

Chapter 3

TEA GARDEN LABOUR IN ASSAM

‘The history of all the hitherto existing society of class struggle.....’ The Communist Manifesto written by Karl Marx and Frederic Engels is related to class consciousness of proletariat as well as labour and it opens with the sentence. The term ‘labour’ used in Karl Marx’s writings describes the activity by which human beings produce the means of their existence and their economic survival. Marx averred that human labour is self-actualizing, as it is through labour that human beings create value, maintain their existence, and confirm themselves in society and history. It is also called working class and the working class (or lower class, labouring class, sometimes proletariat) consists of those employed in lower tier subordinate jobs. This class typically includes blue-collar jobs, but it also includes large amounts of white collar and service work. The working class subsists on wages, by working for others, because it does not own independent means of income generation. Thus it therefore includes majority of the population in industrialized economies, of the urban areas of non-industrialized economies, and also a significant sector of the rural workforce worldwide. The working class generally includes all of those possessing below average incomes, but it may also include layers that earn high incomes (Marx 1848).

THE WORKING CLASS

In Marxist theory and socialist literature, the term ‘working class’ is often used synonymously with the term proletariat, and includes all those who commit either mental or physical labour to produce economic value, or wealth in non-academic terms, for those who own means of production. It thus includes knowledge workers and white collar workers who work for a salary. Wages can be very low; there

may be the state of unemployment, i.e., lack of independent means of income generation and lack of waged employment. The working class also includes the extremely poor and unemployed who are called the lumpen proletariat. As the working class exists through social relations, it can't be defined in the strict sense; rather it changes, in capitalist society. The term 'working class' may alternately be derogatory, or expressing a sense of pride in those who self-identify as with the working class (Marx 1848).

Karl Marx defined the working class or proletariat as a group of individuals who sell their labour power for wages and who do not own the means of production. According to him, they are responsible for creating the wealth in society. The working class physically builds bridges, crafts furniture, grows food, and nurses children, but it does not own land, or factories. A sub-section of the proletariat called the lumpen proletariat (rag-proletariat) consists of the extremely poor and unemployed, such as day labourers and homeless people. In *The Communist Manifesto*, Karl Marx argued that it was the destiny of the working class to displace the capitalist system, with the dictatorship of the proletariat, abolishing the social relationships underpinning the class system and then developing into a future communist society in which "the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all" (Marx 1848).

In Assam, the labourers are the integral part of tea garden industry. The labourers and the owners in the garden constituted bourgeois and proletariat or lower and elite classes. The elite class constituted the owners and management authority and the other class of the tea gardens consisted of the labourers. According to Karl Marx, the labourers are a central character of the production system. Intentionally, the Britishers developed their company through establishment of the tea gardens in Assam. Then they started labour indent from different states like Jharkhand, Bihar, Orissa, West Bengal and Southern part of India like Andhra

Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Kerala. As a result of migration of labourers (tribes and caste groups) for tea plantation, the term 'labour' has expanded a specific and popular connotation in these tea plantation areas, signifying such tribes as Santhal, Oraon, Munda, Bhumij, Mahato/Kurmi etc. These migrated labourers who are now increasingly prefer to be called 'Adivasi'. So, the Adivasis, being basically tea garden labourers, live in villages inside the tea estates established by tea planters. They have been classified as the More Other Backward Classes (MOBCs) in the Central List of MOBCs for the state of Assam. However, there is no single community described as 'Tea Tribes' and the term officially refers to collectively four groups of the existing plantation labourers; namely, (i) tea garden labourers, (ii) tea garden tribes (Tea Tribes), (iii) ex-tea garden labourers and (iv) ex-tea garden tribes (Ex-Tea Tribes) (Govt. of India 2012: 1-2). These migrant labourers comprise a large number of tribes and linguistic identities such as Santhal, Oraon/Urang, Munda/Mura, Bhumij, Mahato/Kurmi, Dom, Sora, Bhuiya, Pahariya/ Mal Pahariya, Kol, Bagoi, Kharia, Kond Asur, Ganju, Sabar, Garait, Gond, Paiyk, Mahali, Mali, Chassa, Kisan and Ho. They have historically been tribes and even today they continue with certain old traditions in backward conditions. Their own brethren in other parts of India have been accorded status of the Scheduled Tribes but in Assam they have been denied this status on the ground that they are not indigenous people in the land of the Assam state and due to this reason they have made some organizations by which they can raise their voice for demand, identity and rights.

THE TEA GARDEN LABOURERS: GENESIS OF CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS

The history of freedom struggle in Assam is unfinished if the struggle of the Adivasi plantation labourers is not counted. However, the scholar Amalendu Guha has rightly accounted the labourers' fight and struggle against the British Planters in his *'PlanterRaj to Swaraj'* (Guha 1977). This clearly shows that Adivasi plantation labourers fight against the colonial British. The conflicts began in 1904 -1905 when labourers demanded better facilities from the tea garden management. There were several strikes in the tea gardens during the period from 1911 to 1937. In 210 cases

the labourer - planter conflict took place, out of which 141 were cases of rioting and unlawful assembly, arising from the issue of inadequate remuneration and trying economic conditions. The Chargo Exodus not only shows the great sacrifice of 3000 Adivasi labourers but this also inspired the Railway workers to fight against the British. From 1916 AD to 1937 AD there continued labour unrest in the gardens of Assam. Adivasis themselves organized and fought against planters. A large number of Adivasi tea labourers sacrificed their lives for the freedom of Assam and India as a whole (Guha 1977).

Though India got freedom on 15th of August in 1947 when the Britishers left India, it did not liberate the Adivasi community from the slavery of the planters. The Indian Government never paid attention to them or neither did the Assam Government. Tea garden labourers including Adivasis organized themselves under the leadership of their own community and continued the struggle for their rights.

THE TEA GARDEN LABOURERS ORGANIZATIONS

The Tea Garden Labourers has so many organisations which has an unit comprising multiple people, that have a collective goal and Here, it is attempted to the major organizations of the tea garden labourers.

Adivasi Council of Assam (ACA)

ACA was formed under the leadership of Mr. Francis Hans and I.S. Ekka after Jaipal Singh Munda visited Assam during 1955- 58. It is the first Adivasi organization in Assam which started the movement demanding for Scheduled Tribe status for Adivasis in the organized way. To press their demand they submitted memorandum to the government and met the then Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi. It was through their strong lobbying that the nine Adivasi groups were decided to be enlisted in the ST list of the state in 1987 under the then Chief Minister P. K. Mahanta. But the

process was hampered as the 'tea tribes' related organizations and individuals demanded the ST status for the entire 'tea tribe', not only for the nine groups.(
<http://www.aktivasiawaz.com/st.htm>)

All Assam Tea Tribes Students Association (AATTSA)

Chotanagpuria Chatra Sangha formed under the leadership of Simon Singh Horo and Santosh Topno on 28th December 1947, which was, later, came to be known as Assam Tea Tribes Students Association. In 1984-85 it led a strong movement under the leadership of Lokeswar Kurmi (President) and Bhagirath Karan (Secretary). Their movement ended with an accord signed with AGP Government, according to which ATTSA got four AGP tickets for Assembly seats and all of them lost the election. However, AATTSA created identity of Tea Tribe which is not accepted by experts. On 14th August 2006 the Minister of Tribal Affairs in the government of India Mr. Silvius Condapan placed a bill in the parliament to include the Adivasis in the ST list, who announced that, as per the State Government's latest report 97 communities who were placed under the rubric of tea tribes had no primitive traits and lived in no geographical isolation. In 1985 Central Government was about to accord Scheduled Tribe status to nine Adivasi tribes of Assam. But the then Labour Minister Barki Prasad Telga and AATTSA leader Mr. Bagirath Karan opposed the move and submitted a memorandum to The Assam Government requesting to stop it. Their struggle for getting scheduled as STs is still going on in several ways. (<http://www.aktivasiawaz.com/st.htm>, on December 22 at 12.30 p.m).

All Adivasi Students Association of Assam (AASAA)

AASAA was formed on 2nd July 1996 after the ethnic clash in Kokrajhar. Initially it worked well to solve the problems of the Adivasis. It has been a strong

organization from 1996 to 2014. For the first time it was able to raise the demands of the Adivasis at Delhi. Adivasi masses were able to lead a strong movement demanding their rights from the government under the leadership of Justin Lakra of Gossaigaon (President), Joseph Minz of Lakhimpur (General Secretary) and Bosco Chermako of Gossaigaon. Several leaders of AASAA sacrificed their lives for the society, whose names are listed in the martyrs' list. Philimon Hemrom (Srirampur) sacrificed his life in a police firing on 5th July 2000. Andrius Marandi Assistant General Secretary of AASAA laid down his life at the gunshot of Bodo extremist on 8th March 2001. Eight Adivasis died in a police firing on 25th July 2002 during the bandh called by AASAA demanding rehabilitation of the Kokrajhar Adivasi Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and their scheduling as a tribe. The martyrs were Jiten Tanti, Arun Tanti, Nathenial Munda, Dambu Hasa Perti, Sanika Sawasi, Mangra Mund and Basudeo Kherwar. Hundreds of students were arrested and tortured whose names were not recorded. Another great contribution of the movement was formation of organizations like All Adivasi Women's Association (AAWAA), All Assam Santali Students Union (AASSU), Adivasi Sahitya Sabha (ASS) and many NGOs were formed to work for the Adivasi society. Several Adivasi Mahasabhas were organized which took resolutions and made plans to strengthen the community. A section of youth formed under-ground organization like Adivasi Security Force (ASF), Birsa Commando Force (BCF) Adivasi National Liberation Army (ANLA) and Adivasi Cobra Militant (ACM). Today, the movements and organizations of Adivasis have lost their strength due to lack of leadership and other organizations are also silent about their grave situation for several reasons (<http://www.adivasiawaz.com/st.htm>, on December 22 at 1.30 p.m).

Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC)

Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) is the trade union wing of the Indian National Congress. It was founded on 3 May 1947. It is affiliated to the International Trade Union Confederation. According to provisional statistics from the Ministry of Labour, INTUC had a membership of 3,892,011 in 2002. INTUC is widely accepted as a trade union that works with the management and is not a typical confrontational organisation. The foundation of INTUC on 3 May 1947, just 3 months before India attained Independence. Acharya J B Kripalani who was then President of the Indian National Congress inaugurated the founding conference of INTUC which was presided over by Sardar Vallabhai Patel. Among the distinguished leaders who attended the opening session were Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, Shankarrao Deo, Jagjivan Ram, B. G. Kher, OP Mehtab, Aruna Asaf Ali, Ram Manohar Lohia, Ashoka Mehta, Ramchandra Sakharam Ruikar, Maniben Patel and other prominent trade unionists. Under the guidance of Mahatma Gandhi, the founding fathers in their wisdom preferred to let the INTUC have an independent identity with its own constitution, while at the same time functioning as an arm of the Congress. (<http://www.adivasiawaz.com/st.htm>, on December 22 at 1.30 p.m).

The Present role and objectives of INTUC are mentioned hereunder:

To establish an order of society which is free from hindrances in the way on an all round development of its individual members, which fosters the growth of human personality in all its aspects and goes to the utmost limit in progressively eliminating social, political or economic exploitation and inequality, the profit motive in the economic activity and organization of society and the anti-social concentration in any form.

1. To place industry under national ownership and control in suitable form in order to realize the aforesaid objectives in the quickest time.

2. To organize society in such a manner as to ensure full employment and the best utilization of its manpower and other resources.
3. To secure increasing association of the workers in the administration of industry and their full participation in its control.
4. To promote generally the social, civic and political interest of the working class to secure an effective and complete organization of all categories of workers, including agricultural labour.
5. To guide and co-ordinate the activities of the affiliated organizations.
6. To assist and co-ordinate the activities of the affiliated organizations.
7. To assist in the formation of trade unions.
8. To promote the organization of workers of each industry on a nation-wide basis.
9. To assist in the formation of Regional or Pradesh Branches or Federations.
10. To secure speedy improvement of conditions of work and life and of the status of the workers in industry and society.
11. To obtain for the workers various measures of social security, including adequate provision in respect of accidents, maternity, sickness, old age and unemployment.
12. To secure a living wage for every worker in normal employment and to bring about a progressive improvement in the workers standard of living.
13. To regulate hours and other conditions of work in keeping with the conditions of the workers and to ensure the proper enforcement of legislation for the protection and uplift of labour.
14. To establish just industrial relations.
15. To secure redressal of grievances, without stoppage of work, by means of negotiations and conciliation and failing these by arbitration or adjudication.

16. To take recourse to other legitimate methods, including strikes or any suitable form of *satyagraha*, where adjudication is not applied and settlement of disputes within a reasonable time by arbitration is not available for the redress of grievances.
17. To make necessary arrangements for the efficient conduct satisfactory and speedy conclusion of authorized strikes or *satyagraha*.
18. To foster the spirit of solidarity, service, brotherhood, co-operation and mutual help among the workers.
19. To develop in the workers a sense of responsibility towards the industry and community.
20. To raise the workers' standard of efficiency and discipline.

THE TRADE UNIONS

Trade unions in Assam are basically a by-product of the industrial mode of production in the state. Trade union started in the year of 1939 with the registration of labour organizations of Assam. Syllate Cachar Cha Bagan Mazdoor Union and Upper Assam Tea Company Labour Union registered on 27th April 1939. Assam Cha Mazdoor Sangha formed under the banner of Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) on 9th August 1958 is the largest trade union in the tea gardens of Assam with largest membership. This organization today becomes just a means to capture the political power for Indian National Congress. It raises fund for the Indian National Congress from the labourers and provides vote bank. They are not interested in the development of the labourers and the community because this Trade Union Congress retains its power in Assam. The former Indian National Congress president of Assam Debokanto Baruah said, "So long as Alis and Coolies are with the Indian National Congress Party, it does not care for anybody. Several leaders were elected to Parliament and the Legislative Assembly but nobody cared for the community.

Leaders like Pawan Singh Ghatwar, Silvius Condapan, Prithvi Majhi etc are elected from this community but they have done nothing for the community” (<http://www.adivasiawaz.com/st.htm> on December 22 at 2 p.m).

The labour movement was active in the early part of 19th century and various unions were formed throughout the tea garden area in Assam regarding various issues of tea garden problems. The key issues of the labour movement has led to reforms and workers’ rights, such as the one day -week-end, minimum wage, paid holidays, and the achievement of the eight-hour work -a- day for labourers. Demand of the tea garden labourers are as follows:

1. Scheduled Tribe status should be given to all the Adivasi workers
2. Per day salary increase up to Rs. 330/- is demanded.
3. Clear provident fund money be provided to the old age tea garden workers and retired workers
4. Take action against Bhuban Valley Tea Garden Company which one is going to be closed and various labourers are also going to starve and die due to the complete failure of the per day salary, provident fund and other facilities to be guaranteed to workers of the closed gardens as Supreme Court guideline. There is prevailing chronic, abject malnutrition among the tea workers’ family members in all the tea garden in general.
5. Full ration should be provided to all the workers’ families at BPL price rate and also to the sick, closed tea-estates like Bhuban Valley.
6. Periodic medical health camps and medical check-ups should be organized in tea-garden areas.
7. All the tea-workers families should be included under the BPL category.

8. All the arrear and employment allowance under the MNREGA must be paid immediately.
9. 200 days of work per year should be provided to the job card-holders under the MNREGA.
10. On the basis of the guideline of Indian Labour Conference, 1957 and the directives of Supreme Court, the minimum wage of the tea-workers and the workers of all unorganized sectors must be fixed.
11. The wages of the tea-workers of the Barak Valley should be at par with that of the Brahmaputra Valley.
12. The power should be decentralized through multi-layered autonomy to ensure equal rights of all communities.
13. The rampant corruption at all levels and the skyrocketing price hike of essential commodities must be arrested, and the Lokpal act must brought into force.

In sum, there have been raised so many question about the identity and the struggle and present situation of the tea garden labourers in Assam specially Adivasi. Gopal Bhumij(a CPIM leader of Doloo tea Garden) said, “we are agitating against Assam Government and every Tea Garden Authority regarding our basic demand like ST status, salary, ration, provident fund, education and health facilities of the labourers. Generally it is organized in front of Assam State Assembly office or Secretariat and sometimes District Magistrate office by all the members of Assam Cha Mazdoor Sangha(ACMS), All Adivasi Student’s Association of Assam (AASAA) Adivasi Council of Assam (ACA) All Assam Tea Tribe Student Association (AATTSA) AllAdivasi Women’s Association (AAWAA), All Assam Santali Students’ Union(AASSU), Adivasi Sahitya Sabha (ASS) AdivasiSecuriy Force (ASF), Birsa Commando Force (BCF) Adivasi NationalLiberation Army (ANLA), and Adivasi Cobra Militants (ACM),Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC), Bharatiya Mazdur Sangha(BMS) and other organization of labourers”.