authors: Forgotten Wars: The End of Britains Asian Empire (Cambridge and Harvard University Press), Books Review by Sugata Bose in Desh (Boi Sankhya- Bengali periodical, 2Feb, 2007)
Assam, trying to make out it had been a great independent kingdom before the British came, I had to point out gently that the British had rescued it from Burmese rule.100

Bardoloi’s role during the Grouping plan was commendable, when the Assam’s fate seemed to be overwhelmingly jeopardized under the scheme due to the possibility of adjoining Assam with the Pakistan (East). Gandhi rebuked Bardoloi for not showing his opposition to the Sylhet referendum but Bardoloi said that he could not go against the decision of the Executive Committee of the APCC and Basanta Kumar Das, the Congress leader from the Sylhet district also supported the referendum. Gandhi was not wholly in agreement with Bardoloi in that position.101

The movement which was started since 1905, got its maturity since 1920-21 and galvanised the vast bulk of the population of India, with its chief support from the lower middle class and the peasantry, the Congress at last helped in bringing the sovereignty to the indigenous population, thus ending 200 years of British suzerainty over the Indian subcontinent. The fate of the subalterns like the tea plantation labourers never changed at the achievement of independence because for them the concept of freedom meant only the freedom from the clutches of the white managers or Burra Sahibs which still continued to justify to rule over the socio-economic set-up of the tea plantation labourers even up to the 1970s.

The protests in the work places continued and the colonial government after 1945, always tried to blame the Communist Party for their support to those strikes. It was very interesting that after 1942-45, the colonial state avoided in the case of the labour front to put any blame upon the Congress for the labour strikes. Even, in the mid week of August 1947, the tea garden labourers continued their protests:

Throughout the week, tea garden labour in Lakhimpur has been in disturbed state. There are reports from many gardens of increasing disciplines which generally taken the form of “coarse plucking” in defiance of orders and demands for payments at

101 Birendrakumar Bhattacharya: Gopinath Bardoloi (translated from English by Narayan Barpujari) (Delhi- 1992), Pp. 57-59
rates applicable for “fine plucking” or higher. This led to trouble at Panitola when payment was refused altogether for this week, the situation was aggravated by tactless handling by the garden authorities .... 102

Some funny incidents occurred also in some areas, regarding the news of independence in August 15, 1947. The defined idea or assumption about the implication of independence was quite different for the peasantry and they believed that the independence would bring an over all-reformulation of the economic policies. The new government also noticed:

There are grotesque misunderstandings in various party as to the situation after the 15th which are leading to local outbreaks of lawlessness. In Sibsagar district, it is currently believed that the police force will be abolished on the 15th and thereafter villages will appoint Chowkidars of their own choosing; in parts of Sylhet it has been announced that as from the 15th all existing laws will lose their validity. 103

The resistance of the labourers against the authority of the planters, although, never assumed the character of a fully organized revolutionary struggle, but the form of their protests rather constructed a boundary which did unite the fragmented parts of the workers inclusive meridian to a cause, and that cause and its effects affected the colonial state and the planters lobby to slowdown their habit of exploitation over the labourers. It was their inordinate faith in their power of resistance which almost engulfed or deeply touched the whole stratum of the tea plantation labourers society. Their refusal to respond to the indecent behaviours of the planters and their protests against the price hike, all symbolised the rock-like solidarity of the workers. Though for a short period they were united, but that was the symbol of the voiceless workers protests, where an imposed capitalist cultural distinction was always ruling and the pre-justified study of the labourers as illiterate, easily prone to violence and immersed only in liquor, did not become a hurdle in path of their culture of protests against the expropriators.

But what had become detrimental to the lower order of the Indian society was that the democratic-bourgeois Indian republic would not accept the intolerant and

102 Police Intelligence- 18 August, 1947 (PHA Record)
103 Ibid.
impatient political activities of those people for whom the economic freedom meant more than the just political freedom, which the country had attained. This probably, created a hiatus for the lower rank of the society, where majority of them were subalterns who had been facing the exploitations of both the indigenous and the foreign exploiters.

At the time of independence, the classic poverty of the economy became more distinct and so the historians like Tapan Raychaudhuri has observed:

The successor states of the Raj were among the poorest countries of the world. It is estimated that in India some 48 to 53 percent of the rural population were below the poverty line in 1947: in other words nearly half the population could not afford the minimum intake of food required to sustain the human body. Average life expectation was twenty-nine years. Nearly 88 percent of the population was illiterate.  

The condition of the poor workers did not change radically and it became also certain that the ideological calculation of the Congress, regarding the workers protests was that the violent protests of the workers would not regarded as a respectable method of struggle for achieving demands. The formation of the INTUC and the never ending dilemma of the Communist Party regarding the newly achieved freedom, rather gave the golden chance for the bourgeois politicians to harness the growth of the bourgeois capitalist culture in the post colonial Indian society. A specific form of government control was discovered to bring harmony (though artificially) to the antagonistic relationship between labour and capital and that was named the ‘Indian way’, which obviously recognised the Gandhian way of labour struggle, where workers independent stiff resistance was denied and the mutual collaboration with the capitalist was given chief importance.

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104 Tapan Raychaudhuri: Perceptions, Emotions, Sensibilities (Delhi-1999), p. 159
105 The first Prime Minister of the newly independent Indian republic said in a speech given on the occasion of the May Day at Delhi: ‘I concede that there is class struggle with different classes having conflicting interests. But the point is how are we to get over these conflicts. Are we to overcome them through the old methods of turmoil and violence and wielding the big stick of lock-outs and strikes, or to remove them gradually by having a negotiated settlement after a peaceful exchange of views?’ Nehru gave answer to the question he posed: ‘We have to go forward step by step in this Indian way, which is to some extent Gandhiji’s way, by avoiding a violent conflict between the different classes and resolving all disputes, through peaceful negotiations. We have to follow this path, a difficult path, steadfastly to achieve the goal of establishing a socialistic pattern of society’. The Hindu, 3rd May 1955, (Republished on 2005, 3 May)