

## Labour Protest and Nepali Participation in Colonial Assam

Mineral oil is known to have existed invariably in or close to the outcrops of coal bearing areas of Upper Assam<sup>1</sup>. The earliest recorded notice of Oil in Assam is by Lieutenant Wilcox discovered in 1826 oil-springs and several coal-beds in south-east corner of the district Sibsagar<sup>2</sup>. He also mentioned that the neighbouring jungles were full of an odour of petroleum<sup>3</sup>. In 1828, C.A. Bruce refers oil-springs on the bank of the safari and its surrounded locality<sup>4</sup>. Major White also discovered several springs of petroleum at Nampong on the Namrup River in 1837<sup>5</sup>. Lieutenant H. Bigge and Dr. Griffith, also came across petroleum springs in the banks of the Namrup River, while they exploring for coal<sup>6</sup>. In 1838 Captain Jenkins observed several small springs of petroleum close the outcrops at Borhat, from which some quantities were collected by his servants<sup>7</sup>. In 1845, Captain P.S. Hannay, Commandant of the 40<sup>th</sup> Regiment Infantry, reported that he had come across ordinary oil along with ‘earthy and indurated sandy ashphalte’ at Nahar Pung near the mouth of the Namchik River. Mr. Hannay wrote: ‘that at times there is an internal noise as that a distant thunder, when it burst forth suddenly with a loud report and then for a time subsides’<sup>8</sup>.

In 1854 by Captain Dalton, Principal Assistant, Lakhimpur district reported the existence of oil-spring at Bopoopoong (the present site of Digboi), Makum and

---

<sup>1</sup> H.K Barpujari, *The Comprehensive History of Assam, Vol. V* (Guwahati: Publication Board Assam, 2004), p.86.

<sup>2</sup> H.K. Barpujari, *Assam: In the Days of the Company* (Shillong: NEHU Publication, 1996), p. 261.

<sup>3</sup> Lieutenant Richard Wilcox, “Memoir of a survey of a survey of Assam and the Neighbouring Countries”, Executed in 1825, 26, 27, 28,” *Asiatic Researchers*, Vol. XVII, (1832), pp. 314, 469.

<sup>4</sup> F.R. Mallet, “*Memoirs of the Geological Survey of India*”, Vol. XII, pt. 2, (1876), p.4. Also P. Goswami, *Assam in the Nineteenth Century: Industrialization and Colonial Penetration*. (Guwahati: Spectrum Publications, 1999), p. 110.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> H. Bigge, “Notice of the Discovery of Coal and Petroleum on the Namrup River,” *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, Vol. VI (1837).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 1838, Vol. VII, p.169.

<sup>8</sup> S.F. Hannay, “Notes on the Iron Ore Statistics and Economic Geology of Upper Assam”, *JASB*, Vol. XXV (1856).

Namchik<sup>9</sup>. At the same time Mr. Medlicott mentions the existence of oil springs at the deboucher of the Makum and also found oil oozing out at Hukanjuri, near Jaypur. He saw cracks of massive sandstone at Telpung on the Dikhow where oil was oozing at frequent intervals to the surface as well as streams of marsh gas bubbles<sup>10</sup>. Mallet also found a superficial deposit of the oil at Bapu (then called Babu Barpung) on the northern part of Tipam range<sup>11</sup>.

In 1854, an Australian speculator, Wagentriber, applied for lease of the oil spring in the district Lakhimpur to ascertain the quality and commercial value of the springs<sup>12</sup>. The Board of Revenue thereupon asked Mr. Jenkins, the Commissioner of Assam to furnish full particulars as to the working of the springs. Jenkins reported the existence of three springs at Makum, Bapoopung and Namchik<sup>13</sup>. The Commissioner, however, pointed out that Namchik being located three days journey away from the frontier outpost was insecure while Bapoopung was used by the Government as a trap for capturing elephants. Makum therefore could be leased out without any objection. E.T. Dalton, Principal Assistant, Lakhimpur estimated that the output of the spring was between twenty to thirty *seers* of oil per annum<sup>14</sup>. A scientific operation or the search for oil-fields of the existing areas was neglected, as the local demand for mineral oil was extremely limited<sup>15</sup>. The little quantity of kerosene that the officials and Europeans required was to kill the white-ants at their office, which was supplied by local traders<sup>16</sup>. The Board of Revenue, on the recommendation of Jenkins, the Commissioner, granted a lease to Wagentrieber “to operate the petroleum springs at Makum for a term of three years”<sup>17</sup>.

---

<sup>9</sup> Bengal Revenue Consultations 1854; 27 July, No. 204, Dalton to Jenkins, 2<sup>nd</sup> March 1854, also Barpujari, H.K. (1996). *Op.cit.*, p. 261.

<sup>10</sup> H.K. Barpujari, *The Comprehensive History of Assam, Vol. V* (Guwahati: Publication Board Assam, 2004), pp. 86-87.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.

<sup>16</sup> Bengal Revenue Consultations 1854; 27 July, No. 204, Dalton to Jenkins, 12 June 1854.

<sup>17</sup> *Assam Secretariat Proceedings*, Revenue A, July 1854, Prog. No. 18, also P. Goswami, *Op.cit.*, p. 111. ASA.

In 1865, Goodenough, of Mckillop Stewart and Company, Calcutta, applied to the Board of Revenue for a lease of petroleum springs for twenty years. The Board of Revenue was averse to granting of such long term leases. But Cecil Beadon, the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, felt that “the application should not be turned down unless the Government itself was prepared to undertake the operations”<sup>18</sup>. Local authorities were therefore, on the condition that to forbidden to interfere with the catching of elephants by the government in the neighbourhood of Jaypur and Makum, authorised Mr. Goodenough a rent free lease of petroleum spring for a period of twenty years<sup>19</sup>. Goodenough started operations near Jaypur and the first systematic boring for oil was commenced at Naharpung in November 1866<sup>20</sup>. His first attempt dug well which sunk to a depth of 102 feet at Naharpung, led to a dry well<sup>21</sup>.

On 26<sup>th</sup> March 1867, Goodenough struck oil at Makum, the oil was found at a depth of 118 feet and about 300 gallons of oil were collected<sup>22</sup>. Goodenough’s operations proved beyond doubt that there was abundant supply of mineral oil in Makum field<sup>23</sup>. By 1867-68 eight other wells had been boring at Telpung, south, of the Buridihing River near Margherita. The most copious discharge was from 550 to 650 gallons per day<sup>24</sup>.

Notwithstanding these successful results, Goodenough was failed in establishing a petroleum industry in Assam. The endeavours made by these pioneers were commercially unsuccessful mainly because the transportation difficulties which raised the cost of the oil which it could not compete with oil from Rangoon or America<sup>25</sup>. These unsuccessful operations, ultimately led Goodenough to hand over his petroleum

---

<sup>18</sup>File- Revenue, A, File 68, 1878, ASA, also Barpujari, H.K. *Vol. V. Op.cit.*, p. 87

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> F.R. Mallet, *Memoirs of the G.S.I.*, Vol. XII, pt. 2, (1876), p.55.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Barpujari, *Vol. V. Op.cit.*, p. 88.

<sup>24</sup> *G.S.I.*, Vol. VII. (1874), p.55.

<sup>25</sup> Mallet, *Op.cit.*, p.12.

rights to The Assam Mineral Oil Company<sup>26</sup>. This Company also failed commercially because of transportation difficulties<sup>27</sup>.

In January 1878, M/S Balmer Lawrie and Company, Calcutta submitted an application for 'right of raising' manufacturing and selling all petroleum and other minerals in the area Bapapung near Makum and Naharpung near Jaipur for a period of ninety-nine years<sup>28</sup>.

The company also submitted an offer to pay a royalty of one rupee on every hundred gallons of refined oil<sup>29</sup>. However, in consideration of the initial cost and the transportation involved, Government of India took a liberal view on the subject. It was decided to give the company the exclusive rights to extract petroleum and other minerals products at Naharpung and Makum for a term not exceeding fifty years. The lease was subject to the rental of Rs. 50/- per square mile which was to merge in the royalty paid for crude and refined oil<sup>30</sup>.

### **The Assam Railways and Trading Company**

Dr. John Berry White, Assistant Surgeon, 42 Regiment of Assam Native Infantry in civil Medical charge Dibrugarh was intimately connected with the exploration and development of petroleum industry in Assam. Dr. White along with Mr. J.C. Batchelor of East India Railways, Mr. A. Lawrie, Mr. Hudson, Mr. J. Simpson, supported by a solicitor Mr. Francis Barrow, formed a private oil company under the name of 'Assam Mineral Oil Company.' He was a person with "foresight, faith in future and preserverence, qualities most demanded in an entrepreneur"<sup>31</sup>. Sir Boverton Redwood, a petroleum expert had said that "Dr. White's scientific and practical knowledge of this subject, coupled with his long experience, has been of the greatest

---

<sup>26</sup> Goswami, *Op.cit.*, p.113.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> File- Revenue, File 68 of 1878. ASA.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> P.C. Barua, *The Saga of Assam Oil: From Naharpung to Numaligarh, 1825-1999* (Guwahati: Specturm Publication, 1999), p.28.

service in connection with petroleum work”.<sup>32</sup> But communication and transportation had been the main impediment to the development of oil and other industry in Assam. The most urgent requirement of Assam was an improvement in her transport and communication system. According to Mr. White “unless the indispensable preliminary of providing cheap and certain communication from the mines to the river is first undertaken by the Government, it is certain that no lease will be applied for.”<sup>33</sup> The idea of forming Railway Company had originated in 1877 when Dr. White “...planned of a railroad construction from the steamer *ghat* in Dibrugarh to the 51 mile on the Sadiya road, together with three branch lines extending to the coal and oil areas”.<sup>34</sup> Accordingly in 1879 Dr. White invited applications in London for shares in the proposed ‘Assam Railways Company.’ The project did not however, generate any interest among the financiers in London and the scheme collapsed. This disappointment however was temporary. Towards the end of 1888, the project of Dr. Berry White was brought to the notice of Benjamin Piercy, an engineer from London. He had been responsible for the construction of railways in England and other parts of the world. Piercy advised to widen the addition to timber and petroleum rights. According to his advice and raised scheme “that the whole scheme promised to provide a most remunerative investment”<sup>35</sup>. On 30<sup>th</sup> July 1881, the Assam Railways and Trading Company was incorporated<sup>36</sup>. Eventually, the Assam Railways and Trading Company played a vital role in the exploitation and development of the resources of the province.

### **Commercial Production of Oil**

In 1882 a concession was granted to the Assam Railway and Trading Company covering the petroleum rights over thirty square miles at Makum in the district of Lakhimpur. The lease was for a period of twenty five years with option of renewal for another twenty five years<sup>37</sup>. The Company had exclusive right to work petroleum

---

<sup>32</sup> W.R. Gawthrop, *The Story of the Assam Railways and Trading Company, 1881-1951* (London: Harley Publishing Ltd., 1951), p. 8.

<sup>33</sup> File- Revenue B, Letter No. 704, dated 22 March, 1879. ASA.

<sup>34</sup> Gawthrop, *Op.cit.*, p.8.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>37</sup> File- Revenue, 137R., 16, December 1882. ASA.

subject to the payment of royalty of four *annas* per hundred gallons of crude oil and a rupee per hundred gallons of fined oil for a period of five years, and thereafter 5 per cent of the market value of the crude and 2 per cent of the refined oil<sup>38</sup>. The ARTC commence their operation in that area by October 1884. The company had the right to surrender their lease, but transfer of such lease to be sanctioned by the Government of India<sup>39</sup>. The company selected the site south of the Buridihing and neighbourhood area which Goodenough had earlier worked in 1868. The ARTC made substantive efforts to work in this field by importing experts from abroad and after having invested substantial amount of capital; it was found that the wells in the area had been exhausted. Notwithstanding these disappointing results, the company applied for another lease about six square miles at Digboi. Meanwhile, company equally concentrated in constructing the railway line from Dibrugarh to Margherita, while they noticed oil seepages near present Digboi. Permission, however, granted an area near Digboi for “examining by boring or otherwise” with the condition that no trees can be cut or anything else done in the forest without the previous authorisation of the forest officials<sup>40</sup>. The company was granted a lease of four miles for twenty five years from 1892 at a royalty of eight *annas* per hundred gallons<sup>41</sup>.

Works on the fields at Digboi area was started in 1887-88. The first well struck in 1889 at a depth of 178 feet and was successful in extracting crude oil<sup>42</sup>. The company drilled four more wells in Digboi area in 3 years and total of 7 wells by 1893-94. They drilled another 3 by 1898 but oil could be extracted only in small quantities<sup>43</sup>. In 1888 Mr. Townsend was deputed by Government to inspect the Makum Oil field operations<sup>44</sup>. In spite of unsatisfactory results, he struck well at Digboi in 1888 and reported the discovery of a big well at Digboi. In his letter to Charles Elliott, Chief Commissioner of Assam, on 20 September 1890, he wrote “...the oil strata was pierced at 615' from the surface and the drill only entered it a few inches when oil rose

---

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> Gawthrop, *Op.cit.*, p.45.

<sup>41</sup> File- Revenue A, June 1894, 78-236. ASA.

<sup>42</sup> Goswami, *Op.cit.*, pp. 116-117.

<sup>43</sup> P.C. Barua, *Op.cit.* p.34.

<sup>44</sup> File- Revenue A, June 1894, 78-236. ASA.

at once...and flowed over the surface for a night...few more feet are drilled much greater supplies of oil and gas will be released”<sup>45</sup>.

Similarly, another concession of four square miles at Digboi on usual terms and condition was granted to Assam Oil Syndicate <sup>46</sup>. Meanwhile, Balmer Lawrie abandoned the project and became the agent of Assam Oil Syndicate. In 1888 Mr. Townsend revealed that the Syndicate had found oil in several wells<sup>47</sup>. The Assam Syndicate had already invested a considerable amount of money but want of adequate funds no attempt was made to construct a refinery or to follow up operations<sup>48</sup>. At a meeting of the Syndicate in Calcutta, most of the share holders felt that “there was no justification in sinking more money in what must still be looked on as a speculation”<sup>49</sup>. The company therefore sought permission of the Government of India to sale or transfer the concession to ARTC<sup>50</sup>. The Government of India accorded with the approval from Sir Henry Cotton, the Commissioner of Assam, approved the rights of the Company to ARTC as well as extended the period of lease from 25 to 30 years<sup>51</sup>.

Although drilling for oil by the ARTC continued to be successful. To carry on further operations and better results could be expected only with improved methods and induction of more capital. After a long discussion the Board of Directors came to the conclusion to form a subsidiary company. Accordingly in 1899, the ARTC promoted another company known as the Assam Oil Company. The ARTC transferred all the rights and privileges of both the Digboi and Makum oil concessions to the Assam Oil Company<sup>52</sup>. The Assam Oil Syndicate Company also transferred its rights to the Assam Oil Company<sup>53</sup>.

---

<sup>45</sup> File- Revenue B, 1892, 378-411. ASA.

<sup>46</sup> File- Revenue A, June 1894, 78-236. ASA.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> Barpujari, *Vol. V. Op.cit.*, p.90.

<sup>49</sup> File- Revenue A, June 1894, 78-236. ASA.

<sup>50</sup> File- Revenue A, October 1897, No. 74-84. ASA.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> Gawthrop, *Op.cit.*, p.47.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

In the meanwhile the Assam Oil Company was formed in London with a capital of £ 310,000 with the object of taking over oil concessions and plant of ARTC and the Syndicate<sup>54</sup>. The new company took over the petroleum interest including Makum and Digboi. Lord Ribblesdale, Chairman of the ARTC, became the first chairman of the Assam Oil Company<sup>55</sup>. The new company was looked after by the Agent and General Manager. Mr. A.B. Hawkins was the first General Manager of the Company in 1901<sup>56</sup>. The Company also erected a huge refinery and started production. The outturn of petroleum of the Digboi Refinery in 1901, was of 500 barrels or 20,000 gallons a day<sup>57</sup>. The first lot of Kerosine from the Digboi refinery appeared in the market in 1902. The Boards of the two companies ARTC and AOC, were intimately connected in the exploration of oil in the province. But in due course of time the ARTC did not relinquish their interest in oil entirely. Ultimately in January 1921, ARTC sold their shares to the Burmese Oil Company<sup>58</sup>.

Financial soundness as well as managerial and technical efficiency, on the other hand, was achieved by the oil industry of Assam after it was taken over by the Burma Oil Company from A.O.C. in 1921 after which production rose significantly.

**Table: 5.1**

**Production of Petroleum in Assam till 1946**

Year	Annual Production (in million gallons)	Year	Annual Production (in million gallons)
1918	11.0	1926	24.0
1919	6.57	1928	32.0
1920	5.11	1931	65.7
1925	10.95	1946	70.0

Source: R.B. Choudhury, *Economic Problems of Assam*, p.34.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> P.C. Barua, *Op.cit.*, p.42.

<sup>57</sup> Gawthrop, *Op.cit.*, p.47.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*



The annual production of petroleum went down from 11 million gallons in 1918 to only 5.11 million gallons in 1920, but the production recorded a gradual rise after the takeover of the management by the Burma Oil Company from 10.95 million gallons in 1925 to 70 million gallons in 1946, increased about six and half times<sup>59</sup>.

### **Initial Difficulties**

The twentieth century proved a successful one in respect of the development of mining industry in Assam. But it was not an easy task for the exploration and exploitation. The prime disadvantages under which the enterprise had to work in respect of the remoteness of the working areas and the difficulties of communication<sup>60</sup>. The area was covered by thick jungles and human inhabitation was almost unknown in such areas. The jungles were so thick and dense that even sunlight could not penetrate to the ground<sup>61</sup>. The remoteness of these regions had rightly remarked by J. Edward Wilson, when he traversed by the proposed railway were- “covered over literally with forest or jungle about as penetrable as a brick wall. The solitude of the desert may be great, but not as desolate as here and the absence of all signs of life, when a view of any extent of the country can be had, is sadly oppressive there being scarcely any indigenous population”<sup>62</sup>.

The unhealthy working condition in the jungle was a serious problem in the exploration of oil in the Upper Assam. Diseases like malaria, cholera and *kala-azar* which caused death of hundreds of lives in every year in Assam. The impenetrable jungle also caused malaria. Mr. Hopkinson, Commissioner of Assam reported on the unhealthy conditions of Assam that in Assam people were always “either falling sick, are actually sick or are convalescing and in which either of the three stages they may be, the work they have to do does suffer greatly. Moreover constant recurrence of disease and weakness, both in mind and body, breaks down hope, energy and enterprise and sets up in the place a desponding careworn mood with despair of

---

<sup>59</sup> R.B. Choudhury, *Economic Problems of Assam* (Guwahati: Kitapghar, 1991), p.34.

<sup>60</sup> File- Revenue A, November 1899, 47-49. A.S.A.

<sup>61</sup> Gawthrop, *Op.cit.*, p.35.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

everything and finally discontent creeps in everybody and everyone in Assam wishes to get out of it”<sup>63</sup>.

In every year flooded water of the river Brahmaputra on the one hand causes of widespread havoc on the other hand deposit of silt along with water made the soil fertile. Heavy rainfall and flood caused “its climate damp and relaxing, so that while the people enjoy great material prosperity, there is strong tendency towards physical and moral deterioration”<sup>64</sup>. Through moisture and humidity in summer and fog in winter it causes Malaria, Typhoid, dysentery, small-pox, gout etc., are the most common diseases of the valley<sup>65</sup>. The nature of the soil, climate, rainfall, flood and erosion and earthquakes occurring at regular intervals had been contributed in the high rate of sickness and mortality in the province<sup>66</sup>. When Cholera broke out in 1834, a large portion of the population of Assam was swept away by it<sup>67</sup>. Again in 1851, cholera took one fourth of the population of Guwahati within a few weeks<sup>68</sup>. The low natural growth rate of population was due to incidence of deadly diseases like small-pox, *Kala-azar*, Cholera and Malaria together with mortality in maternity and absence of proper medical care<sup>69</sup>.

With the discovery and development of the tea, the industrialisation of Assam in modern lines started. The development of tea industry also followed a number of linkage industries in the province. However, the most important problem that the industries had to squarely face was insufficient supply of labour. The local Assamese labours were prone to disappear during the harvesting season and little certainty of return. It was therefore, not easy to attract capital and labour to the province. Hence the bulk of the labour force had to be brought from outside of Assam. Labour force for the oil industry was also largely dependent on immigrant labour. The workers for the

---

<sup>63</sup> A.S.R. Letter No. 7/9, 16 November 1864, cited P. Goswami, *Op. Cit.*, p.124.

<sup>64</sup> P.C. Choudhury, “The Brahmaputra Valley: Its Civilization” in *Assam and the Assamese Mind*, eds., Nagen Saikia, (Jorhat: Assam Sahitya Sabha, 1980), p. 116.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p.117.

<sup>66</sup> John M’cosh, (2000). *Topography of Assam*. Second Indian Reprint, (New Delhi: Logos Press), pp. 70-92. (Original work Published 1837).

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p.114.

<sup>68</sup> H.K. Barpujari, *American Missionaries and North East India, 1836-1900* (Guwahati: Spectrum Publications, 1986), p.58.

<sup>69</sup> Robindra Kumar Choudhury, *Economic Problems of Assam* (Guwahati:1991), p. 29.

oil industry were recruited in to two ways; directly or through indirectly. The monthly wages of the labourers varied between Rs. 8 and Rs. 10 for a man between Rs. 7 and Rs. 9 for a woman<sup>70</sup>.

The Company Government entered Assam with the high hope of commercial benefit from the region. But their hope and aspirations soon proved disappointing one as local labour were very much scare. The disappointment was reflected among the colonial Government machinery when the chairman of ARTC remarked that:

“when Assam first came under British rule, it possessed four great assets- land, river, forest and minerals, all awaiting development. The acute shortage of labour caused by the Burmese atrocities and by pestilence has since been remained by immigration of workers from other parts of India”<sup>71</sup>.

According to an official enquiry report in 1945, the percentage of people from Assam in the labour force (skilled and unskilled) was 22<sup>72</sup>. In the absence of sufficient labour force in Assam, workers were mainly drawn apart from Assam, Eastern Bengal, Nepal and a lesser numbers from Uttar Pradesh and Punjab<sup>73</sup>. The recruitment policies of AOC gradually began to change when it came under the Burma Oil Company in 1929. In 1930, the post of Labour Superintendent was created, and he had been responsible for all requirements. The labourers both unskilled and semi-skilled henceforth, were selected through labour superintendent’s office in every fortnight. Skilled labourers were primarily recruited from youths. Persons who had completing apprenticeship in company workshops, placed in respective departments. Skilled labourers were also recruited from the persons who came to Digboi searching for job. Vacancies were also filled up by promoting improvers who passed the required trade tests<sup>74</sup>. In addition to

---

<sup>70</sup> G.N. Gupta, *A Survey of the Industries and Resources of Assam and Eastern Bengal 1907-08* (Shillong: Assam Government Press), pp. 86-87.

<sup>71</sup> Gawthrop. *Op.cit.*, pp.45-46.

<sup>72</sup> *Report on an Enquiry into the conditions of Labour in the Mineral Oil Industry in India*, by D.V. Rege, I.C.S., Chairman, Labour Investigation Committee, Delhi, 1945, p.22.

<sup>73</sup> D. Benarjee, *Op.cit.*, p.77.

<sup>74</sup> D.V. Rege, (1945). *Op.cit.*

this labourers were also recruited by contractors for jobs such as building construction, road work, jungle clearing etc<sup>75</sup>.

**Table: 5.2**

**Employment in AOC, 1938**

<b>Employee</b>	<b>Oilfield</b>	<b>Refinery</b>	<b>Tinsukia</b>	<b>Total</b>
Men	3437	1437	546	5419
Women	6	-----	-----	6
Children	4	2	2	8
<b>Total</b>	<b>3447</b>	<b>1439</b>	<b>548</b>	<b>5433</b>

*Source:* Report on an Enquiry into the conditions of Labour in the Mineral Oil Industry in India, 1945, p.22.

Though the labourers of the oil mines were better paid than the tea garden workers in Assam, but they had no specific insurance coverage, health insurance, rest-day which was necessary in the mine's sites. The Royal Commission on Labour in India also suggested to corroborate the fact of the labour problem. The Royal Commission are of the opinion that:

“...the protection of the law in regard to rest days, hours of work, health and safety should be extended to workers on the oil fields. We also think that labour statistics analogous to those for factories and mines should be compiled and published. We therefore recommend that conditions on the oilfields be examined by government with a view to determining whether the end can be achieved by modifying the present exemption and applying appropriate provisions of the Mines Act, or whether separate legislation should be passed for the regulation of hours, rest days, safety and health on oilfield”<sup>76</sup>.

The working condition under which the labourers had to work in the Assam Oil Company, Digboi was not satisfactory one. Compare to the tea plantation labourers,

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> *Report of the Royal Commission Labour in India*, (Whitley Commission) Vol. 6, related to Assam and the Duars, London, 1930, p.112. Also D. Benarjee, *Op.cit.*, p.78.

the physical facilities and working condition in the AOC factory was certainly better but the conditions were certainly worse than many other factories in India of similar status. The workers had to work hard in many cases fourteen hours a day. The workers were not entitled to enjoy any holiday even Sunday, nor did they receive any extra allowance for the overtime work.

In January 1929, protesting against such working condition, about 800 workers of Digboi oil field struck work. They demanded weekly holiday, extra payment for overtime work and additional proportionate pay for working on Sundays<sup>77</sup>. The Assam Oil Company after a few months of bargaining ultimately conceded to the workers demands. According to the agreement the Assam Oil Company accepted weekly holiday or proportionate pay for working on Sunday including overtime allowance were allowed<sup>78</sup>.

The AOC strike in 1929 was important because for the first time, different political parties supported the labour and sent their representatives to study the situation. The Socialist wings were very much active in Assam during that time. They were trying to take up the labour related issues in the province whenever possible. In 1928, Harekrishna Sahu of Madras, a representative of the Trade Union Congress came to Assam. He visited coal mines, oil-fields and gardens of Assam to gather first hand information about the labour condition in Assam<sup>79</sup>. Chowdhury Chowka Singh, a trade union activist of Jamshedpur, who declared that he was sent by Subhas Chandra Bose, came to Assam in 1929<sup>80</sup>. He visited Tinsukia and Lakhimpur outwardly for the purpose of forming a labour union in to the province. But it was said that his main motive to visit Assam to foment strikes among the employees of the Assam Oil Company at Tinsukia and Digboi<sup>81</sup>. On September 25, 1929, he addressed the oil workers of Tinsukia and emphasised the need of organised movement of the labour and of forming trade unions. He also distributed printed pamphlets in Assamese and Hindi among the labourers formulating the demand which labour should make in

---

<sup>77</sup> Home Political File No. 1/1929 (F.R.) January 1929, NAI, also A. Guha, *Op.cit.*, p.188.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> Home Political, File No. 1/1828 (FR) Second Half, April, 1928. NAI.

<sup>80</sup> Home Political File No. 17/1929 (FR), Second Half, September 1929. NAI.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

future<sup>82</sup>. Chowka Singh along with his associates Swami Jitananda, addressed several public meetings from time to time in the subsequent period to gain the labourers confidence<sup>83</sup>. With the inspirations of the people along with local socialists began to organise themselves for the first time and protest against the capitalist exploitation of the workers of Digboi oil field<sup>84</sup>.

### **Labour Strikes in Assam in the Non-plantation sector: the early Beginning**

During the first quarter of the twentieth century there was serious changes occurred in the Indian economy, immediately after the First World War. There was a simultaneous rise in the prices of all daily necessities. During that period was marked a class of consciousness on the wage-earning and peasant population of Assam. The rising prices and relatively low wages compelled the labour to organise themselves. Between 1913 and 1920, the cost of living in Assam shot up by about 33 to 50% per cent. But “the rate of wages in force had remained unchanged for a quarter of a century”<sup>85</sup>. It was during this period the labour-management relation came into open conflict. The period was also marked by the increasing the socialist and communist groups activities and the formation of labour unions. The Labour union came into existence to focus and resist exploitation of the labourers.

The first clash in Assam was recorded between Government and the workers in June 1917, when the staff of the Government press and the officers and clerks of the Assam Secretariat, Shillong demanding an immediate increase in pay<sup>86</sup>. They argued that the World War I, the cost of living had been increasing but their salaries were not revised. But when Government of Assam expressed its inability to concede to their demands the employees of the Government Printing Press went on strike on 18<sup>th</sup> August, 1918<sup>87</sup>. In 1920-21 the Dibru-Sadiya Railways workers also struck work demanding a fifty per cent. Increase in their pay<sup>88</sup>. During the period 1904-05 to 1920-21 there

---

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> Bhuyan, A.C. & Sibopada De, *Political History of Assam* Vol. II, reprint (Guwahati: Publication Board Assam, 2008), p. 261

<sup>84</sup> D. Benarjee, *Op.cit.*, p.78.

<sup>85</sup> *Report of the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee, 1921-22*, Government of Assam, 1922, p.35. ASA.

<sup>86</sup> *Assam Legislative Council Proceedings* (1918), No. IV, p.162, Shillong, 1918. ASA.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> *Amrit Bazar Patrika*, 20<sup>th</sup> July, 1920, also *Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, Op.cit.*, pp. 7-8.

were as many as 210 reported disputes between the planters and their workers in Assam out of which 141 cases of rioting and unlawful assembly<sup>89</sup>. Resentment amongst the tea garden labour of Sibsagar and Lakhimpur regarding their low wages, which in 1927, “there have been a series of strikes for higher wages in several tea gardens in the Lakhimpur district”<sup>90</sup>. All these labour protests were not successful in either increased their wages or changing the conditions of the labourers. Therefore they felt that only an independent labour organisation could organise the labourers to raise their voice against the management. Labour leaders and organisers all over India also felt the necessity of organisation to effectively guide the labour movement. In 1920, the All India Trade Union Congress was formed and soon all trade unions that existed in India by then affiliated to the AITUC after the payment of a prescribed fee<sup>91</sup>. Despite the formation of AITUC, it could not conduct labour movement effectively in India as the trade unions had no legal status.

In 1924 an initiative was taken in the official level to give legal status to AITUC. On 1 March 1924, is a resolution the Indian Legislative Assembly recommended to initiate legislation for the protection and registration of trade union<sup>92</sup>. Accordingly on “25<sup>th</sup> March 1926, Indian Trade Unions Act, 1926, (Act XVI of 1926) was passed which came into force all over India on and from 1<sup>st</sup> June 1927”<sup>93</sup>.

The birth of the Communist party of India in 1927 greatly helped to unionise the labourers. The communist party besides their immediate political end also tried “to gain control of the working classes by organising them in unions, teaching them the principles of communism. Inciting them to strikes in order to educate them and teach them solidarity”<sup>94</sup>. The communist encouraged and organised ignorant labourers to want for strike. This alarmed the Government of India which led to Government to pass Act No. VII of 1929 in the name of the Trade Dispute Act, 1929, and empowered

---

<sup>89</sup> *Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, Op.cit.*, p. 89. ASA.

<sup>90</sup> Home Political, File No. 32/27, (FR), First Half of June 1927, NAI.

<sup>91</sup> Giri, V.V. (1972). *Labour Problems in Indian Industry*, Bombay: Asia Publishing House, pp. 10-14.

<sup>92</sup> *The Gazette of India*, Delhi, part V, 24 January 1925, p.8, also *Political History of Assam*, Vol. II, *op.cit.*, p.241.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> R.C. Mazumdar, *History of the Freedom Movement in India, Vol. III*, (Calcutta: Firma KLM Private Ltd., 1963), p.264.

the Government to declare a strike illegal<sup>95</sup>. By this Act trade disputes should be settled either to the court of Enquiry or to the Board of conciliation appointed by the Government<sup>96</sup>.

In 1931, Communist Party of India (CPI), organised the Red Trade Union Congress under its leadership and established its hold over the All India Trade Union Congress<sup>97</sup>. In 1934, the CPI gave a call for a general strike to all textile workers<sup>98</sup>. This action of CPI forced, the Government of India in 1934 to declare it and all trade unions under its control as illegal<sup>99</sup>. Despite this, the Communist did not fail to take up the cause of the labourers in India. Meanwhile Socialist and Left nationalist led by Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhas Chandra Bose formed a powerful Left Consolidation within the congress<sup>100</sup>. Thereafter the communists and socialists made systematic efforts to propagate the cause of the labourers in the country. In the 1937 election, except few centres, the AITUC gave its support to the congress candidates<sup>101</sup>. On the other hand, in their election manifesto congress declared that the congress would take steps for the settlement of labour disputes<sup>102</sup>. The propaganda taken by the Socialist, Leftist along with the Congress were greatly helpful to spread the consciousness among the labourers. Between 1937 and 1939 the number of trade unions in India increased from 271 to 562 and the total membership of these unions increased from 261,047 to 399,159<sup>103</sup>.

### **Impact of Leftist in Assam**

Communist and Socialists made systematic efforts was gradually emerging in the political life of Assam. After the formation of the CPI in 1927, some of the students of

---

<sup>95</sup> Bhuyan, A.C. & Sibopada De, *Vol. II, Op.cit.*, p.244, also R.C. Mazumdar, *Ibid.*, pp. 320, 513.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, p.685, also Bhuyan, A.C. & Sibopada De, *Vol. II, op.cit.* p. 245.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> Bipan Chandra et. al. *India's Struggle for Independence*, Reprint (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1989), p.221.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*



Cotton College established with the Bengal Peasant's and Workers' Party<sup>104</sup>. In 1937 some of the Cottonians established "The Radical Club" and supplied literature related to Communism to a selected group of students<sup>105</sup>. During this period the socialist and Communist became active in the province "in probing grievances both among industrial labour in the oil fields, collieries and tea gardens"<sup>106</sup>. During the period 1936-38 eminent labour and Socialists leaders like Subhas Chandra Bose, Jawaharlal Nehru, M.N. Roy, Jalaluddin Hasmey, Chouka Singh, Dinkar Mehta, Sudhindra Pramanik visited Assam which gave added impetus to the labour movement in the province<sup>107</sup>. In December 1937, Jawaharlal Nehru visited to Digboi. In his speech he alleged that due to capitalist exploitation on the subject of oil and tea areas in the province by the foreign companies for which the benefits are not reaching the common man<sup>108</sup>. He further added "the worker of the Company has the legitimate right over this national resource"<sup>109</sup>. At the same time labour organisers like Chowka Singh and other continued their efforts in Lakhimpur district to form a union<sup>110</sup>.

In 1930, the Royal Commission on Labour recommended law in regard to welfare of the workers. According to the Report:

"Hours of work, rest day, health and safety should be extended to workers in the oil-fields either by separate legislation or by modifying the existing exemption granted under the Mines Act to oil wells and boring and applying to them appropriate provisions of the Act"<sup>111</sup>.

But the management of AOC strongly opposed to implement 8 hours shift and rest day in a week<sup>112</sup>. According to General Manager, AOC, Digboi, "the oil Industry is different from all other industries...when an oil well is being drilled work cannot be

---

<sup>104</sup> Bhuyan. A.C. & Sibopada De, *Vol. II, Op.cit.*, p. 246.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, p.247.

<sup>106</sup> *Administrative Report for the Year 1938-39*, ASA: 1940, See Political Summary.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> *Asamiya*, 11 December 1937.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> Bhuyan. A.C. & Sibopada De, *Vol. II, Op.cit.*, p. 263.

<sup>111</sup> *The Report of the Royal Commission on Labour*, see 'Mineral Oil', pp.111-112, 1930.

<sup>112</sup> File- Immigration A, December 1-17, 1932, ASA.

discontinued until casing pipe is set and cemented”<sup>113</sup>. Even in 1932, Mr. T.C.S Jayaratnam wrote to Government of Assam advocating payment of wages on rest day<sup>114</sup>, W.A. Cosgrave, the Chief Secretary to the Government of Assam was not in favour to made payment on rest day<sup>115</sup>.

The necessity of a Trade Union was keenly felt among the workers of the Assam Oil Company. Labour leader like Chowka Singh and others continued their efforts in the district of Lakhimpur to form a Union. During the period of 1938, there were ten thousand oil workers of which six thousands were directly under company’s employ and the rest were under the contractors<sup>116</sup>. On 13<sup>th</sup> February 1938 the workers of AOC assembled in a mass meeting decided to form a union to formulate their demands. In the formal inaugural meetings held on 22 February 1938, in which nearly 4,000 workers participated, a labour union was formed<sup>117</sup> with an executive of 36<sup>118</sup>. All employees of the AOC including both Hindu and Muhammadans were its member<sup>119</sup>. The principal office bearers of the Union were<sup>120</sup> (i) President- J.N. Upadhyaya, (ii) Vice- President- Sadhu Singh, (iii) General Secretary- M.A. Chowdhury, (iv) Joint Secretaries- J.N. Bhuyan and Pritam Singh. The Union was registered subsequently on 7<sup>th</sup> August 1938 under the Trade Unions Act, 1926<sup>121</sup>.

The Union was come into existence with the active support of the Indian National Congress party<sup>122</sup>. Therefore Muslim League through the Digboi Anjuman<sup>123</sup> passed a resolution and instructed the Muslim workers not to join the congress dominated

---

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> T.C.S. Jayaratnam, Deputy Secretary to the Government of India, Department of Industries and Labour, to the Secretary to the Government of Assam, Letter No. M. 1265, dated Shimla, the 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1932.

<sup>115</sup> File- Immigration A, March, 1933, 63-70. ASA.

<sup>116</sup> *Report on the Court of Enquiry into the affairs of Digboi*, J.C. Higgins, Chairman, 7<sup>th</sup> January 1939, Government of Assam, Shillong, 1939.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>118</sup> Home Political File (FR), No. 18/2/38, Second Half, February 1938. NAI.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>120</sup> Sir Manmatha Nath Mukherji, *Report on the Enquiry into the AOC Strike in 1939*, Digboi, ASA.

<sup>121</sup> Home Political File (FR), No. 18/8/38, Second Half, August 1938. NAI.

<sup>122</sup> Home Political File (FR), No. 18/2/38, Second Half, February 1938. NAI.

<sup>123</sup> A religious organisation under the control of the Muslim League.

newly formed Union<sup>124</sup>. Anjuman also threatened that any of its members joins the union, would be expelled from the Anjuman<sup>125</sup>. The congress handled the situation very tactfully and to convince the Muslim workers that the Union was not congress controlled organisation, they even stopped attending the meeting of the Union<sup>126</sup>. To convince the Muslim workers, Union invited Trade Union leaders like Abdul Bari, Zalaluddin Hashmey to Digboi<sup>127</sup>. The Muslim workers however, ultimately realised that in their own interests they should join the union but they demanded 50% representation in the Union, which after negotiations, it was settled at 45% per cent. joined the Union<sup>128</sup>.

On 28<sup>th</sup> April 1938, the Union sent a letter to the Company seeking recognition<sup>129</sup>. In their letter they also included their grievances and demanded introduction of a pay scale, free quarters for all direct employees, leave on full pay, etc<sup>130</sup>. The Assam Oil Company was against the formation of the Union and was not ready to recognise the Union. On 29 April, 1938 in their replied letter to the Union put various condition for recognition<sup>131</sup>. The Company also tried to delay the recognition by raising a number of tricky question and stated that “...unconditional recognition means accepting something we knew nothing about and just as a man does not buy something with his eye shut so the Company must see what the facts are about the Union”<sup>132</sup>. The reluctance of the AOC management to recognise the Union did not stopped the Union to raise their voice against the capitalist exploitation. A mass meeting was held on Sunday, 24 July 1938, where 6,000 workers of the Assam Oil Company were

---

<sup>124</sup> Home Political File (FR), No. 18/2/38, Second Half, February 1938. NAI.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>127</sup> Home Political File (FR), No. 18/4/38, Second Half, April 1938, and No. 18/5/38, Second Half, May, 1938. NAI.

<sup>128</sup> Home Political File (FR), No. 18/6/38, First Half, June 1938. NAI.

<sup>129</sup> *Report on the Court of Enquiry into the affairs of Digboi*, J.C. Higgins, Chairman, 7<sup>th</sup> January 1939, Government of Assam, Shillong, 1939.

<sup>130</sup> Home Political File (FR), No. 18/6/39, Second Half, August 1939. NAI.

<sup>131</sup> D. Benarjee, *Op.cit.* p.84.

<sup>132</sup> *Report on the Court of Enquiry into the affairs of Digboi*, J.C. Higgins, *Op.cit.*, ASA.

participated. In the meeting, the workers drafted a list of their genuine demand. The general demands of the workers were<sup>133</sup>:

- i. Unconditional recognition of Assam Oil Company Labour Union.
- ii. Immediate general increment of the following basis:
  - a. *Annas* 8 per rupee to workers drawing wages up to Rs. 30 per month.
  - b. *Annas* 6 per Rupee to workers drawing wages over Rs. 30 to Rs. 50 per month.
  - c. *Annas* 4 per Rupee to workers drawing wages over Rs. 50 to Rs. 100 per month.
  - d. *Annas* 2 per rupee to workers drawing wages over Rs. 100 to Rs. 150 per month.
- iii. Introduction of Grade system with provision for annual increment.
- iv. Forty four hours work for all workers.
- v. Framing of service rules with provision for gratuity, old age pension holidays, casual leave and sick leave with full pay.
- vi. Security of services and adequate compensation in cases of wrongful dismissal; a missionary consisting of representatives of employers and of the union should be set up to deal with suspensions/dismissals.
- vii. Proper quarters to all workers with due regard to number of family members and with electric light and sufficient water supply.
- viii. First preference should be given to existing workers in filling up the vacancies.
- ix. Existing system of registering candidates and appointing workers should be radically changed and replaced by competitive examination.
- x. Candidates on waiting lists should be provided with quarters, food allowance and medical aid till appointment. In case of all vacancies registered candidates must be given first chance according to priority of registration and deficiency.
- xi. Introduction of profit-sharing bonus system.
- xii. All other minor grievances should be given due consideration by the management according to the representation of the union.

---

<sup>133</sup> *Assam Secretariat Proceedings*, General B, December 1940, No. 245-283, p.54, Extract from letter of AOC, to the Management, Dated 26<sup>th</sup> July, 1938, ASA.

These demands were placed to the Company on 26<sup>th</sup> July 1938. But the reply of the Company to the Union did not satisfy the Union and the Union threatened to call a general strike<sup>134</sup>. By the middle of 1938 Sudhindra Pramanik, a veteran trade-union leader from Bengal arrived Assam. Under his Secretaryship AOC labour union formed a strike committee<sup>135</sup>. On 3<sup>rd</sup> August the committee submitted a 14 day strike notice to the Company unless their demands were met by that time<sup>136</sup>. Under the circumstances, the company requested the Government to intervene and set up a Court of Enquiry. On 16 August 1938, Muhammad Saadullah, the premier of Assam, formed a Court of Enquiry Committee with J.C. Higgins, Commissioner of Assam as Chairman, Omeo Kumar Das and Maulavi Sayidur Rahman as members under the provision of section 3 of the Trade Dispute Act, 1929<sup>137</sup>. The matters to be referred to the Court were as follows<sup>138</sup>:

- i. The demands of the workers of the Assam Oil Company Limited, and the replies of the Company in their General Notification No. 62 of 29<sup>th</sup> July 1938.
- ii. The wages paid by the Company and the hours of work required for such wages.
- iii. The manner in which the said hours of work compare with those in force in other industries in Lakhimpur district.
- iv. The conditions of service of the employees, particularly in respect of housing, water-supply, conservancy, hospital treatment, gratuity and pension, leave and security of employment.
- v. The cause or causes of the apprehended dispute.

After giving notice to the two parties to the dispute, the Court started its hearing on 29 August 1938 and submitted its report on 7<sup>th</sup> January 1939<sup>139</sup>. While the enquiry was in process, Muhammad Ismail and his brother Md. Abdullah, both were bungalow servant dismissed from service on 21 August 1938, for allegedly appearing before the

---

<sup>134</sup> Vide Notification No. 62 dated 29<sup>th</sup> April 1938, *Ibid*.

<sup>135</sup> Bhuyan A.C. & Sibopada De, *Vol. II, Op.cit.*, p. 263.

<sup>136</sup> Benarjee, D. *Op.cit.*, p.88.

<sup>137</sup> *Report on the Court of Enquiry into the affairs of Digboi*, J.C. Higgins, *Op.cit.*

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid*.

court of Enquiry as a witness<sup>140</sup>. The Union vehemently protested against these dismissals and the AOC workers refused to cooperate with the Higgins Committee as the Court fail to protect its witness against victimisation by the Company<sup>141</sup>. In September 1938, strike was extended to all the categories of contractors' labour<sup>142</sup>. The affairs were turning worse and the authorities of the AOC feared that the strike might spread to Company's direct employees also<sup>143</sup>. However, the strike was averted somehow with the subsequent intervention of the Government in the last week of September 1938<sup>144</sup>.

Meanwhile Gopinath Bardoloi led Congress Government came into power (19<sup>th</sup> September to 16<sup>th</sup> November 1939). The Higgins Committee submitted its report to the Bardoloi Ministry in December 1938. The workers of the AOC expected that the new Government might made an amicable settlement. But Bardoloi led coalition Government disappointed the workers greatly<sup>145</sup>. Even during the period of the Court of Enquiry (August and December 1938) as many as 36 workers were discharged from service as detailed below<sup>146</sup>:

1.	14 <sup>th</sup> November 1938	-----	07
2.	23 <sup>rd</sup> November 1938	-----	06
3.	09 December 1938	-----	11
4.	23 <sup>rd</sup> December 1938	-----	07
5.	30 <sup>th</sup> December 1938	-----	05
<b>Total</b>			<b>36</b>

<sup>140</sup> K.K.Hazra, *Report of the Board of Conciliation 8<sup>th</sup> August 1939*, also Assam Gazette Extraordinary, No. 3, 10<sup>th</sup> February 1939, also D. Benarjee, *Op.cit.* p.89, also Bhuyan, A.C. & Sibopada De, *Vol. II, Op.cit.*, p. 264.

<sup>141</sup> K.K.Hazra. *Ibid.*

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>143</sup> *The Administration Report of Assam for the year 1938-39*, Government of Assam, Shillong, 1940, see Political Summary.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>145</sup> Guha, *Planter Raj to Swaraj. Op.cit.*, p.193

<sup>146</sup> K.K. Hazra, *Op.cit.*

The Bardoloi Government accepting the Higgins Committees report on 9<sup>th</sup> February 1939. But the government remained silent and neither the demand for a wage increase nor that for 44 hours of work in a week was accepted. On the other hand the court failed to pronounce judgement in the cases of victimization and wrongful dismissals of the workers<sup>147</sup>. This stand of the Government indirectly support and encouraged the authorities of the Company to add further dismissals. Even the protest of the labour Union, the Company by the end of March 1939 discharged more labourers from their services<sup>148</sup>. The Company authorities from November 1938 to April 1939 discharged as many as 74 workers from service. The workers sacked in several batches from February 1939 to April 1939 were as follows<sup>149</sup>:

1. 16 <sup>th</sup> February 1939	-----	06
2. 2 <sup>nd</sup> March 1939	-----	08
3. 17 <sup>th</sup> March 1939	-----	05
4. 01 <sup>st</sup> April 1939	-----	08
5. 11 <sup>th</sup> April 1939	-----	11
<b>Total</b>		<b>38</b>

To support these dismissals, the authorities of AOC claimed that there were surplus hands and there were not enough work to engage them in the Company<sup>150</sup>. In fact, the vindictive attitude of the Company brought unity among the workers as job security was related with the issue. Meanwhile, the Company accorded preliminary recognition to the Union on 20<sup>th</sup> March, 1939, at the same time Company allowed non-unionised labourers to place their grievances direct to the Company's authorities<sup>151</sup>. This action of the Company was a blow to the growing unity of the striking people. The union in its letter, dated 27<sup>th</sup> March 1939 wrote to the Company:

<sup>147</sup> A. Guha, *Planter Raj to Swaraj*, *Op.cit.*, p.193.

<sup>148</sup> *The Administration Report of Assam for the year 1938-39*, Government of Assam, Shillong, 1940, see Political Summary.

<sup>149</sup> Sir Manmatha Nath Mukherji, *Op.cit.*, ASA

<sup>150</sup> AICC Papers, File No. G. 39, TL No. 1161, "Digboi Strike 1939," NMML, New Delhi, A Note by J.N. Bhuyan, General Secretary, AOC Labour Union.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*

“that the notification has created a good deal of misunderstanding among the workers regarding the intension of the Company and the nature of recognition of their union”<sup>152</sup>.

The Union, in its correspondence with the AOC tried to bring back suitable atmosphere in the workplace. But the Company authorities did not respond favourably. On 2<sup>nd</sup> April, a general meeting of the Union was held where resolution had taken that:

“this meeting accordingly declares to go on a protest strike for one week from Monday morning as has been notified to the Company, as a mark of protest against the policy and to get their just demands fulfilled accordingly to the repeated ultimatum presented to the Company”<sup>153</sup>.

The Union therefore declared a strike from 3 April 1939<sup>154</sup>. Accordingly more than 10,000 Assam Oil Company workers (6,000 at Digboi and 4,000 workers at Tinsukia) struck work. Even the sweepers and the bungalow servants, along with direct and indirect (contractors’) labourers joined the strike<sup>155</sup>.

The authorities of the AOC from the very beginning called the strike as politically motivated, having no connection with any labour unrest issue. The Company authorities were believed that the strike would not last long. But when the strike became successful to attain support from all quarter, the Company tried to crush it. The Company decided to use strong methods and allowed to enter eight platoons of Assam Rifles as well as armed police for the protection of industrial area<sup>156</sup>. The strikes were also threatened that they would not be re-employed in future<sup>157</sup>. According to the order issued by the District Magistrate, volunteers and the strikers

---

<sup>152</sup> Extract from the *Assam Secretariat Proceedings*, General and Judicial Department, No. 1820- G.J. dated 18<sup>th</sup> December 1939.

<sup>153</sup> AICC Papers, File No. G. 39, TL No. 1161, “Digboi Strike 1939,” NMML, New Delhi.

<sup>154</sup> *ALAP*, 1939, 6 May 1939, p.190.

<sup>155</sup> Home Political File (FR), No. 18/4/39, First Half, April 1939. NAI.

<sup>156</sup> D. Benarjee, *Op.cit.*, p.98.

<sup>157</sup> Indian Annual Register, n. 134, pp.206-08, also Bhuyan, A.C. & Sibopada De, *Vol. II, Op.cit.*, p. 268.



who were carrying flags in sticks were asked to get disarmed. Under the order of disarmament, military soldiers forcibly taken out flags and were torn out<sup>158</sup>. In the evening of 6<sup>th</sup> April, Mr. Tanish, the Cost Engineer of the Company, knocked down quite a few numbers of volunteers and strikers by his polo stick and abused them by calling them “Red-Shirt Monkeys”<sup>159</sup>.

Right from the very beginning of the strike the AOC authorities planned to start new recruitment. Local military along with Company’s people asked to visit Railway station at night to recruit new heads<sup>160</sup>. The Company in order to put a stop to the peaceful picketing by the union assaulted strikers. The officers of the AOC visited the workers quarters at night and offered higher wages and tried to carry with them forcibly<sup>161</sup>. The quarters of the bungalow servants were reportedly ransacked<sup>162</sup>. On April 4 1939, police assaulted about 20 to 30 volunteers, Beni Madhav, a volunteer was injured seriously<sup>163</sup>. The brutal atrocities of the police to the peaceful picketers were widely condemned and from 7<sup>th</sup> April 1939, workers started *satyagraha* in different parts of Digboi and Tinsukia<sup>164</sup>. On the other hand, the District Magistrate observed, “a state of emergency has arisen in the areas lying within a radius of three miles of Tinsukia and Digboi police stations owing to the unlawful activities of bands of Labour Union volunteers, commonly known as Red Shirt Volunteers”<sup>165</sup>. On 5<sup>th</sup> April 1939, C.S. Gunning, Deputy Commissioner, Lakhimpur passed order under section 144 (6) of the code of criminal procedure, 1898, which was implemented from April 8, 1939, restricting assembly of four or more persons within a radius of three miles of Tinsukia and Digboi *Thana*<sup>166</sup>. Restriction was also put “carrying of *lathis* or any other weapons or arms, except *Kirpans* in the case of Sikhs, by person other than

---

<sup>158</sup> Sir Manmatha Nath Mukherji, *Op.cit.*, ASA.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>162</sup> File No. I-10 of 1939, General Department. ASA.

<sup>163</sup> *Op.cit.*

<sup>164</sup> AICC Papers, File No. G. 39, TL No. 1161, “Digboi Strike 1939,” NMML, New Delhi.

<sup>165</sup> File No. I-10 of 1939, General Department. ASA.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*

this behalf by the Superintendent of Police in the said areas for a period of two months, with effect from the date of this order”<sup>167</sup>.

The Company management through a notification dated 7<sup>th</sup> April 1939, threatened the strikers to join their work on or before 10 April, failing of which losing their job and from that date the Company will consider itself free to recruit new hands<sup>168</sup>. This infuriated labourers and the strike which was planned for a week, continued for an indefinite period<sup>169</sup>. The AOC authorities tried to engage new workers in the Company, and every night AOC officers visited nearby areas for recruitment<sup>170</sup>. The Company made it very clear when AOC advertisement published in *Teenidiniya Asamiya*, local newspaper on 14<sup>th</sup> April 1939. Application invited for “clerks at Digboi”<sup>171</sup>. The Company also replaced their watchmen by the new Nepali recruits<sup>172</sup>. This infuriated the labourers and protest against this kind of recruitment. The situation worsened on 18<sup>th</sup> April 1939, when strikers wanted to obstruct AOC van which went for new recruits<sup>173</sup>. The armed police accompanied by AOC officials opened fire on the group of strikers who blocked a road and obstruct their van<sup>174</sup>. Three workers, Praneswar Chowdhuri, Satyendra Chakravarty and Chandra Ahir were killed and 12 other injured<sup>175</sup>. The persons who suffered bullet injuries were- 1. Madhu Pashi, 2. Harihar Tiwari, 3. Jogesh Nath, 4. Bhulo Ahir, 5. Bhagabati, 6. Ghuram, 7. Asamata Ali, 8. Bangsa Bahadur, 9. Ramabai, 10. Modhi, 11. Sukari Ahir, 12. A. Miah.

The news of death of workers in police firing on 18<sup>th</sup> April 1939 had widespread repercussion all over the country. After post-mortem when dead bodies were arrived at Digboi on 20<sup>th</sup> April, 1939, more than 15,000 mourners followed them. All shops of Tinsukia closed instantly<sup>176</sup>. The government immediately ordered a judicial Enquiry

---

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>168</sup> D. Benarjee, *Op.cit.*, p.99.

<sup>169</sup> *ALAP*, 1939, pp. 190-191. ASA.

<sup>170</sup> *Saatdiniya Asomiya*, 22<sup>nd</sup> April 1939, News of 13<sup>th</sup> April, Digboi.

<sup>171</sup> *Teenidiniya Asamiya*, 14<sup>th</sup> April, 1939.

<sup>172</sup> Home Political File (FR), No. 18/4/39, First Half, April 1939. NAI.

<sup>173</sup> *Saatdiniya Asomiya*, 14<sup>th</sup> April 1939.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, also *Administration Report of Assam for the year 1938-39*, Government of Assam, Shillong, 1940, See Political Summary.

<sup>176</sup> *Anand Bazar Patrika*, 24<sup>th</sup> April 1939.

under Mr. Pabitrnath Das, Magistrate, to look into firing incident. He submitted his report on 17<sup>th</sup> May, 1939, where he found that, the police patrol opened fire in self defence, when infuriated volunteers deliberately ambushed and stoned to their van<sup>177</sup>. He even did not find any evidence against Mr. Tanish, Mr. Towler and Mr. Gillespie who alleged fire on the mob<sup>178</sup>. The finding of enquiry did not satisfy the union and both armed police and Magistrate were publicly condemned<sup>179</sup>. The Government on 10<sup>th</sup> July 1939 therefore decided to appoint a Committee of Enquiry presided by Manmath Nath Mukherjee, Ex-Chief Justice of Calcutta High Court, and G.D. Walker as member<sup>180</sup>. The committee with the following term of reference:

1. To enquire into the events leading to the incident of 18<sup>th</sup> April and into those subsequent thereto in so far as they are not subjudice.
2. To enquire into the measures and actions taken by local authorities before, during and after the occurrence; and
3. To consider the origin and causes of the strike and to suggest means whereby strikes of this nature can be avoided in future<sup>181</sup>.

The AOC management, in its efforts to foil the strike tried to employed local Assamese labour. Most of the workers of the AOC were non-Assamese and outsiders. On the eve of the strike, the company had only 12.17 % workers from local Assamese and 87.83% recruits were from outside of Assam<sup>182</sup>. The Company therefore, decided to fillup the vacancies from the Assamese-speaking people only. The Company through local notice, called application from Assamese and considerable number of workers had been recruited from Tinsukia and Digboi<sup>183</sup>. To recruit the local labour, organisations like “Assam Welfare League”<sup>184</sup> and “Dibrugarh Unemployment Bureau”<sup>185</sup> appeared on the scene. On the second half of May, 1939, ‘The Assam

---

<sup>177</sup> *The Statesman*, 25<sup>th</sup> may 1939, also D. Benarjee, *Op.cit.*, p.105.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>179</sup> Bhuyan, A.C. & Sibopada De, *Vol. II, Op.cit.*, p. 269.

<sup>180</sup> File No. I-10 of 1939, General Department. ASA.

<sup>181</sup> *Assam Gazette*, Resolution No. 4420-H, dated the 10<sup>th</sup> July 1939. ASA.

<sup>182</sup> D. Benarjee, *Op.cit.*, p.109.

<sup>183</sup> Home Political File (FR), No. 18/5/39, First Half, May, 1939. NAI.

<sup>184</sup> *The Statesman*, 11<sup>th</sup> May, 1939.

<sup>185</sup> *The Advance*, 24 May 1939.

Unemployment Association' came into existence and supplied labour to Digboi<sup>186</sup>. By the end of May, 1939, the Company recruited more than 1,000 new labour<sup>187</sup>.

The role played by the Bordoloi led Congress Government was severely criticised. In a series of meetings held in all over Assam, trade unionist and Left Nationalist bitterly criticised Bordoloi Government. The Statesman, in its editorial column dated 29<sup>th</sup> April, 1939 termed the Bordoloi Government as 'Criminal Government.' It further stated that:

“...a Government which orders the police to act as anarchists and agent of social revolution...it is clear that the Assam Government is not a Government at all but a predatory junta...”<sup>188</sup>.

Ultimately, on 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1939, Government appointed Mr. K.K. Hazra, District and Sessions Judge, as the 'Board of Conciliation' to settle the dispute<sup>189</sup>. During the enquiry, he noticed that there were only 2,412 workers, out of which 762 were old employees and 1,680 were newly recruited<sup>190</sup>. The continuation of the strike had caused hardship and loses for both employee and employed. But the Company, on their part did not hesitate even to curtail their labour requirement. Before the strike, AOC had 6,350 workers, the Company put its labour requirement now only to 5,560<sup>191</sup>. By taking the opportunity of the strike, the Company abolished 700 posts. The Labour Union vehemently protested against this move. At the intervention of the Board of Conciliation, the company offered a month's salary as ex-gratia payment to the terminated workers, which the workers refused to accept it<sup>192</sup>.

However, the Conciliation Board failed to bring an amicable settlement on the issue. Mr. K.K. Hazra reported that the adamant attitude of the Company officials “clearly

---

<sup>186</sup> Home Political File (FR), No. 18/5/39, Second Half, May, 1939. NAI.

<sup>187</sup> D. Benarjee, *Op.cit.*, p.113.

<sup>188</sup> *The Statesman*, 29<sup>th</sup> April, 1939.

<sup>189</sup> *Administrative Report of Assam for the year 1938-39*, Government of Assam, Shillong, see Political summary. ASA.

<sup>190</sup> K.K.Hazra, *Report of the Board of Conciliation for Assam Oil Company*, Digboi, 8<sup>th</sup> August 1939, Government of Assam, Shillong 1939. ASA.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*

showed that there was no room for conciliation and amicable settlement for the strike”<sup>193</sup>. However, the Board submitted their report on 8<sup>th</sup> August 1939 and made two very significant recommendations<sup>194</sup>:

1. All strikers including who were discharged should be reinstating by dismissal of all new hands. The cases of these new recruits may be considered by the Company in making appointments to future vacancies.
2. A Work Council should be formed to decide if any surplus workers over the requirement of the Company. In discharging the surplus, the most junior men should be followed.

The AOC, naturally would not accept these recommendations. The Bordoloi led Congress Government too, postponed their further consideration and even publication, until the submission of the M.N. Mukherji Report. Numerous meetings were held in different parts of the country sympathising with the strikers. AITUC in its Nagpur session on 23<sup>rd</sup> July adopted a resolution to observe 6 August as “All- India Digboi Day” in support of the strikers of the Digboi<sup>195</sup>. This day was observed at Digboi by organising protest rally where 1,500 people were paraded shouting slogans like ‘*Inkilab Zindabad Punjibad Barbad, Duniyaka Mazdoor Ek Ho*’<sup>196</sup>.

Unfortunately for the workers, the Second World War started and Central Government under the Defence of India Rules imply a ban on the Digboi strike. Mineral being the vital material for the war connected with the defence of the country. On 5<sup>th</sup> September 1939 Digboi was declared as a protected area<sup>197</sup>. In a meeting of the strikers, the District Magistrate explained the implications of such protected areas. Meetings and processions were banned according to the order issued under section 144, Cr.P.C<sup>198</sup>. Principal Union and strike leaders were deported or forced to leave the

---

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>195</sup> AICC Papers, File No. G. 39, TL No. 1161, “Digboi Strike 1939,” NMML, New Delhi.

<sup>196</sup> *The Advance*, 11st August, 1939, also D. Benajee, *op.cit.*, p.124.

<sup>197</sup> Vide Notification No. 21/114/39-Political (W)-II, *The Gazette of India*, Extraordinary, 5 September 1939.

<sup>198</sup> Guha, *Planter Raj to Swaraj*, *Op.Cit.* p. 195.

area under threats of deportation<sup>199</sup>. Restriction was also imposed to entry any outsider within the protected areas without the prior permission of the local authorities<sup>200</sup>.

The Company, on the other hand, desperately wanted to have the skilled workers back to their work. The Company, therefore, continued their all means to bring division among the workers in some way or the other. The Company officers made a list of skilled workers about one thousand to fifteen hundred and visited workers' line with the help of armed forces to call them to resume their duties<sup>201</sup>. But the workers did not join immediately, rather the strikers in one voice demanded that all workers including contractors' labourers and the bungalow servants must be taken back and all of them should be given their settlement dues within 48 hours<sup>202</sup>.

The uncompromising attitude of the Company and "the unexpected and inexplicable dead silence on the part of the Government have created grave crisis amongst the strikers, whose patience, energy and purse have almost been exhausted on account of protracted but peaceful moral fight for the last five months"<sup>203</sup>. The Labour Union then realised the fact that continuation of the strike might not be possible. On 7<sup>th</sup> September 1939, the Union expressed their willingness to support and suspend the strike, and extended cooperation to the Government in the war-time emergency<sup>204</sup>. After the resignation of Bardoloi Government on 15<sup>th</sup> November 1939, Md. Saadullah formed the Government on 17<sup>th</sup> November 1939. M.N. Mukherji submitted its Report on 25<sup>th</sup> November and published on 3<sup>rd</sup> December 1939. The Committee found the strike to be unjust<sup>205</sup>. Thus the heroic struggle of the Assam Oil Company workers at Digboi and Tinsukia came to an end that shook Assam for more than five months.

---

<sup>199</sup> File Immigration B, Judicial and General 68-70, June 1940. ASA.

<sup>200</sup> AICC Papers, *Op.Cit.*, Letter from S. Pramanik, General Secretary, Central Strike Committee, to the President, Indian National Congress Camp, Wardha on 6-9-1939. NMML, New Delhi.

<sup>201</sup> AICC Papers, *Op.Cit.*, Letter from S. Pramanik, General Secretary, Central Strike Committee, to the President, Indian National Congress Camp, Wardha on 6-9-1939. NMML, New Delhi.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>203</sup> Resolution passed in the General Meeting of the Strikers held at Digboi on 30<sup>th</sup> August 1939, cited, D. Banarjee, *op.cit.*, p.127.

<sup>204</sup> File- Immigration B, 41/25, 1939, also AICC Papers, *Op.Cit.*

<sup>205</sup> Guha, *Planter Raj to Swaraj*, *Op.Cit.*, p.195.

## Nepalis in the Oil Mines

From the beginning of oil exploration in Assam, the Nepalis were recruited as labourers. The areas where the British discovered mineral oil was covered dense forests. Assam from the ancient period had been a thinly populated area. The devastation caused by the internal conflict and Burmese invasion followed by the wake of Kala-azar had to loss a large number of populations. Again the fertile land of Assam makes the people of Assam self-sufficient. The self-sufficient village economy of Assam, along with their prestige issue to work as wage-earners under the British, resists the local Assamese people to work as manual workers. Those who came out for such manual work “were prone to vanish during the harvesting season with little certainty of returning”<sup>206</sup>. Therefore, to procure permanent labour the Assam Oil Company in its initial stage had to face serious problem. Thus the labour shortage was the prime issue at that time. Hence the Company had no way left except engaging some agents to “fetch labourers from Shillong, Darjeeling and even from Nepal to employ in the work with bond or agreement (*girmit*)”<sup>207</sup>. Nepali labourers were recruited either direct or indirect (contract) basis. The contract or *Girmitia* coolies were work under the supervision of a contractor, who was responsible for their recruitment. Labourers were also placed under skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled labours. The rank of ‘executives’ was usually the agreement holders. The ‘Babus’ were usually clerks, operators, supervisors etc. The skilled labours were generally fitters, turners, welders’ drivers. The unskilled labourers were helpers, *chowkidars*, guards and bungalow servants<sup>208</sup>. Among the labourers from various communities like Bengali, Telugu, Punjabi, Assamese, etc., Nepali were in sizeable numbers<sup>209</sup>. Nepali labours were recruited on the agreement of one year<sup>210</sup>. To recruit Nepali labour Company appointed few contractors who get Rs. 5 each labour recruited by him<sup>211</sup>. In this regard a letter issued by the General Manager, Assam Oil Company, to Jit

---

<sup>206</sup> S.N. Visvanathan, *Hundred years of Oil*, (New Delhi: Vikash Publishing House Pvt. Ltd., 1990).

<sup>207</sup> J. Upadhyaya, “Oil Industry in Assam Vis-a-Vis Assamese Nepali: A Historical Approach”, in *History and Culture of Assamese Nepali*, ed., J. Upadhaya (Guwahati: DHAS, 2009), p. 165.

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>209</sup> D. Benarjee, *Op.Cit.*, p. 77.

<sup>210</sup> Bishnulal Upadhyaya, *Ajivan Sangrami Bhakta Bahadur Pradhan*, (Nepali Sahitya Parisad: 1990), p.3.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*

Bahadur Pradhan, a contractor, on dated 28<sup>th</sup> September, 1923 in the context of recruiting Nepali labours. The latter stated<sup>212</sup>:

Dear Sir,

We wish you to proceed at once to Rajbhatkhawa, Doors, North Bengal to recruit coolies for work in the refinery here as they are urgently required. It must be clearly explained by you what work they are expected to do. The following are our terms:

1. All coolies to remain one full year at Digboi.
2. Wages to be:
  - a. Men- Rs. 16 per month.
  - b. Women- Rs. 8 per month.
  - c. Boys- From Rs. 8 to Rs. 12 per month with a maximum of Rs. 12 per month.

In addition all coolies will be paid Rs. 2 per month, for regular daily attendance at work plus all overtime pay.

3. Advance to coolies to be recoverable.
4. Clothing is not to be supplied.
5. All your expenses will be paid including 3<sup>rd</sup> class Rail return fare from Digboi to Rajbhatkhawa. A detailed note of these must be submitted to us.
6. You will receive an advance of Rs. 100 which will be accounted for to us.
7. We wish you to return within three weeks with the above coolies.
8. You must write to us describing your progress.

In addition to the above mentioned travelling expenses we are prepared to pay commission at the rate of Rs. 5 per coolies recruited at the end of three months from the date of their arrival in Digboi and provided they remain here 1 year.

Yours Faithfully

General Manager.

---

<sup>212</sup> Purushottam Bhandari, *Freedom Movement and Role of Indian Nepalese 1800-1950*, (Jagiroad: Rama Bhandari, 1996) pp. 93-94.



The first such Nepali recruited by the Assam Oil Company in its payroll dates back to 1918-20. During subsequent two decades a large number of Nepalis in different capacities were recruited<sup>213</sup>. Company constructed a few lines or barracks for the settlement of these 'Girmitia' Nepali labourers at the Station-Muliabari road, near the railway station and on either side of the Shillong-road<sup>214</sup>. Later these Nepali coolies after expiry of time were settled at Rastapati, Nalapati, Itabhata, Muliabari, Toplabasti, Agreement line, Dhaka Line, Gorupathak etc. in Digboi<sup>215</sup>.

At the eve of the famous Assam Oil Company Strike 1939, there were more than 10,000 (direct and indirect) employees under the Assam Oil Company, at Tinsukia and Digboi. Along with these there were a considerable number of bungalow servants. Among these large sections of labour population, there were more than 3,000 Nepali labourers employed in the Assam Oil Company<sup>216</sup>. These labours were the assets of British capitalist, who were involved in the exploration of oil from the earth and its purification. But the working condition of the Assam Oil Company, Digboi was not satisfactory one, there were subjected to hard work- "in many cases, fourteen hours a day including Sundays"<sup>217</sup>. Labours were also faced shortage the minimum necessities of life like, pure drinking water, medicine, electricity and quarters<sup>218</sup>. There was also no job security of the workers; they were dismissed at the sweet will of the AOC authorities.

The growing impact of the socialists and leftist within the congress highlighted the labour issues in the province. In the year 1938, Socialist impact became visible for the first time in the plans and programmes of the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee<sup>219</sup>. In the Government reports also it was admitted that "socialist and communist segment of the congress were instrumental in probing grievances both among industrial labour

---

<sup>213</sup> J. Upadhyaya, *Op.cit.*, p. 165.

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>216</sup> Shyam Raj Jaishi, *Assam Ma Nepaliharuko Aitihashik Prishtabhumi*, (in Nepali), (Digboi: Bodh Kumari Smriti Prakashan, 1990), p.108.

<sup>217</sup> D. Benarjee, *Op.Cit.*, p.79.

<sup>218</sup> Bhandari, *Op.cit.*, pp. 95.

<sup>219</sup> D. Benarjee, *Op.cit.*, p.81.

in the oil fields, collieries and the tea gardens of the province”<sup>220</sup>. The local socialists take up the matter capitalist exploitations of the Assam Oil Company, Digboi and asked the labours to organise themselves<sup>221</sup>.

During the period 1936-38 Socialist and labour leader like Dinkar Mehta, M.N.Roy, Subhas Chandra Bose, Jawaharlal Nehru, Sudhindra Pramanik, Jalaluddin Hashmi visited Assam and highlighted the labour issue, which encourage the Assam Oil Company Labours to form a Union. During his Assam tour Jawaharlal Nehru addressed a mass meeting at Digboi on 15<sup>th</sup> December 1937, he stated:

“...Oil is wealth; it is means for economic progress. Its profit should be shared by labour and employer and the country. Thousands of labour and employees are involved in the exploration of oil from earth and for its purification to sell in the market. Company employees stay in luxury bungalow, tour in vehicles and get high salaries. Labour stay in suffocating small and dark houses. Is there any facility for you like drinking water, ration, medicine, electricity, minimum acceptable wages rate etc.? Many of them died in accidents, some due to sickness and their houses became empty. Labour must form their own union, should bring unity among them, and should fight for their rights. The Congress leaders of Dibrugarh should help them on this task”<sup>222</sup>.

On 13<sup>th</sup> February 1938, all section of Assam Oil Company worker assembled in a mass meeting at Digboi in which it was decided to form a Trade Union<sup>223</sup>. On 22<sup>nd</sup> February 1938, in the formal inaugural meeting in which more than 4,000 workers were participated, a labour Union was formed with an executive of 36 members<sup>224</sup>.

---

<sup>220</sup> *Administrative Report of Assam for the year of 1938-39*, Government of Assam, Shillong 1940, See Political summary. ASA.

<sup>221</sup> D. Benarjee, *Op.Cit.* p.78.

<sup>222</sup> Bishnulal Upadhyaya, *Op.Cit.*, pp.9-10, also Bhandari, *Op.Cit.* pp. 94-95.

<sup>223</sup> Home Political (FR) 18/2/38, Second Half, February, 1938. NAI.

<sup>224</sup> Home Political (FR) 18/2/38, Second Half, February, 1938, NAI, also K.K.Hazra Report *Op.Cit.*

The principal office bearers of the Union were<sup>225</sup> (a) J.N. Upadhyaya (President), (b) Sadhu Singh (Vice-President), (c) M.A. Chowdhury (General Secretary) (d) J.N. Bhuyan and Pritam Singh (Joint Secretaries). Bhakta Bahadur Pradhan and Aiman Thapa, two executive members from the Nepali Community were also elected.

On April 28, 1938, the Union wrote to the Company seeking recognition and demanding redress of their grievances<sup>226</sup>. The Assam Oil Company Trade Union demands included introduction of a pay scale, free quarters for all direct employees, leave on full pay etc<sup>227</sup>. But Company on their part delayed in granting recognition by saying that before granting recognition Company should be satisfied on the numbers of the workers who had joined the Union, its constitution, and also on whether its office bearers had been duly elected or not<sup>228</sup>. The Company officials view regarding this issue was “unconditional recognition means accepting something we know nothing about and just as a man does not buy something with his eyes shuts so the Company must see what the facts are about the Union”<sup>229</sup>. On Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> July 1938, a mass meeting of 6000 workers of the Assam Oil Company was held at Digboi. The workers came into unanimous decisions about their grievances and drafted a list of 12 genuine demands<sup>230</sup>. These demands were placed to the Company but the Company authorities were not ready to concede anything to satisfy the workers. Ultimately on 3<sup>rd</sup> August, 1938, the Union gave a 14 day ultimatum to the management for strike unless their demands were met by that time. The wholehearted support of all section of workers of Assam Oil Company compelled the Government to appoint a Court of Enquiry with J.C. Higgins, Commissioner of Assam Valley division as Chairman, Maulavi Sayidur Rahman and Omeo Kumar Das as members under the provision of session 3 of the Trade Dispute Act, 1929 as subsequently amended<sup>231</sup>.

Meanwhile, organising the workers, Union called a strike on 2<sup>nd</sup> September 1938, demanding skilled workers of the contractors at the rate of wages 12 *annas* per day as

---

<sup>225</sup> M.N. Mukherjee, *Op.Cit.*

<sup>226</sup> *ALCP*, May 1939, Shillong, pp.190-191, also J.C. Higgins, *Op.cit.*

<sup>227</sup> M.N. Mukherjee, *Op.cit.*

<sup>228</sup> Home Political (FR) 18/8/38, Second Half, August, 1938. NAI.

<sup>229</sup> J.C. Higgins. *Op.cit.* ASA.

<sup>230</sup> File No. Genl. B, Proc. December, 1940, No. 245-283, p.54. ASA.

<sup>231</sup> J.C. Higgins. *Op.cit.* ASA.

were given to the Company's skilled workers<sup>232</sup>. By 9<sup>th</sup> September the strike was extended to all the categories of contractor's labour<sup>233</sup>.

### **Role of the Nepalis in the AOC, Digboi Oil Strike**

Bhakta Bahadur Pradhan, who joined Assam Oil Company as a motor mechanic was one of the active member of the Union from the day of its inceptions. His speeches not only attracted the Nepali workers but also other section of people to join the strike. On 18<sup>th</sup> September 1938, a mass meeting of 3000 workers was held at the Mazdur Sangha, Digboi under the Presidentship of Kedar Nath Goswami, who was also the acting President of Dibrugarh District Committee. The leaders of Labour Union namely Jagannath Upadhyaya, Sadhu Singh, Jadunath Bhuyan and Bhakta Bahadur Pradhan were also present in the meeting. In the course of his speech Bhakta Bahadur Pradhan said-

“Brethern, I am very glad to find that you have been sitting here with much affection towards each other. If you remain united in this way you will be able to do much good to you, but you will have troubles as soon as you refuse to undergo a little hardship. You have restored to the strike for the benefit of your brethren. I have heard and personally seen that the labourers now go to work in motor cars facing towards the interior of the cars. It is a matter of shame to suck the blood of the brethren for the sake of one's own belly. Those who go to work sucking the blood of their brethren for the matter of -/8/- annas or -/12/- annas are nothing but devils. Some of our brethren have quietly gone to work while these volunteers have been standing in rains with the flag in their hands. Those who have gone to work are sucking the blood of their brethren”<sup>234</sup>.

---

<sup>232</sup> Home Political (FR) 18/9/38, First Half, September, 1938. NAI.

<sup>233</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>234</sup> File Home Confidential B, March, 1939, 124-132, (130-C/38). ASA.

Bhakta Bahadur Pradhan also tried to convince the Nepali workers of Assam Oil Company to participate into the strike of their common grievances and demands. Addressing to the Nepalis he said-

“My Nepali brethren, you know that you may live in a country where the king is your enemy but you cannot live in the place where the people have turned your enemies. Because you are poor you are hated by all. Although you are poor you do not take the flesh of your brethren”<sup>235</sup>.

The Company right from the very beginning tried to crush it by all possible means. In order to put a stop, the Company authorities tried to influence the Nepali workers to keep aloof from the Union and ongoing strike. Responding to the AOC’s call, few Nepali workers continued their service. This move of the Nepali workers was also highly criticised by Bhakta Bahadur Pradhan by saying:

“you have proved yourselves to be demons in this strike. You are determined now to suck the blood of your brethren. It is a shame on your part to go to work leaving these five or six thousand people. You belong to an independent country but you have earned very bad name here. If you could understand a little you would not have sucked the blood of these brethren of yours. I shall write letters to your native places stating that you have been trying to deprive the other people of their bread. You should stop work along with others till a settlement is arrived at. I request you again to remember that you should not try to suck the blood of these brethren who have gone on strike”<sup>236</sup>.

The widespread gaining popularity made the Company authorities very much concern. The Company, with few of their faithful employee tried to convince their co-workers to return to their duty who were in strike. This led the discontentment amongst the

---

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*, Report of the Proceedings of a meeting of the Mazdur Sangha, held at Chariali, Digboi on 18<sup>th</sup> September 1938.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*

strikers and non-strikers. Bhakta Bahadur Pradhan in a meeting of the *Mazdur Sangha*, held at Digboi on the 22<sup>nd</sup> September 1938 said:

“I offered thanks to the *Mazdur* for their unity and assured them that they would be helped by all the people of India in their struggle. He said that the members of the Labour Union were in shackles now but in case of necessity they would break the fetters and side with the *mazdurs* to depend on God and to carry on their struggle in a peaceful and non-violent manner”<sup>237</sup>.

Bhakta Bahadur Pradhan further urged to the co- Nepali workers thus:

“not to lower the prestige of their country and their religion by going to work while so many people had stopped work. The speaker added that if any of the Nepalis go to work he would commit the sin of killing 7 cows and his dead body would not be touched by the other Nepalis. He further exhorted them to show their valour as they did in the last Great War”<sup>238</sup>.

The strike was a successful one; the affairs were turned worse when all contractors labour went on strike. The situation was that “less than one fifth of the men were at work”<sup>239</sup>. The involvement of all contractors labour into the strike feared the authorities of Assam Oil Company that this might spread to the Company’s direct employees also<sup>240</sup>. However, when the workers showed excellent solidarity and organised all section of labour for their common grievances and demands, the Company took its prestige issue and tried to crush it. The cases of Company officials assaulted the strikers was common during the strike. Bhakta Bahadur Pradhan criticised the Company authorities and appealed the volunteers to suffer such brutal atrocities for the sake of their ultimate goal. In a meeting held on 23 September Pradhan said:

---

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.*, Report of the Proceedings of a meeting of the *Mazdur Sangha*, held at Chariali, Digboi on 22nd September 1938.

<sup>239</sup> Home Political (FR) 18/9/38, Second Half, September, 1938. NAI.

<sup>240</sup> *Administrative Report for the Province of Assam for the Year 1938-39*, Government of Assam, Shillong, 1940, See Political Summary.

“Brethren, I am very sorry to hear certain things today. I have heard with shoes, but, you should remember that if you want to do any good work some of you will have to bear *lathi* charges, go to jail and to give up your life even. You should not be disheartened on account of the troubles you have had to face up to this time. I appeal to the British Government to maintain peace here. From what we have heard and seen it appears to us that the officers of the Government have been trying to set up a quarrel here. The Superintendent of police should take some steps early regarding this matter. We have got this belief up till now that the British Government will support the cause of the public. If they do it we shall pray for their welfare. It is for solving the bread problem that the *Mazdur Sangha* has started their struggle, this struggle against the contractors and the Company. The Government should consider the subjects as their children and try to alleviate their distress. I hope the Government will remove the grievances of these poor *Mazdurs*. I request the volunteers to remain peaceful. I thank them for what they have done up till now”<sup>241</sup>.

A strike fund was maintained to meet the situation. Essential commodities like rations and medical aid had been provided to the poor strikers. Bhakta Bahadur appealed the Nepali workers to join the strike, he said “brethren not to go to work”<sup>242</sup> and request them to “go our office if they find any difficulty about their ration”<sup>243</sup>.

Bhakta Bahadur Pradhan tried his best to spread the strike amongst the Nepali workers also. In a meeting of the *Mazdur Sangha*, at Digboi on 24<sup>th</sup> September 1938, Bhakta Bahadur Pradhan advised the *Mazdur*

“not to give up their struggle till they achieved success. He hoped that if they remained united, they would get everything

---

<sup>241</sup> File Home Confidential B, March, 1939, 124-132, (130-C/38), Report of the Proceedings of a meeting of the *Mazdur Sangha*, held at Chariali, Digboi on 23<sup>rd</sup> September 1938. ASA.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.*

they demanded. He assured the *Mazdur* that the Nepalis also would join with them within a very short time”<sup>244</sup>.

Meanwhile, the Union completed its 14 days strike. The strike was withdrawn, pending an Enquiry in the last week of September 1938<sup>245</sup>. However, the tensions remained pent in the Assam Oil Company Digboi. When the Enquiry was in progress a serious incident took place. One Md. Ismail, a bungalow servant was dismissed from service on 21<sup>st</sup> October for allegedly appearing before the Court of Enquiry. His brother Md. Abdulla who was also an employee of the Company, was also discharged from the service on the same day for the same reason<sup>246</sup>. The Union vehemently protested against these dismissals and called it a case of revenge. It also condemned the Court of Enquiry for the failure to protect its witness against victimisation by the Company<sup>247</sup>. The Higgins Committee, which submitted its report on 7<sup>th</sup> January, 1939, reported the unsatisfactory labour conditions in the Assam Oil Company<sup>248</sup>.

Large numbers of Nepalis who immigrated or emigrated Assam choose grazing as their profession in due course of time. These people choose *Chars* and *Chaparis* for grazing their cattle, which was equally ideal for their grazing business. A large number of Nepali professional graziers settled in Kaziranga prior to 1880<sup>249</sup>. But in 1916, Kaziranga declared as ‘Game Sanctuary’. In 1920, Government ordered all graziers of Kaziranga to vacate within 24 hours of receiving the notice. There was a hue and cry among the graziers for receiving such kind of notice. But before they could do anything, forest Officers in the name of execution of the order dismantled and burnt all the households of the graziers residing within the proposed forest areas. Thus the atrocities displayed by the forest officers had a greatly impact in the mind of Chabilal Upadhyaya, a *mahajan* among graziers at Kaziranga. Meanwhile, Chabilal Upadhyaya came in contact with Chandranath Sarmah, advocate of Tezpur. The Seventeenth Annual Plenary Session of the Assam Association met was held at

---

<sup>244</sup> File Home Confidential B, March, 1939, 124-132, (130-C/38), Report of the Proceedings of a meeting of the Mazdur Sangha, held at Chariali, Digboi on 24<sup>th</sup> September 1938. ASA.

<sup>245</sup> Home Political (FR) 18/9/38, Second Half, September, 1938. NAI.

<sup>246</sup> J.C. Higgins. *Report of the Court of Enquiry, 7<sup>th</sup> January, 1939*. ASA.

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>248</sup> Home Political (FR) 18/2/39, Second Half, February, 1939. NAI.

<sup>249</sup> Bhandari, *Op.cit.*, p.42.



Tezpur from 26 to 28 December 1920. Chabilal Upadhyaya went to the meeting so that he could draw the attention of the state leaders and public. A reception Committee was formed under the presidentship of Dalimchandra Borah. In his welcome speech he criticised Government on grazing tax. He condemned the “official high-handedness shown in the case of evicting settlers from the Kaziranga forest reserve and demanded an enquiry on this issue”<sup>250</sup>.

The Assam Association decided to set up enquiry committee, with Kuladhar Chaliha, as president and Chandranath Sarmah as Secretary, to enquire into the alleged eviction of Nepali settlers from the Kaziranga forest reserve<sup>251</sup>. On 18<sup>th</sup> April 1921, the Assam Association had another sitting at Jorhat. In this meeting, the presidentship was given to Chabilal Upadhyaya of Nepali community<sup>252</sup>. Besides condemning the recent evictions of Nepali graziers from Kaziranga and police atrocities on them, the meeting also discussed the non-cooperation programme and organisational matters<sup>253</sup>. Chabilal Upadhyaya who joined the Congress after the incident of Kaziranga, led Nepali Community in Non-cooperation movement in Assam. Meanwhile Mahatma Gandhi visited Assam in August 1921 with a 10 days programme. He attended several meetings at Guwahati, Tezpur, Nagaon, Jorhat, Dibrugarh, Silcahr, Sylhet. When Gandhiji came to Tezpur Chabilal Upadhyaya also went there to attend the meeting. After the meeting, District Superintendent of Police asked to him that “Your country is Nepal. That country is independent. Don’t oppose the Government. I will pay you Rs. 500/- per month”<sup>254</sup>. Chabilal Upadhyaya refused by saying “I am born in Assam and shall die in Assam. Nepal may be an independent country, but I have not seen Nepal. Assam is my motherland. I could not leave the Congress”<sup>255</sup>. When Gandhiji heard about this incident he praised him by saying ‘well done’<sup>256</sup>.

---

<sup>250</sup> Bhuyan, A.C. & Sibopada De, *Vol. II, Op.cit.*, p.13

<sup>251</sup> *Ibid.*, p.14

<sup>252</sup> Krishna Sarmah, *Krishna Sarmahar Diary*, (Assamese) (Guwahati: 1972), p.78, also *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>253</sup> Guha, *Planter Raj to Swaraj*, *Op.cit.*, p. 102.

<sup>254</sup> *Karmabir Chabilal Upadhyaya Jyo Ko Karmamoi Jeevan ko Roop-Rekha* (Nepali), (Assam Gorkha Sanmellan: Behali Branch, 1973), p.5, also P. Bhandari, *Op.cit.*, p. 54.

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>256</sup> Bishnulal Upadhyaya, *Svadhinata Yunjara Nayak Chabilal Upadhyay*, (Assamese) (Guwahati: Lawyers Book Stall, 1990), p.32. Also P. Bhandari, *Op.cit.*, p.54.

Chabilal Upadhyaya with his active leadership, was able to spread Gandhiji's message of non-violence and non-cooperation movement among the people of the northern part of the river Brahmaputra. There was a campaign against the use of foreign goods and clothes. Under the leadership of Chabilal Upadhyaya a meeting was held at Behali (Majgaon), in Sonitpur district. At the end of the meeting, the assembled people made a bonfire of foreign clothes<sup>257</sup>. In 1921, a meeting was held on Tezpur Town Hall under the presidentship of Chabilal Upadhyaya. To spread the message of non-cooperation movement among the masses, a *Swayam Sevak Dal* was formed<sup>258</sup>. Soon he and his brother Hari Upadhyaya were arrested and sentenced 3 months imprisonment<sup>259</sup>.

On the other hand two great labour leader from the Nepali community- Bhakta Bahadur Pradhan and Dalbir Singh Lohar led the labour as well as freedom movement in upper Assam. Bhakta Bahadur Pradhan (1901-1992) was the son of Jit Bahadur Pradhan, a labour contractor of Assam Oil Company. Bhakta Bahadur did his schooling at Darjeeling. Once he got an opportunity to attend a public meeting of Chittaranjan Das with a call to come out for the cause of nation and make India free from the foreign rule. Bhakta Bahadur was very much influenced by his speech and subsequently he gave up his studies and returned to Digboi. In 1926, Mahatma Gandhi visited Guwahati to attend the conference of Congress party. Bhakta Bahadur came to Guwahati to hear Gandhiji. He was so inspired by Gandhiji that soon he joined Congress party and started to work in its organisational front. He was very much aware of the pathetic working conditions of the labourers engaged in coal mine, tea gardens and oil mines. But he could not find a way to end all such exploitation, suppressions to the labourers of the Company. Meanwhile, Jawaharlal Nehru visited Digboi in 1937 and suggested openly to form a labour Union. Bhakta Bahadur actively engaged himself to form the Union. On 22<sup>nd</sup> December 1938 'Assam Oil Company Trade Union' was formed. Bhakta Bahadur was the active member from the date of its inception. Bhakta Bahadur Pradhan along with Aiman Thapa from the Nepali Community was elected in Executive members of the Union<sup>260</sup>.

---

<sup>257</sup> P. Bhandari, *Op.cit.*, p.54.

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>260</sup> P. Bhandari, *Op.cit.*, p.95.

On 3<sup>rd</sup> April 1939, Assam Oil Company Trade Union went for strike. The union agitated over the issues of low wages, the retrenchment and non-recognition of bungalow servants as Company employees<sup>261</sup>. Bhakta Bahadur Pradhan not only became a prominent leader of the Strike Committee but his house was also converted into Union House. The cookery of food for the leaders of the Union and some labourers was done in his house<sup>262</sup>.

To crush the Strike, the Governor of Assam took unusual initiative in directing drastic measures against the strikers without even formally consulting the Congress Premier Gopinath Bardoloi. Accordingly 6,000 (six thousand) armed police men were deployed against about 10,000 (ten thousand) striking employees of the Company<sup>263</sup>. The Company authorities now decided to use strong arm method to crush the strike. Under the orders from the Magistrate, the military in the name of disarmament of volunteers of the Union, began to snatch away the flags and to tear them and trample them. To crush the strike the Company authorities assaulted Union volunteers, roused them from sleep at nights, offered higher wages, some were even forcibly carried with them to work at AOC. These measures were aimed at breaking the morale of the workers. The Company officers even toured Railway stations, mostly during nights for the purpose of new recruitment for AOC. The houses of the bungalow which were adjacent to the bungalow of the officers were reportedly ransacked.

One Nepali AOC worker, Kajiman, served as a bungalow servant of Mr. G.M. Warson. He had been in service since 1935 and used to get his pay from the Company. He also lived in the servant quarter. But when the strike broke out he also struck work. But his involvement in the strike did not make his master happy anyway. Therefore on 19<sup>th</sup> June 1939 Mr. S.T. Glover, an engineer and M. Hussain an employee of AOC, Digboi came to him and asked him to vacate the quarters. But when he politely refused to leave by saying “where shall I go now?” they threatened that they would forced him out if he did not vacate the quarter. They then threw out all

---

<sup>261</sup> J.C.Higgins Report. *Op.cit.*, also Guha, A. *Op.Cit.* p.193.

<sup>262</sup> P. Bhandari, *Op.cit.*

<sup>263</sup> AICC papers Representation of S. Pramanik to AICC President, File- G/39, TL. 1161, 1939, NMML.

his little properties outside of his quarter and did not allow him to enter into the compound.

Man Bahadur, who belonged to Nepali community, was the bungalow servant of Mr. Richie, Installation Manager of AOC, Tinsukia. He used to live in the servant quarters of the Mr. Richie bungalow. When the strike started, he was actively involved in it. But the Company authorities were always against the workers demands and tried to crush it. On 5<sup>th</sup> September 1939, when Man Bahadur went to Margherita and put the house under lock and key, in his absence Mr. Richie removed all his goods worth approximately Rs. 50 to 60. He was not allowed even to enter into the compound. A criminal case had lodged by him in the police station against Mr. Richie.

Entry of all non-residents was banned; meetings, processions, assembly of more than four persons, objectionable dresses like red shirt of union volunteers and volunteer organisation were all declared illegal<sup>264</sup>. All the action of the district administration at the stage started acting in a concert with the AOC administration to crush the strike as:

“The part played by the district administration of the Government of Assam was that of absolute partiality since the commencement of the strike and this was being objected by the Labour Union. They persistently refused to lend any ear to the allegations made on the plea of protecting AOC’s property but actually they were being used for recruiting. Omeo Kumar Das, MLA, met the Deputy Commissioner of Lakhimpur and also the Superintendent of Police and asked them to enquire into these allegations. But they paid no attention. On the other hand, all sorts of allegations against the Labour Union were being made at the Police Station by the Company and the District executive, on the basis of these reports promulgated an order under Section 144 Cr.P.C. restricting the carrying of *lathis* by volunteers and also *Khukuri* by Nepalis, though there were no specific case of violence against any of these volunteers. If there were any at all, the ordinary law was sufficient to deal with them. No single

---

<sup>264</sup> Bhuyan, A.C. & Sibapada De, *PHA, Vol. III*. p.147.

volunteer was prosecuted for any act of violence. But on the other hand, the District executive Magistrate refused to inquire into the allegations made in writing to the police officers. It is clear that the AOC authorities with the direct and indirect help of military and District administration played the old game of provoking the union volunteers to violence although to no success”<sup>265</sup>.

On April 8<sup>th</sup> 1939, section 144 Cr.p.c. was evidently induced local authorities enforcing and disarming peaceful volunteers flag sticks. Restriction was also imposed on carrying *Khukuri*. But Nepali workers refused to disarm *Khukuris*, because they solemnly considered *Khukuri* as religious as *Kirpans* of Sikhs<sup>266</sup>. A meeting of the AOC labour Union was held on 12<sup>th</sup> June 1939, where about 2000 people attended. In this meeting Aiman Thapa criticised the imposition of 144 Cr.p.c. and restriction imposed on *Khukuri*. He also requested the union to report of those whose *Khukuris* had been snatch away<sup>267</sup>.

On 9<sup>th</sup> April in a largely attended meeting, representatives of Surma Valley Student Federation and Sylhet-Cachar Tea Garden Workers’ Union came in a delegation to Digboi. They expressed their solidarity with the striking workers of AOC. Addressing the meeting Dalbir Singh Lohar, Bhakta Bahadur Pradhan and Aiman Thapa along with other Union leaders condemned Assam Oil Company authorities<sup>268</sup>.

Though the AOC authorities called the strike a “political strike,” it gradually assumed the structure of a labour struggle against reactionary forces<sup>269</sup>. At a huge public gathering on 30<sup>th</sup> June 1939 in Digboi, Aiman Thapa along with the prominent leaders participated. C. E. Gibbon, worker of All India Forward Block came Digboi to see the actual situation was also present the meeting. Addressing the meeting he referred that

---

<sup>265</sup> Extract from Press statement of 8 MLAs who were present at the Judicial Enquiry at Digboi. Source- AICC Papers File- G-39, TL. No. 1161, Digboi Strike, 1939, NMML.

<sup>266</sup> Copy of Telegram, 8/4/1939, sent by Labour Union to District Magistrate, Dibrugarh, AICC Papers File- G-39, *Ibid.*, TL. No. 1161, Digboi strike, 1939, NMML.

<sup>267</sup> File- Home Confidential B, September, 1939, 220-234 (108-C/1939).

<sup>268</sup> *Anand Bazar Patrika*, 17<sup>th</sup> April, 1939.

<sup>269</sup> Bhuyan, A.C. & Sibapada De, *PHA, Vol. II*. p. 269.

Anglo-Indian Civil Liberties Association in their meeting also strongly protested against the uncompromising attitude of the AOC and sympathising with the strikers. Aiman Thapa also delivered his speech in the meeting, where the meeting appreciating Mr. Gibbon's and Anglo- Indian friends service in their cause<sup>270</sup>.

To commemorate the 100<sup>th</sup> Day of the strike, a huge meeting was organised by the Digboi Labour Union on 11<sup>th</sup> July 1939. The meeting was addressed by S. Pramanik, Dalbir Singh Lohar, Bhakta Bahadur Pradhan, R.D. Sahai, Sardar Man Singh, Asgar Hussain and Nandan Pandey<sup>271</sup>. They resolved to fight consistently for the strikers' cause and condemned the role played by the Company authorities<sup>272</sup>.

Growing popularity of the labour strike into the province forced the Government to extern and arrest leading leaders of the Union. Bhakta Bahadur Pradhan joined the Assam Oil Company as 'Apprentice Motor Mechanic.' But due to his involvement in the labour strike, he lost his job. In 1940 according to the order of Deputy Commissioner he was externed from Digboi. He started a small business at Chowkidingi in Dibrugarh for the maintenance of his family. Afterwards Bhakta Bahadur was not allowed to enter Digboi. Even when his father was seriously ill, he requested Mr. Gunning, Deputy Commissioner, Lakhimpur on 3<sup>1st</sup> July 1940 to allow him to enter Digboi to see his father, but his request was rejected<sup>273</sup>. Soon he was arrested while he was heading towards an emergency meeting by his car. Bhakta Bahadur was arrested and sent to Dibrugarh jail, where he met the prominent freedom fighter like Priyanath Sarmah, Harnam Singh Pujari, Dalbir Singh Lohar. In the jail also he engaged in organising the prisoners and started agitating with fast against the jail authority to improve the quality of diet. The jail authority had to negotiate with the agitators.

On 18<sup>th</sup> December 1941, Chief Secretary, Government of Assam issued an order instructing the district authority to extern Bhakta Bahadur not only from Digboi but from the territory of Assam within 72 hours of this notice. Police left him at Lumding from where he went to Tripura. From Tripura he started extensive tour in the guise of

---

<sup>270</sup> *Advance*, 6<sup>th</sup> July, 1939

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid.*, 13<sup>th</sup> July, 1939

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>273</sup> P. Bhandari, *Op. Cit.*, p. 96.

a *sadhu*, an ascetic. He toured Kolkata, Purnea, Bhagalpur, Darjeeling, Tezpur and ultimately his birthplace Sadiya. On 6 August 1942 Jit Bahadur Pradhan, due to the absence of his son Bhakta Bahadur Pradhan livelihood earning of his family, requested Chief Secretary of Assam to provide maintenance allowance for the survival of the family. But his application was rejected.

The declaration of World War II, the economic distress of the poorer section of the people of Assam gradually increased. Due to inadequate supply of commodities, black marketing and consequent price rise, cost of living was increased tremendously. In the Lakhimpur district, where a large number of AOC labour reside cost of living had gone up by 2 *annas* to Re. 1 within three to four months of the declaration of War<sup>274</sup>. Despite the gradual appreciation in the cost of living the Company authorities did not enhance the dearness allowance until in October 1940, which was Rs. 3/12<sup>275</sup>. In February 1941 the Company reduced the same to Rs. 2-12 followed by a further decrease of *annas* 12 by next May<sup>276</sup>. Besides the AOC's own workers a large number of contractors' labourers also worked for the Company whose plight was made even more miserable. Most of them did not get their timely wages from the contractors and wages of many were in arrears for months. Further, they were subjected to regular wage deductions for the War Fund<sup>277</sup>. By February 1941 out of a total collection of Rs. 9,75,201 in the Assam War Fund, Rs. 2,15,117 came from Lakhimpur. Obviously, the major shares of this were from forcible deductions from the labourers' wages. Such was the pathetic condition of the labourers in the oil areas<sup>278</sup>. Despite this, the labourers could not go on organized protest as the DIR was in force and as their leaders were in prison. On one occasion however the aggrieved workers sounded for starting a *satyagraha* in the oil complex with the beginning of the INC led individual *satyagraha* from 17<sup>th</sup> October 1940<sup>279</sup>. On the issue of compulsory war contributions, Bhakta Bahadur, Dalbir Singh Lohar and others condemned the Government. By the middle of 1941 Bhakta Bahadur along with other leaders of the Union began to revive

---

<sup>274</sup> Bhuyan, A.C. & Sibapada De, *PHA*, Vol. III, p. 148

<sup>275</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>276</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>277</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 149

<sup>278</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 148

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.*

union activities in AOC. Soon according to the order by the Chief Secretary Government of Assam, dated 18<sup>th</sup> December 1941, Bhakta Bahadur Pradhan externed not only from Digboi but from Assam also<sup>280</sup>.

Another Nepali leader who participated in AOC Digboi labour strike was Dalbir Singh Lohar (1915-1969). While he was a school student, he came forward with others to oppose the Cunningham Circular in 1929 as a congress volunteer for which he was imprisoned in 1930 for 3 months. He was sent to jail in 1941 for one year for participating in *satyagraha* and again in 1942 he was imprisoned for six months for participating in quit India movement. In 1939 he actively participated in the AOC strike for which he was banished from Assam. However, later he was allowed to stay in Goalpara. There he worked for organising *Sevadal* and that led him to imprisonment. There was growing demand for the labour organisation in the province and labour leaders like Bhakta Bahadur Pradhan, Dalbir Singh Lohar from the Nepali community to come forward to opposed the capitalist class of exploitation was highly remarkable in the history of Assam Labour Movement.

## **Conclusion**

After the annexation of Assam in 1826, British Colonial Government was actively involved in exploration and extraction of mineral resources into the province. With the continuous efforts and well supported by the energetic British officials Oil and Coal was discovered in the remote areas of Upper Assam. Exploration of oil was started in 1854, when Mr. Wagentriber dug first well at Makum. The tireless efforts of the Company ultimately oil was produced commercially under the Assam Oil Company in 1901. But the major hindrance in the commercial production of oil was the shortage of labour. Assamese people were not ready to work under the British Government as labourers, for which colonial Government had to rely upon the imported labours. Labours were imported to Assam from Nepal, Uttar Pradesh, Eastern Bengal, and Punjab. The importation of labours were also helped the Colonial Government in two ways. Firstly, Company extracted works in minimum cost; secondly, Company was far away from the danger of any form of labour union as most of the labours were

---

<sup>280</sup> Rudraman Thapa, "Asomor Tholuwa Nepali Samaj", in *Pratibadi Sattar Pratik: Sarbahara Bhakta Bahadur Pradhan*, ed., R. Thapa, (Duliajan: Tulsi Prakashan,2004), p. 149.



from the poor economic background and from different states, countries and languages. The Company compelled the labourers to work hard and in many cases fourteen hours a day without a weekly holiday, nor did they offer any extra allowances for overtime work. In 1920, under the leadership Mahatma Gandhi struggle for freedom was started to oust the British from the country. At the same time the All India Trade Union Congress was formed which parallaly organised the labours to raise their voice against the British Capitalist exploitation. In 1927, the Communist Party of India was formed and people like Jawaharlal Nehru, Subhas Chandra Bose who believed in socialist ideology within the Congress were greatly helpful to spread the consciousness amongst the labours. The consciousness was witnessed in Assam in 1929 when AOC labours struck work demanding weekly holiday, extra allowance for overtime work. The strike was successful and Company accepted their demands. In on February 1938 AOC Labour Union was formed. Bhakta Bahadur Pradhan, Dalbir Singh Lohar, Aiman Thapa prominent labour leaders from the Nepali community were actively participated in the Union from the day of its inception. But the Company neither recognise the Union nor tried to solve their problem. The strike which was peaceful suddenly worsened on 18<sup>th</sup> April 1939 when three (3) workers were killed and twelve (12) were injured in an open firing by police. This led the situation tensed. People and organisations of all over the country extended their support to AOC Labour Union. Most of the prominent leaders like Bhakta Bahadur Pradhan and few others were deported not only from Digboi but also from the state. But the wake of the World War II, Digboi announced as protected area and the strike was ultimately cancelled. Though the union failed to achieve their goal but the kind class of solidarity and unity demonstrated by the strikers has always been highly praised.