CHAPFER-8

CONCLUSION

In a colonial economy like India in general, and Assam in particular, the workers’ culture of resistance or protests had to face the doubly difficult and offensive situation because both the colonial state as well as the nationalist intelligentsia, who also took the leadership in the nation’s struggle for freedom, were greatly in opposition to the large bulk of the ‘labouring poor’s’ protests. The economy of the Province, called, Assam was primarily dominated by the foreign capitalists (tea capitalists), and the colonial state took a keen interest in protecting the interests of the tea capitalists. The colonial state gave more importance in maintaining a steady flow of labour-supply to the tea estates and whenever, a crisis came both in the shape of the workers protests or slow pace of labour-supply, then the colonial state tried to maintain the status quo intact by deploying all available means of suppression and disciplining the labourers.

Unlike the city-based factories in India, the plantations in Assam with its large bulk of labourers had assumed the characteristics of an agrarian productive relation. The semi-manufactured item became one of the most lucrative items of export for the British businessmen. It would be quite incorrect also, to opine that the industry had a perfect agricultural nature, and we should not forget the fact that the labourers got wages from the capitalist, although the planters tried to maintain a subsistence economy within the boundary of the tea estates by giving land for cultivation to the labourers. It did not simplify or soften either the existing relationship between labour and capital\(^1\) and the workers experienced also the exploitation of the capitalist relations. If the tea plantations

\(^1\) Marx has analysed about the relationship that developed in the post industrial revolution economic set up and has said about the mutual but antagonistic relationship that occurred between the labour and capital out of the capitalist productive relation: ‘In every country in which the capitalist mode of production reigns, it is the custom not to pay for labour power before it has been exercised for the period fixed by the contract, as for example, the end of each week. In all cases, therefore, the use value of the labour power is advanced to the capitalist: the labourer allows the buyer to consume it before he receives payment of the price; he everywhere gives credit to the capitalist. That this credit is no mere fiction is shown not only by the occasional loss of wages on the bankruptcy of the capitalist, but also by a series of more enduring consequences.’

Karl Marx: Capital-I, (Moscow-1986), p. 171
were working through a capitalist farming system, then also their employees or the workers faced the vicissitudes of the capitalist crises and above all, the dexterity in their (capitalists) behaviours towards the labourers. The relationship which was forged between the tea planters and the labour force who worked tirelessly in the tea estates of Assam, had to face a crucial juncture whenever the industry faced terrible economic crises and their fate automatically became puzzle one because the planters always tried to give low wages to their workers, showing the reason of the economic crisis in their respective tea estates.

Another very significant feature of the tea plantation sector had its low technical novelties or innovations. The technical innovations introduced in the industry were insignificant unlike the other industries (textiles, jute). During the colonial period, the progress in industrialisation did not initiate the process of further over-all changes in the technical or scientific matters. So obviously, it had no such great resemblance with the Marx’s notion of revolution in respect of the technical matters, which could help in transforming the country’s economy and here in this respect then, the capitalist masters did not try to revolutionise the entire process of production. But certainly the impact of the introduction of a new capitalist cash-crop production overwhelmingly changed the relationship in the socio-economic setup. Also the tea plantation sector of Assam employed the largest number of workers among all the organised industries in India and became one of the successful business concern. Samita Sen rightly points out in an excellent essay: ‘The tea industry in India-concentrated in Assam and North Bengal —was the most spectacularly successful colonial business enterprise.’

2 What Marx says about the usual bourgeois characteristic of the progress in the technical tools for production was non-existent in the case of the tea industry, where the use of mechanical instruments was quite insignificant and so, the technical revolution never occurred in the case of the tea industry. Marx has written: ‘The bourgeoisie can not exist without constantly revolutionising the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relation of society ....constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier epochs.’


The antagonistic relation between the labourers and the tea planters developed just after the establishment of the tea plantations and, particularly after the 1880s it took a serous matter of concern for both the owners of the industry and to the state. How did the class evolve itself in the tea plantation industry and how did they succeed in acquiring their rights to protest in an adverse circumstance was rather a fascinating story of resistance offered by the tea garden labourers against the planters. It was also true what the tea planters feared most was the possibility of the growth of organisation among the workers under the leadership of the bourgeois nationalists and after the 1920s, the tea planters were particularly conscious of not to give permission to enter and mobilise their workers by the leftists. If the high profile leaders of the INC were particularly apprehensive of the violent and unorganised protests of the poor workers, at the same time, the spirit of the subalterns like the tea plantation labourers did not lessen inspite of the negligence showed by the INC leaders. The peculiarity of the tea garden labourers protests was that it never did emanate itself from the enthusiasm of the outward elements but it did grow from the workers own political domain and their day-to-day experiences in their work places.

The national movement under the leadership of Gandhi then failed to bring the lowest of the lower level of the colonial Indian society to nationalist line. Was it happened because of the multi-class character of the movement? In this context, Bipan Chandra has defended the nature of the Congress led movement in India:

The Indian National Movement, as an anti-colonial movement, in which the primary contradiction put the entire society against colonialism, was a popular, people’s movement, a multi-class movement which represented the anti-imperialist interests of all classes and strata. It did not, therefore, have to have a specific, pre-determined, necessary or inevitable or fixed class essence or to bear a direct or necessary relationship to classes. While the anti-colonial nationalism does not arise or function in a social or class vacuum, it does not have to have a specific class belonging, for it represents the primary contradiction of the entire colonial society vis-à-vis colonialism. It is, therefore, incorrect to assume that an anti-colonial national
movement serves (or must serve) in practice only one specific class and goes against or does not reflect the interests of another specific class or classes. Such an assumption is particularly untenable when an anti-colonial or national movement has acquired a mass-based character.⁴

In the context of the national movements in Assam (since 1920s), the spread of the movement did not lead either to ‘a single unified movement’ (with the workers).⁵ The protests against the planters' exploitations in the tea estates of Assam was broadly unconnected with the progress of the national movement and also the main leaders of the movement showed a cool temper towards the great initiatives of the labourers.

The positive aspects of their (tea plantation labourers) struggle were important than the supposed negative features of their methods of struggle. The pace of their protests sometimes took a sharp rise but after a little while its tenacity of standing on their own demands slowed down remarkably. Those protests were never lasted for a month unlike the textile workers' strikes in Bombay, where external support to the workers' cause helped in giving a stiff resistance against the mill-owners. But, the culture of protests, as developed in the case of the tea plantation labourers' grievances against the tea plantation authority, was itself a brilliant example of the militant spirit of a subaltern class.

At the same time the negligence of the native elites towards the labourers' cause was also a significant aspect. It became certain that the rising bourgeois expectations of the native elites were never to get entangled themselves in the violent protests of the labourers. The Assamese elites in fact tried to emulate the examples shown

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⁴ Bipan Chandra: *Indian National Movement* - The Long Term Dynamics (Delhi-1996), Pp. 68-69
The whole small text is a fine example of the defense of the nationalist leaders and basically the ideological framework of the national movement.

⁵ A Guha has explained about the impact of the first movement (Non Cooperation Movement) and the subsequent strikes in the tea gardens: 'Ideological reservations prevented the well-organised Non-Cooperation movement and the spontaneous strike wave from welded into a single, unified movement. What happened came closest to such a development in the Surma Valley. Even there what was achieved was far from a conscious multi-class, anti-imperialist front.'
A. Guha: *Planter Raj to Swaraj* (Delhi-1991), p. 139
by the British tea planters in Assam and to bring the bourgeois capitalist development to the province; they were not in favour of destroying the capitalist manoeuvres like the tea plantations. No doubt, the indigenous tea capitalists also had to face great obstacles in their path of commerce and the prejudicial colonial policies ultimately did not bring great results to their entrepreneurial efforts.

The domination of the "Planters Raj" over the social life of the native elites was apparently continued during the whole colonial period in Assam and the conscientious minds of Assam, like Nabin Chandra Bardoloi who went to England to plead for the inclusion of Assam's name in the Montagu-Chelmsford reform scheme with another fellow Assamese, Prasanna Kumar Barua, spoke frankly about the audacity of the British tea planters in their undignified behaviours against the native elites. Even the Chief Commissioner of Assam, Sir Beatson Bell did dare to 'boot in the person of the late Rai Bahadur Phanidhar Chaliha' and Bardoloi also said 'this was an insult flung not only at Mr. Chaliha but to the whole nation'. But, interestingly except making those verbal protests against such misdemeanours of the British tea planters, there was no such political mobilisation against the tea planters. Even, during the national movement period also, they were not in favour of taking up the real aspects of those disparities continued by the planters in Assam. Above all, the native elites almost did not take up the labourers conditions as their chief point of discussion.

The nationalist Congress leadership saw only the indiscipline amongst the tea garden labourers when the labourers continued their protest against the repression of their employers and the new elites were not in consonant with the logic of the workers culture of protests. The subaltern militancy of the labourers sometimes greatly created irritation among the native elites (e.g.1920-22). The politics of the elites, never gave sufficient importance to the legitimate demands of the workers protests. Perhaps, there

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6 Prasanna Kumar Barua, a local tea planter of the Dibrugarh sub-division of the Lakhimpur district later wrote that 'this part of the speech of Mr. Bardoloi was heard with raat attention by the members which made them look at each other with awry faces.'

Prasanna Kumar Barua: The Assam Delegation to the Joint Parliamentary Committee- Presided by Lord Selbourne 1919 (Dibrugarh-1955), p. 43
was a huge difference between the two classes in their methods of struggle or in ideological contents:

Mobilization in the domain of elite politics was achieved vertically whereas in that of subaltern politics this was achieved horizontally. The instrumentation of the former was characterized by a relatively greater reliance on the colonial adaptations of British parliamentary institutions and the residue of semi-feudal political institution of the pre-colonial period; that of the latter relied rather more on the traditional organization of kinship and territoriality or on class associations depending on the level of the consciousness of the people involved. Elite mobilization tended to be relatively more legalistic and constitutionalist in orientation, subaltern mobilization relatively more violent. The former was, on the whole, more cautious and controlled, the latter more spontaneous.\(^7\)

The sudden eclipse and compromises of the national movement at the crucial period had no such effects upon the workers protests and only in some specific contexts such as during the Non Cooperation movement; the workers had a great reason to join in the movement despite the Congress leaders' lack of response to the workers protests. The first organised form of political movement in the Province; the Non Cooperation movement succeeded in mobilising the peasants and petty bourgeoisie section against the British colonial rule. Gandhi's utopian hope for bringing Swaraj had much given a wide pretext for the peasantry and the workers a chance for ending their age-old exploitations.

The protests of the workers grew up in a terrain which was tortuous enough to live in and for breaking up the trauma of the capitalistic exploitations; the workers started their protests without any help from their learned compatriots. The

\(^7\) Ranajit Guha: *On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India* in Ranajit Guha (ed.): *Sub. St. -I* (Delhi-1997), Pp. 4-5
protests had an 'autonomous' nature, largely uninfluenced by the practical politics of the bourgeois nationalist leadership. What was at stake was the indomitable will of the workers; facing the atrocities of the colonial state as well as the planters and it seemed to have died immaturely without seeing the results and the negligence of the native bourgeois leadership almost brought a dead end to the pioneering resistance of the plantations workers. There has been provided ample justifications of the role of Gandhi and the INC, in the context of the poor workers and peasants struggles. Bhikhu Parekh, for instance, has justified the stand taken by Gandhi during the national movement and his poor performance in mobilising the poor workers for the movement has been explained as Gandhi’s more real moral concern to the deep aspects of the poor workers conditions and, which failed because of the failure of getting ‘adequate institutional articulation’:

Since the weaker sections of society had no real role to play in the struggle for independence as Gandhi conducted it, they were barely visible within it. Hardly any of their leaders was ever elected or appointed to a local or regional Congress committee, let alone to the AICC or as Congress President. Thanks to Gandhi, they were a pervasive moral presence within the Congress but, since they lacked and organised and voice of their own, they had no political presence. Being nowhere near its centre of power, they were not involved in shaping its agenda and priorities. .... Within such a politically unbalanced context, Gahdhi's deep moral concern for the poor and the oppressed could not find adequate institutional articulation.9

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8 About the 'peasant insurrection' of the twentieth century (particularly since the early 1920s), Gyan Pandey has emphasised the autonomous nature of the insurrections: '...many of the most important peasant insurrections in the country were largely autonomous, and that the intervention of 'outside' leaders was a marginal and, often, a late phenomenon.'

G. Pandey: Peasant Revolt and Indian Nationalism: The Peasant Movement in Awadh, 1919-22 in Ibid., p. 151

9 Parekh still does not find great fault in that mechanism followed by the Congress in respect of the poor workers and he has sincerely explained without any analytical criticism of the role of Gandhi and the INC: 'Thanks to the logic of the nationalist movement under Gandhi’s leadership, the Congress contained mutually regulating pro-bourgeois as well as pro-poor, pro-industrialist as well as pro-peasantry tendencies within its overall middle class framework. Since Gandhi failed to mobilise the poor, the pro-capitalist tendency was stronger; but the anti-bourgeois tendency was neither absent nor too weak to offer strong resistance. Thanks to its middle class bias, the Congress did not allow itself to be taken over by either tendency.'

Bhikhu Parekh : Colonialism, Tradition and an Analysis of Reform (Delhi-1999), p. 317, p.320
The advent of Gandhi as the most popular leader and his visit to Assam had given a great boost to the rising nationalist intelligentsia of the Province. The lower middle class support to the Non-Cooperation movement and of Gandhi’s visit was the most important part of the events of the 1920-22. The effects of the Non-Cooperation movement upon the masses were tremendous and the involvement of the peasantry and the lower middle class from the 1920-22 onwards, became the most effective source for leading the subsequent phases of the national movement against the British colonial rule. The incident of the Chauri Chaura (U.P.), gave a good lesson to the Gandhian form of struggle where utmost importance was given upon the maintenance of discipline among his followers. Gandhi could not hesitate to call the people’s enthusiasm as unruly and burdened itself with a heavy contempt for discipline. Gandhi’s stiff insistence on discipline did led him to oppose the violent protests of the workers.

In Assam, the culture of the protests which had been continued by the tea garden labourers had become a direct contrast to the non-violent movement of the period (1920-42). The usual apathy of the Congress leaders towards the workers protests was the most significant feature of the movement and the Congress leaders excuse for not supporting the workers protests by citing the Gandhian principles, had made the workers struggles solitary in the isle of the national movement and its politics.

The political idioms of the workers had its own specificities and its regular threat or the real forms of struggles at the great risk of the colonial state and their employers’ extortion cum-repression, made their struggles vulnerable. The employers of the tea estates took extraordinary measurers to take care of any violent outbursts of the workers resistance. Since the Act XIII of 1859, the workers had to live in an ignominious living standard and the oppression of the planters upon the poor labourers was quite inhuman. Despite the rapid rise of the employers consciousness in the post-industrial revolutionary world regarding the rights of the workers and the workers struggle to attain those rights in the tea plantations, there was no such radical transformation in their (employers) policies towards the labourers. In Assam, no such progressive trend did ever
occur, because of the stiff resistance of the employers to bring any bourgeois nature of politics or development among their employees.

It would be much incorrect to say that the workers had no sense of consciousness about their shortages in their livelihood. In fact, the continuity of the strikes at heavy odds amply proved that the hidden grievances of the workers found an outlet through their protests, or, when they sometimes physically attacked their employers or struck their work.

The politics at the working place did not follow the bourgeois nature of politics, where much rhetorical vapours were thrown at each other. The restive nature of the workers always did become more transparent whenever they faced a hard lot due to the economic crises (e.g. 1920-22, 1930-39). The subjugation of the illiterate workers to the capitalistic discipline and rigour did not become a too tough task for the expatriate capitalists and that nature of the expatriate capitalists was more or less followed by their Indian counterparts also.

The militancy of the working class during the colonial period in India, never posed as a great challenge to the dominating nature of the capitalists. Their militant spirit only confounded itself in their respective domain (working place) and the culture which they tried to follow, significantly gave a huge shock sometimes to their opponents (employers). The use of the metaphors like the class conflict or the organised working class consciousness would not be suffice to describe the heterogeneity of the workers form of protests. But the homogeneity among the capitalists was another significant factor, out of which the capitalists made their drastic transformation in their ways of exploitations.

The pre-capitalist formation of the working class sometimes was preserved by the colonial state and the capitalist monopolists; lest the disintegration of the pre-capitalist features within the working class would create discomfiture in their uninterrupted rule over the exploited sections. In the context of Assam, the workers had
to face a double edged precarious situation because both the colonial state and the capitalists and the nationalist intelligentsia were against the workers protests.

The intrusion of the Communists into the domain of the working class politics was not rapid and it lost its dynamic character with its usual sarcastic (verbal or practical) entanglement with the INC leadership, thereby hampering the workers struggles. The bourgeois Congress leaders after their capture of the government seats (particularly in 1937 election or in 1946), also, followed the colonial masters policies in respect of the maintenance of discipline among the labourers and they did not care to take resort to military help whenever the situation seemed to be uncontrollable. The trade union movement did not advance so far due to several reasons and the membership in some specific industrial sectors was quite small.¹⁰

The knowledge gathered by the working class about the conspicuous political development or about the different laws concerning themselves, only filtered down in to their stream of politics through some indirect channels. Their subalternity got a huge chance of overcoming that barrier after 1920s when the ideas of Gandhi and his Swaraj formula, gave potential scope for the unification among themselves towards the cause of an independent nationhood but that was largely impeded due to the opposition of the bourgeois nationalist politicians against the joining of the workers in the national movement. The controlled form of militancy of the intelligentsia and the elite nationalists led struggle usually got higher importance in the nationalist politics.

The INC thought that only under an indigenous form of government, the exploited sections could hope for the better result and they thought, if the working class militancy would ever coalesce itself with the nationalist politics then it would be great deterrent in the path of winning independence for the country. The workers demands and their protests never did create enough impression among the bourgeois nationalists and

¹⁰ ‘The low membership of the trade union organizations in India was mainly due to such reasons as the poverty and cultural backwardness of the workers, danger of victimization at the hands of the employers.’
A.R. Desai: Social Background of Indian Nationalism (Bombay-2006), p.198
both the colonial state and the nationalist themselves had remained more prompt in suppressing the workers strikes. What irritated most to the INC leadership; the Communist Party's part in the working class mobilisation and the CPI's stand in a crucial period of the freedom movement (1942-45).

Both the INC and the colonial government thought out despite the turbulent game of politics during the eventful periods of 1942-1947, that the Communists members had been misguiding the workers struggles. After 1940s the Congress had become more conscious in safeguarding their hold among the working class population and the peasantry and the electoral concerns compelled the INC leadership to look newly (but with same bourgeois mentality) into the labour world.

But, the dynamic pattern of the culture of protest among the plantation labourers never lost its charm even in the month of August 1947 and the tea plantation labourers themselves did not observe any kind of jubilation in the crucial month of the millennium, because the achievement of freedom did not seem to have radically transformed their material culture.