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## **Organized Labour Movement in Assam: A Historical Study between the Period of Two World Wars**

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### **Abstract**

*Labour movements were born out of the industrial revolution and originated in England. With the emergence of industrialization and development of capitalism, workers realized the fact that they could not withstand the power of the employer alone and have to bargain collectively. The period 1918-1921 was an epoch making period in the history of the Indian labour movement. The period intervening the two World Wars constitutes an eventful phase in the history of organized labour movement in Assam. This period was marked by increasing consciousness on the part of the labour. Just after the First World War, a wave of organized labour movement started in both plantation and non-plantation sector in the province of Assam. Most of the strikes were inspired and influenced by different political ideologies. Some of them received serious political as well as national attention and sympathy from the labour class of the country and abroad.*

**Key Words:** *Industrialization, Consciousness, Labour-Movement, Influence, Political-Ideologies*

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**Objective of the Study:** In the study, an attempt has been made to analyze the history of the Organized Labour and Trade Union movements during the period of two world wars in the British Indian province of Assam. The study primarily include strikes for instance, *Dibru-Sadiya Railways, Assam-Bengal Railways, Assam Railways and Trading Company and the Assam Match Company, Assam Oil Company Workers' strikes* etc. The whole study is divided into two-phase i.e. first phase covers the period of 1918 –28 and the second phase covers 1929-40.

In Assam, labour began to organise themselves slowly after First World War crisis period but by the second half of 1930s they showed sufficient strength to fight for their own rights. The working class and Organized Labour movement in Assam had its birth, gestation, growth and progress during the period intervening between the two World Wars. Without knowing the strikes and movements of this period, we cannot understand the trajectory of trade union movement in Assam. All the strikes and movements occurred just after the First World War will help us in our further study and guide us to know some of the

hidden facts of the movements. Therefore, my study will primarily focus on the various strikes, agitations and organized labour movements occurred during the two world wars period.

**Origin of Labour Movement:** Labour movements were born out of the industrial revolution and originated in England. With the emergence of industrialization and development of capitalism, workers realized the fact that they could not withstand the power of the employer alone and have to bargain collectively. In the early stages, labour unions were formed to regulate competition among the workers. The industrial revolution has impoverished the British peasantry, which was then forced to migrate to the industrial centres in search of work. There was constant competition between low paid workers and unemployed job seekers. If a worker was unwilling to work at a particular wage the employer could find several others who would be willing to work for even less. This competition for jobs depressed the wage rates and provided total power to the employers. Workers tried to overcome this competition by forming associations. They did so in the face of stiff opposition from the employers. In fact, trade unions were a result of these spontaneous attempts of workers to end competition.<sup>1</sup>

**Organized Labour Movement in India:** It has already mentioned above that the concept of labour movement has come with the birth of modern factory system. The Industrial Revolution in England gave birth of this system and a new working force in the form of factor workers emerged. The Industrial Revolution created a congenial atmosphere for the growth of the Labour movement and and gradually Trade Union Movement. The main element in the growth of Labour Movement in India is the setting up of large scale industrial units creating conditions of widespread use of machinery, change in working and living environments of workers and concentration of industries in large towns, all of which introduced a new class of workers who were dependent on wages for their livelihood.

The period 1918-1921 was an epoch making period in the history of the India labour movement. Before this, trade unionism in India was very negligible. Generally there were some organizations that came up but they were very short-lived. During the war, some efforts were made to organize workers on modern trade union lines, which ultimately culminated in an All India Trade Union Organization called All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) in 1920. In India, the first union was started in Madras by the initiative of Mr. B.P. Wadia in 1918. It was known as the Madras Textile Union. After, the World War I, a number of Trade unions formed under the different political organizations.

**Organized Labour Movement in Assam:** The period intervening the two World Wars constitutes an eventful phase in the history of labour movement in Assam. This period was marked by increasing consciousness on the part of the labour that resulted in a number of

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<sup>1</sup> Bhowmick, S.K., *State intervention and the working class movement-EPW-Vol.31Dec.28,1996*

strikes and the formation of labour unions. With the tea gardens, coalmines at Margherita and Ledo, Dibru-Sadya Railway Line, Oil Refinery at Digboi were established by the British for their necessity to rule the country and to continue imperialist exploitation. Thus, a new working class gradually came in to being irrespective of their caste, creed, religion and language. In reality, the workers of these industries have the same history of exploitation as that of the tea gardens workers. This condition of the working class paved the path for the trade union organisation in Assam.

The history of the trade union movement in Assam can be traced from the Post World War I. The price situation in Assam is essentially a manifestation of the All India phenomenon of rising prices. The rising prices of all the essential commodities after the First World War also affected the wage-earning population of Assam. In the beginning of the year 1920, the wage-earning population of Assam comprised primarily the emigrant labourers who worked mainly in the tea gardens. Dissatisfaction grew among the garden labourers. The price rise in the same period affected the wage earners of oil, coal, railway and other industries also. Though the wage earners at that time struck work to fulfil their legitimate demands, mainly the increase of their wages, they fought in a disorganised way. Just after the World War I, number of organized workers' movements occurred in different places but these movements were not well organized and not under any trade union. Due to the lack of adequate leadership and public support, these movements were failed to receive national attention as well as political intervention.

In this study, an attempt has been made to explain the various *Organized Labour Movements* of Assam occurred especially between the two world wars.

The period of study has divided into two main phase for the better understanding. The first phase covers the period of **1918 to 1928** and second phase covers the period of **1929 to 1943**.

**Major Organized Labour Movements in Assam (Period- 1918-1928):** In Assam, however, the first part of 1930's was comparatively peaceful. Of course, that does not mean there was no problem in the labour front. Labour problem was there but the workers' movements were mainly confined to the tea gardens and their number was much less than the preceding years. The number of strikes, unlawful assembly and cases of violence were numerous during the preceding decade. Nevertheless, during 1918s, a number of working class movements occurred in Assam. However, these were not well organized at all and not able to acquire serious political attention. However, when we discuss the organized labour movements in Assam then we cannot deny the movements occurred during 1920s. Therefore, here we will discuss all those major working class movements occurred in 1920s.

***The Dibru-Sadya Railways Workers' Strike (1920):*** The Dibru-Sadiya Railways workers' strike is one of the oldest Non-plantation organized labour strikes in the history of Assam. In July 1920, the workers of the Railways struck work demanding a fifty per cent increase of their pay. The strike continued for ten days. It was well organised and virtually

paralysed the entire Railways. The strike that continued for 10 days totally paralysed the entire railways network. One of the significant features of this strike is that the strike receives political attention. The strike was finally called off on 28th July 1920, after the management agreed to increase the workers' salary by thirty to thirty five percent.<sup>2</sup> It can be considered as the successful strike in the history of labour movement in Assam.

The remarkable feature of the strike was that the railway line passed through a number of tea gardens. Thus, the success of this strike influenced the neighbouring tea garden's workers and a similar wave of strike occurred in the different tea gardens of Lakhimpur district of Upper Assam.

***The Assam-Bengal Railway Workers' Strike (1921):*** Perhaps the first sympathetic strike in our country of a tremendous magnitude took place in 1921 when the workers of Assam Bengal railway resorted to an indefinite strike. The strike is very important from the historical point of view not only because it showed strong working class solidarity but also due to the fact that it attracted national attention and involved national political leaders. The strikers were clearly inspired by Non-Cooperation Movement that swept the country at that time. Unlike other labour movements of the period when the workers resorted to strike just to protect their own interest like demanding wage increase or reduced working hours etc., the workers of Assam-Bengal Railway resorted to strike just to express their sympathies towards the oppressed plantation workers at Chandpur in Assam. Although it was an organized movement but ultimately the struggle failed. However, its importance cannot be ignored in the trajectory of Organized Labour Movement in Assam. *"It was the first sympathetic strike organized in the country when thousands of workers belonging to different undertakings struck work and nearly sixty percent of them lost their jobs just for expression of their feelings of sympathy towards the cause of plantation labour and opposing the oppression of the British Government on them. The strike also exhibited the rising solidarity among the labour in the region which was hitherto absent."*<sup>3</sup>

***Dibru-Sadiya Railways Workers Strike, 1928:*** A seventeen-day strike was occurred again in the Dibru-Sadiya railways workers in 1928. In this strike 430 working people involved and ended in a wage increase for them. Earlier in 1920, the workers of Dibru-Sadiya railways went on strike and they achieved their ends. The main demand of the second strike was to revision of the wages of workers and introduction of a pay scale. About four hundred and thirty workers had been involved in the strike and the company had to concede to the workers' demands. The management declared a fifteen to twenty five per cent increase in the wages on different categories of labour. After the declaration of management, the strike called off. The second strike of the workers of Dibru-Sadiya also got its achievement.

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<sup>2</sup> A. Guha, *Planter Raj to Swaraj*(1977)

<sup>3</sup> Banerjee, Dipankar, *Labour Movement in Assam* (2005).pp38-39

The above-discussed strikes are the major strikes occurred in between 1918-1928. During this period of ten years, some other labour strikes were also occurred but here an attempt has been made to study and analyse only those strikes that were well organized able to receive political attention.

The second period of our study starts from 1929-1940. During this period, a number of organized labour and trade union movement occurred in Assam. If we ignore these strikes then we cannot be able to get historical background of the organized labour movement in Assam. Important among them –*Assam Oil Company workers’ strike, 1929, Dhubri Match Factory Workers’ Strike, 1935-36, Assam Oil Company Workers’ Strike, Digboi, 1939, Assam Railway and Trading Company Workers’ Strike, 1938-39 etc.*

***(Period- 1929-1940)***

***Dhubri Match Factory Workers’ Strike, 1935-36:*** The workers of Dhubri Match Factory again went on strike. In 1935-36, all the workers of the factory were again on a 57-day strike, in protest against retrenchment. It was inspired by Labour Party of Bengal. Therefore, it was a unionized movement and led by Bipin Chandra Chakraborty, a veteran trade unionist from Bengal. The strike was a successful one because the workers won almost all their demands. After this strike, resolutions passed at the Dhubri Labourers’ Conference under the guidance of Bipin Chandra Chakraborty clearly reflected the influence of the new communist ideology. On 14 December 1936, the workers again went on strike. Unlike the earlier strikes, when the company conceded the most of the demands of the workers, this time the management was very much adamant. The strike was continued till the April, 1937. The strike of 1936 had a great significance in the trade union history of Assam. It got mass support from the people of Assam. The critical state of affairs was debated in the Assam Legislative Assembly also and for the first time the trade union movement of Assam got political significance.

*"Another significance aspect of this strike is that the workers exhibited their Solidarity as a class which itself is an achievement from the point of view of maturing labour consciousness".<sup>4</sup>*

***Assam Railway and Trading Company Workers’ Strike, 1938-39:*** In 1938-39, the situation of labour unrest was serious in the British-owned Assam Railways and Trading Company (ARTCo) that owned an industrial complex including tea gardens in the easternmost part of Upper Assam. Benoy bhusan Chakrabarty, a tea garden doctor who had resigned his job, Kedarnath Goswami and Nilmoni Barthakur- congressmen with sympathy for the socialist and communist ideology- helped workers of ARTCo to get organized. With the help of these three people the ARTCo Workers’ Union was registered on 29 March 1939 and called for a general strike because this company owned an industrial complex comprising the Dibru-Sadiya Railways, several collieries, saw mills, some shares in Digboi Oil and four tea gardens in and around the towns of Margherita and

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<sup>4</sup> Bhuyan, A.C., *Political History of Assam (edited)*, Vol.-II, p.263.

Ledo. The strike was soon spread to many tea gardens. Workers of the Ledo Tea Estate organized a march towards Tinsukia, protesting against alleged stoppage of water supply by the company. The Indian Tea Association was forced to take emergency measures to tackle the situation, setting up a definite procedure and emergency committees to deal with strikes. It envisaged the launching of enquiry into labour grievances, the declaration of lockout if the strike was found to be baseless, and the initiation of publicity offensives against such strike. This strike influenced the plantation labours of Surma valley. In 30 September 1938, the workers of five tea gardens of Cachar went on strike, involving 2,000 workers. Due to labour unrest in both the valleys of the Province in 1938-39, the Provincial Government led by Gopinath Bordoloi of the Congress set up the Tea Garden Labour Unrest Enquiry Committee in May 1939, which however became defunct due to the planters' non-cooperation.<sup>5</sup>

***Assam Oil Company Workers' Strike, Digboi, 1939:*** The year 1939 has immense significance in the history of non-plantation labour movement in the British Province of Assam. In this year, the historic Assam Oil Company workers' went on strike that receives serious political and national attention. Assam Oil Company workers' Strike is one of the significant trade union strikes in the history pre-independence India. The main issues of this strike were - *unconditional recognition of the Assam Oil Company Labour Union, low wages, the retrenchment security of services, good quarters to all workers with due regard to the number of family members, forty-four hours of work in a week for all workers including medical staff, sweepers, production department, chowkidars and Bungla servants, service rules with provisions for gratuity, old age pension, one month privilege leave, festival leave.* The workers of Assam Oil Company got universal sympathy from the working class of India and abroad and also from the left nationalists.<sup>6</sup> The workers went on strike on the banner of Labour Union that posed an open challenge to the capitalist enterprise and so that company management was bent upon breaking the morale of the strikers. One of the worst examples of the strike was occurred on 18 April when a direct clash ensued between some strikers and a patrol of the Assam Rifles. Three labourers were killed and many were injured. This incident got a serious political attention and spread all over the country within a short period. The Bordoloi government immediately ordered a judicial probe into the matter but the findings of this committee was not appreciable for the working class. But due to the declaration of World War II, the area i.e. Digboi declared as "protected area" under the defence of India Rules. This forced the termination of a bold organized labour movement in a small oil town of Assam.<sup>7</sup> Although the strike got a heavy political attention from the provincial and national government but it cannot be considered as successful organized labour movement occurred just before the World War II.

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<sup>5</sup> Guha, A; *Planter Raj to Swaraj-Freedom struggle & electrol politics of Assam (1977).*

<sup>6</sup> Banerjee, Dipankar, *Labour Movement in Assam (2005).*

<sup>7</sup> Bhuyan, A.C., *Political History of Assam (edited), Vol.-II*

**Conclusion:** Organized Labour movement in Assam developed with the growth of the industries in this province. With the growth of large-scale industries, a distinct class known as the working class has emerged. The industrial expansion correspondingly led to the swelling of the numerical strength of the working class. In Assam Tea industry was first started and with the growth of the tea industries, the other industries also developed. However, along with Tea industry the working conditions of the other industries were not satisfactory. The low wages, unhealthy working conditions, etc. led them to organise and to take action for the development of economic conditions of the workers in the form of movement and gradually trade union organisations were formed.

The labour movements during the period of 1918 -1929 were essentially fought on economic grounds and did not directly aim at overthrowing the colonial rule. Post World War I was a period of skyrocketing prices and rising cost of living. Near stagnation of money wages and consequent decline in real wages therefore resulted in deteriorating conditions for the labour that provided grounds for organisations of labour for collective bargaining to get a fair deal from the employers. Most of the strikes were not successful and not able to receive any national and political attention. It is important to mention here that the pre- world wars workers' strikes were found largely in Assam more particularly in the plantation sector but due to the lack of adequate leadership and organization to handle the strike; these were not popularized and succeeded. Nevertheless, after the First World War, workers' political consciousness gradually increased and they got organized and went on different strikes in different ends and places. Although the strikes occurred between 1918 to 1928 were not well organized and not able to get success but these have some significant features.

Movements occurred between 1929-40 also have some unique features. During this period, socialists and left nationalists emerged on the scene more actively and they tried to give effective guideline to the workers to fight capitalist exploitation. The role, which they played in the labour movement in Assam particularly in Assam Match Company workers' strike, Assam Oil Company strike and tea-garden workers' strikes that took place during the period, was simply unique. During this phase of their struggle, labour movement in the province got a new dimension.

A noticeable feature of workers' struggles during the period in Assam was the absence of local leadership. The reason for this outside leadership in the working class movement in Assam were mainly that the workers were not yet in a position to handle organised trade union activities on their own till these strikes occurred.

At that time, most of the employers were foreign capitalists and had very close links with the Government and the bureaucracy; these movements were anti-imperialist as well. In most cases official bureaucracy, police and the district administration joined hands with the management to crush the labour movements. These were clearly visible almost in all the strikes of the period under study. Here it is important to mention that the political i.e. state intervention was found in the strikes occurred during this period.

Again, it is important to mention that politicians and parties have played a great role in organising trade unions. They were dominated by outsider and political leaders because most of the workers of India as well as in Assam were illiterate. The communist influence was found among the labourers of Assam from 1936-37. In 1935-36, the workers of the Match Factory of Dhubri went on for 57 days strike against wage cut and retrenchment of labour. This strike was inspired by the Labour Party of Bengal of which Bipin Chakravarty, a Communist leader, was a member. He organised a labour conference in Dhubri and utilised the opportunity in propagating Marxist philosophy among the workers. After this incident, Jawaharlal Nehru also came to Assam in 1937 and visited the industrial places of upper Assam i.e. Tinsukia, Makum, Digboi, Khowang etc and influenced the workers by his forceful speech to organize themselves. Communists and Socialists under the cover of Congress became active in 1938 in probing grievances of workers in Oil fields, collieries, tea gardens as well as of peasants. In 1938, Sudhindra Pramanik, who belonged to the Socialist group, organised the Assam Oil Company Labour Union. Along with these, the Assam-Bengal Railroad workers' union was also deeply influenced by Communist Party of India. So, political party influence was seen at that time in the trade union movements in Assam. After the analysis of the nature of organized labour movements in Assam, a very interesting fact can be observed that all the movements occur in same industries as well as same ends and demands. From the whole discourse of trade union movements in Assam, it can also be observed that the entire world faced a great economic crisis during the period between two world wars. During the twelve years between 1928 to 1940 which includes the period of deepest ever crisis of capitalist economy. At the same time, the industries in Assam, both plantation and non-plantation alike, faced workers' movements and strikes. So, it can be deduced as an impact of the worldwide economic crisis.

Thus, the whole discourse of Trade Union Movement in Assam discussed above provides us a strong historical background of trade union movement as basis for further study. Moreover, it also caters us a number of issues and facts along with some angles of research relating to workers' movements and trade union movements.

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