

THE RAILWAY WORKERS STRIKE OF 1974: IMPACT IN THE EASTERN AND NORTHEAST FRONTIER RAILWAY ZONES

Sanghamitra Choudhury

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Indian Railways started its journey in 1853. It is the single largest state owned and state operated system in Asia. It has contributed enormously in the making of modern India. The railways employed a large number of worker's and worked at its maximum capacities after independence. Enormous traffic volumes both passengers and goods traffic compelled the workers to work without limiting the time, which exhausted them largely. It was really inhuman to work for 16-18 hours per day continuously. The Central Government employees abide by the recommendations of the Central Pay Commissions. During 1960s to 1970s Indian economy was worst hit by the inflationary crisis, price rise of essential commodities which led to fall in real wages. Hence sporadic labour unrests became common in different parts of the country.

1960, 1968 and 1974 were the years of major struggles launched by the Central Government employees and especially by the railway workers and amongst these three the most violent and strong was the strike of 1974 led by the railwaymen. This strike lasted for three weeks. The railway workers asserted their power and strength over authoritarianism and had emerged as a symbol of solidarity and unity of the entire working class of the country. It began on 8th May, 1974 with a Charter of Demands which incorporated demands like wage parity with the workers of other public sector undertakings, need based minimum wage, revision of D.A. formula, bonus, working hours and some other issues. The government had brutally suppressed the railway workers' struggle by dismissing or removing them from services, arresting the workers even before the strike began, unleashing immense torture and harassment on the employees and their families.

The Research Questions

Considering that the strike was the most important one in the country in our study we seek to answer some important questions related to the strike.

What were the grievances of the railway workers?

How did the railwaymen and their trade unions in the Eastern and N.F Railways prepare for an indefinite strike?

What was the situation that prevailed in the Eastern and N.F Railways during the strike days?

What were the impact of the May 1974 strike in the Eastern and N.F Railways?

How did the State react towards the working class struggle in India?

Objective of the Study

The objective of the study is to find out the reasons behind the strike of the Railway men in 1974 and certain other related questions. We intend to find out the grievances of the Railway men particularly in the two zones Eastern Railways and in the N.F Railways which led to the extreme decision to go for an indefinite general strike. The study also looks at the impact of the strike particularly in these two zones. We try to find out whether all the shades of opinion in the railway trade unions and the category unions had participated in the strike or not. It looks at the preparations of the trade unions for launching such an indefinite general strike throughout the country. It attempts to explain the nature of the 1974 railway strike. It looks at the situation that prevailed in the Eastern Railways and NF Railways during the strike days of May 1974. The present study also intends to measure the velocity of the strike action led by the Indian Railway men especially in these two zones. Another objective of this study is to demonstrate and analyse the reaction of the union government towards the movement or how the State had responded to the Railway men's demands and the strike which they have resorted to. It looks at the consequences of the Railway general strike in Eastern and N.F Railways.

Research Methodology and Data Collection

The study required both primary as well as secondary data. Primary data are of different types. This study required oral information or oral history that we considered as the most significant resource for this research. We therefore, interacted with the participants in the strike. The opinions of the permanent and casual workers and union leaders of the Northeast Frontier Railways and Eastern Railways are the most valuable resource. Documentary sources were also used. The documents collected and used were government file, administrative reports, reports of governmental committees, peoples' accounts, reports of the public accounts, trade union publications, union records and pamphlets and other daily reports etc.

Apart from Primary data, this study required Secondary Data too. Although sources were limited, few books and articles were available on the railwaymen's struggle of 1974 such as, the articles of Biren Roy, Nabojyoti Chowdhury etc. And few articles written by Ranabir Samaddar, Krishna Ananth, Gopalakrishna etc. are really helpful in understanding the relevance of the strike. Stephen Sherlock's two works, one book and one article remain's the most important of all the works. Books and journals are available in the field of labour movement in general in India but not many researchers and historian's shade any light on the trade union movement in the railway industry. Few articles journals and magazines exists. Magazines provide valuable information in this field of study. Newspapers reports and periodicals during the period from August 1973 to June 1974 were another significant source of secondary data. These data such as books, journals, newspaper reports were collected from National Library, Kolkata, Jawaharlal Nehru University library, New Delhi, Nehru Memorial Mueseum and Library, New Delhi, Library of University North Bengal.

The Chapters

The study has been arranged into six main chapters excluding the introduction and the conclusion which are also chapters. The first chapter proper describes the industrialisation process in India and the emergence of industrial working class in the

colonial period since independence till 1974. This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section has discussed the establishment and growth of railway industry and the emergence of industrial workers in colonial India. The Second section of the chapter describes the process of industrialisation specifically the process of the development of railway industry since independence till 1974. The third section of the study attempts to look at the process of development and consolidation of the railway workers as an industrial working class. This chapter provides a brief history of the railway workers' oppression in the colonial period.

Chapter two explains the emergence and nature of workers' resistances in the Indian Railways since its inception up to 1974. This chapter enquires the reasons behind the workers' grievances and their discontentment in the railway industry till 1974. It is divided into two sections. The first section analyses the growth of labour unrests in Indian Railways in the colonial era till independence. The second section of this chapter observed the nature and development of trade union movement in the Indian Railways from 1947 to 1974. This section has also attempted to find out the reasons of workers' resentments which compelled them to form category wise unions based on craft sentiments. This chapter looks at the causes of workers' resistances in the railway industry since the beginning of the industry up to 1973.

The third chapter is divided into two sections. The first section has focused its attention on the grievances of the railway workers which forced them to revolt against their authority. It also discusses on how the railwaymen had prepared themselves to launch an indefinite and general strike throughout the country. The second section has tried to observe the situation that persisted in the different zones of the railways all over the country during the strike days in May 1974. Chapter three tries to give the answer to the question i.e., 'the reasons behind the grievances of the railwaymen' raised by this study, the grievances that compelled them to go for an indefinite strike.

The fourth chapter deals with the May 1974 strike in Eastern Railways. This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section attempts to discuss the discontentment and grievances of the workers in the Eastern Railways. It also intends to elucidate the process of the preparations of the various trade unions in the Eastern Railways for launching a general and indefinite strike throughout the country. The

second section has dealt with the situation during the twenty days of strike in this zone. In the third section we analyse the impact of this struggle on the economic, political and social spheres of the country. Chapter four addresses the answer to the questions of strike preparations in E.R by the railwaymen and it gives an account of the situation that prevailed during the strike days and also the impact of the movement in this zone.

The fifth chapter focuses on the Railway Workers' Strike of May 1974 in the Northeastern Frontier Railways (N.F Railways). It is divided into three sections. The first section has discussed the grievances of the railwaymen in N.F Railways. It also tries to describe the preparation of the railway workers of this zone before the strike began and how the workers of N.F Railways along with the other zones had prepared themselves for the general strike. The second section of this study intended to discuss the strike situation throughout the N.F. Railways during the long twenty days of the strike. The third section we mainly dealt with the impact of the strike in the N.F. Railways. In this section we analyse the consequences and effects of these long days of workers' movement in the entire N.F. Railways. Chapter five attempt to give answers to the questions regarding the preparations and situations of the railwaymen's struggle in N. F Railways. It also answers the question of impact of the strike in this Zone.

Chapter six deals with the response and reactions of the Railway Board in particular and the Indian State in general towards the strike of May 1974. This chapter has two sections. The first section examines the reasons behind the attitude of the Railway Board towards the railway workers' resistances in this industry and other industrial sectors since independence till 1974. The second section of this study is an attempt to unfold the responses and reactions of the government as well as the Railway Board towards the railwaymen's struggle in May 1974. It also has tried to find out the causes behind the anti labour attitude of the government of India. The question 'what was the attitude of the State towards the railwaymen's strike?' raised by this study has been answered in this chapter. After having done all that we have attempted a summary and conclusion at the end of the study.