

## **Origin of Labour Movement in the Tea Plantations of Duars Region from 1860 to 1947: A Study**

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The labour movement in the tea gardens of Duars region which involved more than two lakhs of workers was of rare occurrence though there were other movements of labour belonging to different industries present during that period. Neither the troubles of 1921 nor the political agitation of 1939 affected the Duars. Labour movement in its organized form resulted much later. There were certain reasons behind this late origin:

- The geographical location of the Duars was one great factor. The tea districts of Jalpaiguri were isolated from the rest of the country. The communication system was also weak. For many years the bad reputation of the Dooars for malaria and black water fever effectively discouraged political leaders to work here.
- The majority of ownership of tea gardens belonged to the local middle class Bengali's. These people discouraged any kind of formation of political association which may disturb their tea gardens in the long run.
- The district political leadership was in the hands of the highly educated elite class and they were not interested to maintain any kind of communication with the labour class who were recruited from regions outside the province. The social relation between them was absent.

The British had a different view about the absence of labour movements in the tea gardens. They felt that as the labourer came from distant areas they became wholly dependent on the manager for the simplest amenities and necessities of life putting them under direct control of the managers. To quote Griffith, "the unquestioned king of a garden population geographically isolated from more advanced elements of society". At the same time it was felt that the situation was balanced as the tea garden managers in the last few decades being drawn from a better class of society the situation of tyranny was avoided with a feeling of paternalism. The managers built the houses of the coolies, established the market and regulated the prices, supplied rice when necessary, constructed puja houses where religious festivals were held and solved the disputes between labourers. The abundance of such managers were found in great majority. According to Griffith majority of the tea garden coolie was happier than that of the ordinary Indian landless labourer at that time. Thus under such system strikes and riots were of rare occurrence. He felt that the labourers in the nineties appeared to be more self confident

and perhaps was less inclined to accept the absolute authority of the manager. This was mainly because of the rise in prices in daily goods and also the influence of the political developments which were then moulding India in a more progressive pattern.

According to the British Government Report in 1895 the planters and the Government was made aware of the situation. The labourers were becoming aware of their rights and they were protesting against any wrong committed by the planters. The tea labourers were demanding more rice in ration. In 1911, there was report that labourers in the few gardens were revolting against the oppression of the planters. They were protesting by not going to work and moving out of garden. In 1916 there was 'tana bhagat andolon' in the tea gardens which created an awakening among the labourers of tea garden.

It was only in 1920-21 that the influence of the non-cooperation movement was felt in the Duars region. The coolies felt it was an opportunity to gain ownership of the gardens. The political agitation was noticed in the different gardens of Jalpaiguri separately but it failed to develop into a greater movement. According to the new rules implemented by the government in 1935 one seat was reserved for the labour from the Duars garden. As there was absence of any kind of association in the gardens an independent member named Babu Litta Munda supported by the owners of the garden became selected for the post.

It was in 1938-39 that the Indian Communist Party of India which was declared illegal began working at Jalpaiguri under the disguise of the Congress Socialist party. They were more involved with the peasants than the labourer's movement. According to the Labour Investigation Report on 1944, it was mentioned that the Duars tea garden within the last five years were found to be more or less peaceful other than few occurrence of strikes. The Duars Plantation Report in 1945 also claims that the situation in the tea gardens were peaceful. According to the Rege Commission Report the labourers were, "*all unorganized and helpless. The Dooars Planters Association stated that there were only two small strikes in the last five years..*" The National Commission of Labour(1969) stated that the "*access into the plantations was difficult, if not impossible and attempts to form trade unions before independence were seldom successful.*"

It was only in 1946 that serious unrest was witnessed in the tea gardens of Jalpaiguri. According to the Report of the Indian Tea Association for 1947, "*as a result of outside agitation bands of labourers had left their work and headed by Communist leaders, were roaming the countryside, in many cases armed with lathis and spears, with the object of entering bustees and raiding paddy stocks in support of a general demand by the ryots of the district for a two-thirds share of the paddy crop, instead of the half share which they had always received in the past from zamindars. In most cases the demands were put forward by the labour to the tea garden managers, these included demands for increased rations of food and cloth and were not infrequently accompanied*

*by a demand for the dismissal of one or more members of the garden clerical staff, with the result that on some gardens the Indian staff had been forced to leave."*

Behind the rise of the trade union movement in the tea gardens the Bengal Assam Rail Road Worker's Union played an important role. The members of this Association secretly kept in touch with the labourers of the tea garden. They were at last successful in forming an association of the labourers of the tea garden in protest against the oppression of the planters. 'Jalpaiguri Cha Bagan Mojdur Union' was formed. The unions of Sungachi, Tunabari of Malbajar region, Lakhipara, Red Bank, Dalpara, Diana (Banarhat) and Danguajhar near Jalpaiguri town were found to be more active. To note these unions were all near the rail junctions. Slogans like 'Hamara mung dena hoga', 'bilati malik London bhago,' 'includ jindabad', were often used by the tea workers. The ITPA reports that, *'the Communist Trade Unionist were able to stir-up unrest in several gardens'*.

From 1946 onwards the tea gardens of Jalpaiguri witnessed the birth of various trade unions. At Alipurdwar in 1946 under the initiative of R.S.P. the United Trade Union Congress different associations were formed in the tea gardens of Jalpaiguri. They raised their voices against the low wages, revive and reform the job agreements, to maintain equality in all the gardens in regard to privileges granted to the workers. Nine gardens under the Shaw Wallace company at Alipurduar protested against the less distribution of ration rice leading to strikes in those gardens. The Jalpaiguri district Cha Bagan Majdur Union presented their demands to the Labour Commission. The demands were increase in wages, good living condition and better medical facilities. The other two important unions formed at this time were 'The Gorkha League' and 'Congress Socialist Party'. According to the DPA's Annual Report 1947-48, *'work in a large number of tea garden came to a stand still inspite of the employers trying their best to prevent workers from leaving. The rebel-workers also put forth their own demand which mainly related to improvement in their living conditions and increase their food rations.'*

Inspite of all this developments it was noticed that the orderly progress of the unions in the tea regions of Jalpaiguri district was hampered by the absence of sound, active and political leaders. In the meantime the Congress wanted to establish their union in the tea gardens of this district with the prior permission of Dooars Planters Association and Indian Tea Planters Association. (I.T.P.A. Report 1947). The planters in order to balance the Communist movement which was becoming very intense in the tea gardens began to encourage the Congress to form unions in their plantation region.

According to the letter written by Deputy Commissioner of Jalpaiguri to the sub-divisional commissioner the situation becomes clear, *"all the politically minded people in it (the district) are deeply concerned financially with tea and they do not want the labour force upset....I should regard the tea gardens area as quite safe, unless some notorious and diabolical expedient is suddenly sprung on us by which the coolies can be aroused to frenzy."* Another letter written to the Bengal Chief Secretary from Sub-Divisional Commissioner of Rajshahi mentions, *"so far as can be seen no interference with labour*

*on tea gardens is likely. The Congress leader and every Indian of means in Jalpaiguri are deeply involved in the tea industry and the last thing they desire is any trouble which would affect the dividends. Possibly they would not mind creating trouble in British owned gardens but would be afraid of it spreading to Indian gardens.'*

The extract from the Proceedings of the special meeting of the Executive Committee of the Indian Tea Planters Association held on August 2, 1947 mentions, "the meeting considered the letter dated the 25<sup>th</sup> July from the Jalpaiguri District Congress Committee wherein the Congress informed the Association of its desire to organize Trade Unions amongst Tea Garden Labourers. The Congress in its letter made it clear that as designing parties were exploiting the labourers for purposes other than for real benefit of the labourers, it intended to establish trade union which would be run on proper trade union lines. The meeting also considered the report of an informal discussion held on the 25<sup>th</sup> July 1947 between the representatives of the D.P.A., the Congress and the Association on the subject..." and decided that the, "Association should advise member bodies to give every possible help and assistance to the Congress". The D.P.A. also took decision to encourage the congress to form unions, "the Congress members with cards of identification will be given permission to hold meeting in gardens with a view to form unions". According to the D.P.A. Report of 1948 it was found that, "about thirty Congress sponsored unions had been started". Thus the unity of the labour movement in the tea regions was hampered. The initial splits lead to more splits like AITUC, INTUC, CITU, UTUC resulting in multiplicity of unions.

In a broad sense the aim of the trade union movement was to unify the workers for collective bargaining and also to help the workers in developing their own leadership so that they could function without the help of outsiders. Thus though different garden unions were formed, many of these became controlled by self seeking local agitators, and the perennial quarrels between Congress, Socialist, and the Communist leaders and the factions existing within each group maligned their character. The result was that it was not until 1955, after a period of general unrest and violence the Indian Tea Association gave recognition to the Dooars union.

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