

CHAPTER-III

COMMUNIST MOVEMENTS IN SURMA VALLEY (1935-1945)

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During colonial period, the root cause of unrest among the peasantry and working class was new socio-economic transformation which emerged as a result of the British rule in India during which centuries old socio-economic relationships were ruined and replaced by new institutions and relationships. From ancient times, the people of Sylhet and Cachar were mainly agriculturists. Besides primary handicrafts, other industrial activities did not play any major role in the local economy. The condition remained more or less the same during the British days. Only in one aspect there was a difference. The British initiated commercial production of tea in the district of Sylhet and Cachar which subsequently became the only organized industrial sector of the valley.²¹⁷

Agrarian class structure during the contemporary period:

During the colonial period, in the realm of agriculture, new agrarian relations and class structure came into being. New classes, absentee landlords and money-lenders at the top and tenants-at will, share croppers and agricultural labourers at the bottom, came into existence. A new agrarian structure was born that was neither traditional or feudal nor capitalist.²¹⁸ In the field of agriculture, this socio-economic transformation took place as a result of the introduction of new land tenure system like-Permanent Settlement, Ryotwari and Mahalwari systems, heavy land revenue demand under those systems and emergence of money lenders.

²¹⁷ Ahmed, Sharif Uddin (Edited). *Sylhet: History and Heritage*. Bangladesh Itihas Samiti (Bangladesh History Association). Dhaka-1999. P-246.

²¹⁸ Chandra, Bipan. *Nationalism and Colonialism in Modern India*. Orient Longman, New Delhi-2006. P-335.

Colonisation of the economy, administrative and legal structure, the land revenue system and increasing commercialisation of rural life created a favourable economic and political climate for the village money-lenders who began to occupy a dominating position in the rural economy and to expropriate both the peasant proprietors and the occupancy tenants and the zamindars. This led to the major tension situations in the country side and produced two interesting consequences. In the many parts of the country, the cultivators could be rallied around by the small and even big landlords against the common enemy- the money-lender. Secondly, the rural tensions generated by the intrusion of the non-cultivating usurer often threatened social and political peace and led to the colonial administrators to rail against him.²¹⁹

The most important change in agrarian relations during the colonial period was the growth in the relative strength of the landlord, the trader and money-lender. The actual cultivator increasingly became a rack-rented tenant-at-will or share cropper, whose terms of tenancy were constantly deteriorating. Another aspect was the differentiation and stratification within the peasantry, as a result of the introduction of new system in agriculture, emerged a stratum of rich peasants both owners as well as protected tenants at the top. The rich peasant as rent and revenue payer was opposed to Imperialism as well as to the zamindars. But an actual intermediary, whose legal position was still that of a peasant proprietor or occupancy ryot, or as a potential intermediary his agrarian and political outlook was deeply conservative. Below the rich peasants, came a stratum of middle peasants who were very close in social and economic position as also political and agrarian outlook to the rich peasants. The vast mass of peasantry was gradually getting reduced to the status of landless agricultural labourers and petty land holders. The landless labourers constituted more than half of the rural population.²²⁰

Immediately after introduction of Permanent Settlement in Bengal, the cultivators lost their ownership rights over their lands and the new class of people became zamindar with the obligation to pay fixed rent to the government. It was clear that motive behind introduction of Permanent Settlement was to maintain a joint hegemony of British Government and the zamindars in the share of produce of the land. So, extensive powers were granted to the zamindars. There was no doubt that

²¹⁹ Chandra, Bipan. *Nationalism and Colonialism in Modern India*. Orient Longman, New Delhi-2006. Pp-338-339.

²²⁰ Ibid. Pp-341-342.

the Permanent Settlement brought disaster to the rural economy of India and this was done by the British with two motives. The first was economic i.e. to have support group of people for their own empire's consolidation and to counter balance the revolutionary urge of the peasants and to use this money to build up British domination on other parts of India. In Bengal, between the zamindars and tillers of the land a new stratum emerged a landed class which took land on lease from the zamindars and sub-let it to share croppers and these sharecroppers are known as *Bargadar* or *Adiar* or *Bhagchasi*.²²¹

As a result of exploitation within the newly emerged agrarian class structure by the top stratum of the agrarian system, the agricultural labourers, petty land holders, tenants and share croppers gradually started to rise in isolated revolts in different parts of the country. During the initial period, those peasant movements lacked any political ideology, class consciousness and organizational backing. The anger of the peasants at that time was targeted against the oppressive zamindars, money-lenders in order to get redress from the inhuman exploitation by the latter. In their first primitive and spontaneous forms the anger and unrest of the peasants found expression in isolated action of revenge and violence against individual money-lenders and landlords.²²²

The term 'peasant movement' and 'agrarian movement' as blanket terms refer to all kinds of collective attempts of different strata of the peasantry either to change the system which, they felt, was exploitative, or to seek redress for particular grievances with out necessarily aiming at overthrowing the system. The two terms used interchangeably thus refer to all kinds of resistance movements, violent or non-violent, organized or spasmodic, pre-political or political. Similarly the terms 'rebellion', 'uprising', 'insurrection' and 'revolt' have been used synonymously implying that, though falling short of a full-scale revolution in a modern or contemporary sense, they involve large-scale peasant violence as a part of resistance.²²³

The nationalist leaders never accepted the demands of the peasantry to rise in anger against landlords and money-lenders and abolition of zamindari system. In

²²¹ Biswas, Girban Ranjan. *Peasant Movement in North East India (1946-1950)*. Regency Publications, New Delhi- 2002. Pp-44-46.

²²² Dutt, R.P. *India Today*, Monisha, Calcutta - 1997. P-275.

²²³ Dhanagare, D.N. *Peasant Movements in India 1920-1950*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi 1994. Pp-19-20.

agrarian India, maximum number of nationalist leaders hailed from the family of zamindars and rich peasants. They were always in favour of a compromise between the peasants and landlords and the Congress leaders also tried to reduce the tension and unrest in agrarian society. Ignoring the basic features of colonial agrarian structure, the national leadership on the whole curbed the anti-landlord struggle. Its dominant sections were opposed to anti- landlord ideologies, policies and agitations. They opposed all anti-landlord activities of the peasantry in the name of non-violence and the unity of the anti-imperialist struggle. Opposing the independent mobilisation of the peasantry, they favoured peasant mobilisation only when it was a part of the broader national mobilisation against Imperialism. Thus, Gandhi advised the agitating peasants of U.P. in February 1921 that “you should bear a little if the zamindar torments you. We do want to fight with zamindars...zamindars are also slaves and we do not want to trouble them.”²²⁴ In May 1921, he again wrote...“it is not contemplated that at any stage of non-cooperation we would seek to derive the zamindars of their rent. The Kisan movement must be confined to the improvement of the status of the kisans and the betterment of the relations between the zamindars and them. The Kisans must be advised scrupulously to abide by the terms of their agreement with the zamindars, whether such agreement is written or inferred from custom.”²²⁵

Peasantry in the district of Sylhet:

The Sylhet district came under the operation of the Permanent Settlement in 1869. ‘Permanently Settled Estates’ means any estates in the district of Sylhet included in the decennial settlement of permanently settled at any subsequent date. The owner of the larger, permanently settled estates were termed as ‘zamindars’ or ‘talukdars’ and in some cases they sublet their land in ‘*patni*’, or under leases fixing the rent in perpetuity, or cultivators whose rights in the lands were governed by the Sylhet Tenancy Act, 1936. The revenue of these lands was fixed in perpetuity, and the revenue was not fixed for a term of years subjected to revision after the expiry of the said term as it found in the case of ‘*Ilam*’ or ‘temporarily settled estates’.²²⁶

²²⁴ Chandra, Bipan. *Nationalism and Colonialism in Modern India*. Orient Longman, New Delhi-2006. P-353.

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ Goswami, Atul. (edited) *Land Reforms And Peasant Movement: A study of North-east India*, Omsons Publications, Guwahati- 1986. P-117.

During colonial period, the district of Sylhet was dominated by a large number of powerful zamindars. They received from the British Government various titles like Roy Bahadur, Khan Bahadur, Roy Saheb etc. In Sylhet district, under the Permanent Settlement, the ryots and peasants had no ownership rights over the land. The peasants were the worst sufferers and victims of zamindari exploitation, torture and oppression. In the initial stage, the peasant community of the valley rose in various revolts in isolated form which were nothing but sporadic outburst in true sense. Against the zamindari oppression the Surma valley for the first time witnessed the organised peasant movement at Bhanubil.²²⁷

In Sylhet, under the Permanent Settlement, the vast mass of peasantry was getting reduced to the status of landless agricultural labourers and, petty land holders and tenant at will. The land revenue and land tenure system of the district of Sylhet was not similar with other districts of Assam except Goalpara. Sylhet and Goalpara districts were though the parts of the province of Assam were under Permanent Settlement because at the time of the introduction of Permanent Settlement, those two districts were not included to the province of Assam but they were parts of Bengal. In Sylhet, the rich and middle peasants, in order to maintain their social status used to regard themselves as landlords. Those self styled zamindars were locally known as ‘mirashdars’ and ‘talugdars’.[□] It was not possible for the mirashdars and talugdars to maintain the life style like those of the actual zamindars out of the income from their small portion of land. So, in order to maintain their status, they used to exploit the ryots in a high level.

After the inclusion of the district of Sylhet into Assam, the principles of Permanent Settlement and other agrarian policy of Bengal were not properly implemented in Sylhet. In later period, a separate legislation was adopted regarding the agrarian policy of the district. The Sylhet Tenancy Act, 1936, was introduced in Assam for the Sylhet district. This was an act to consolidate and amend certain enactments relating to the law of landlord and tenant in the district of Sylhet. This Act

²²⁷ Bhattacharjee, Tapodir and Bhattacharjee.,(edited) Tapojyoti. *Kaler jatrar Dbwani Jananeta Tarapoda Bhattacharjee Smarak Granta* (edited) Aruna-Tarapoda Smriti Samsad. Silchar - 2006. P-189.

[□] Mirash and Taluq are the synonyms of land and their holders were known as Mirashdars and Talugdars.

classified the tenants under different categories.²²⁸ “There shall be for the purposes of this Act, the following classes of tenants, namely:-

- (1) Tenure-holders, which expression includes under tenure holders.
- (2) Raiyats.
- (3) Under-raiyats, that is to say, tenants holding immediately under raiyats; and the following classes of raiyats, namely:-
 - (a) Raiyats holding at fixed rates, which expression means raiyats holding immediately under a proprietor or a permanent tenure holder either rent free for all time or at a rent or rate of rent fixed in perpetuity,
 - (b) Occupancy raiyats, that is to say, raiyats not having a right of occupancy in the land held by them, and,
 - (c) Non-occupancy raiyats, that is to say, raiyats not having such a right of occupancy.

Under this Act, the non-occupancy raiyats were the most exploited sections in the district. They had no legal rights over their land and can be ejected from the land at any time by the zamindars. The Act clearly states: - “A non-occupancy raiyats shall, subject to the provision of this Act, be liable to be ejected on one or more of the following grounds, and not otherwise:-

- (a) On the ground that he has failed to pay an arrear of rent.
- (b) On the ground that he has used the land in a manner which renders it unfit for the purposes of the tenancy, or that he has broken a condition consistent with the provisions of this Act and on breach of which, he is, under the terms of a registered contract between himself and his landlord, liable to be ejected;
- (c) When he has been admitted to occupation of the land under a registered lease on the ground that the term of the lease has expired.²²⁹

By the Sylhet Tenancy Act, a large section of the peasants including the Nankars were not acknowledged as the tenants with out any right of the peasants on their lands. The zamindars were given considerable power by the Act and they could adopt any stand for the exploitation and oppression of the peasants.

One of the unique features of the agrarian society of Sylhet was the existence of ‘Nankars’ or the ‘Service Tenure-holders’ who used to enjoy a portion of tax free land

²²⁸ *The Sylhet Tenancy Act 1936*. Para-4, Chapter II, Pp-5-6.

²²⁹ *Ibid.* Para-57, Chapter V, Pp-27-28.

which was known as 'Nan Land' from the zamindars and mirasdars in return of obligatory services to their masters. The Nankars were most exploited section of the agrarian society of Sylhet district. Nankars were the landless agricultural labourers who were given a rent free land by the zamindars for the survival of the Nankars. In return, the Nankars were bound to render obligatory domestic services to their masters without any wage and those forced labour including their women folk were conditioned to fulfill the demands of their masters. It has been speculated by many scholars that the Nankar system was prevailing in Sylhet district prior to the establishment of British rule in this area and transformation of the agrarian system by the British rulers.

After the prolonged period of inhuman exploitation and zamindary oppression, gradually the Nankars started to rise in revolt individually and in isolated way against the zamindars. It was during and after the First World War, the Nankar Revolt gradually acquired the character of mass revolt. The Nankar Rebellion almost acquired 90 percent of the history of the peasant movement of Sylhet district. It is difficult to ascertain the exact proportion of the Nankar tenants in Sylhet district. But some historians hold the view that in the year 1947, the Nankar tenants constituted about 10 percent of the total peasantry of the Sylhet district. There were about Four lakh Nankars in Sylhet during that time.²³⁰

Peasantry in the district of Cachar:

There was no formal land revenue system in Cachar before the annexation of the district by the British. The vast tract of fertile land was laying vacant. This invited the attention of the landless and land hungry people of the adjacent Sylhet district who started migration to Cachar district and occupied as much as was necessary for them. On assuming the charge, the British Government allotted huge plots of land to a few persons free of tax to work as their agents. On receiving the land these people started evicting the already settled people who had reclaimed lands. Secondly, in order to get revenue, they gave settlement to another set of people. These arrangements, though temporary in nature, is the beginning of the birth of a new class of landlords on feudal model. These landed gentry in turn brought large number of people from the adjacent Sylhet district to cultivate their land under *Paikashi* system. This means that the

²³⁰ Saiyed, Anwar Hussain & Mamun, Muntasin. *Bangladeshe Soshostro Protirodh Andolon*. Asiatic Society, Dacca-1986. P-VIII.

tenants would get no ownership right over land but must give 3/4th of the produce, mainly paddy, per *bigha* to the owner of the land. Failure to do so means eviction. The cost of cultivation must be borne by the man who cultivated the land. In 1840, the British Government found that this system was not working to their advantage. They were not getting enough revenue to bear the cost of their administration. So, they took some steps to develop Cachar district. First, to increase the land revenue they gave settlement to uncultivable land under small *pattha* to large number of people. This system produced large numbers of marginal farmers along with tax free zamindars and other big land owners.²³¹

The district of Cachar was placed under the Ryotwari system like majority of the districts of Assam except Sylhet and Goalpara which were under permanent settlement. Apparently, in ryotwari areas, there were no zamindars at the top and all the peasants were considered as the tenant. In the ryotwari area, mirashdars were at the top and below them the marginal landowners having small amount of land and the *khetmazdoors*. A large section of the marginal farmers are also the *bhagchasi*. They cultivate their own land and at the same time took land from others on the basis of *bhagi* system.²³²

The peasants of Cachar were overwhelmingly Manipuri followed by the Bengali Muslims. The next groups are ex-tea garden labourers who were mostly landless and *khetmazdoor*. The numbers of Bengali Hindu peasants were insignificant at that time. All these peasants did not form into a single peasant class but there is no doubt that they joined the Kisan Sabha and the Communist Party enblock and fought shoulder to shoulder to ventilate their grievances. The common interest was the bond of unity.

The core of the leadership of the Communist Party came exclusively from the Bengali Hindu community except of course Irabat Singh. The notable leaders were Achinta Bhattacharjee, Dwijen Sengupta, Motilal Jagirdar, Manashi Jagirdar, Moni Roy, Lahari Roy, Mrinal Dasgupta, Jibon Banerjee, Amaresh Choudhury, Gopen Roy and others. The peasant leaders were Sitaram Baroi, who also revolted against his mirasdar father, Sona Singh, Chandreswar Singh, Baburen Singh, Bhagirath Singh and host of other leaders. A. Wahid, Latika Bhumij, Tetry Goala, Jagyamoni,

²³¹ Goswami, Atul. (edited) *Land Reforms And Peasant Movement: A study of North-east India*, Omsons Publications, Guwahati- 1986. P-211.

²³² Biswas, Girban Ranjan. *Peasant Movement in North East India (1946-1950)*. Regency Publications, New Delhi- 2002. P-131.

Krishnacharan Nunia, Nabin Majhi were the leaders who hailed from very poor peasant class refusing the claim that peasant always need “outside help”. The above mentioned peasant leaders led the Tebhaga movement in Cachar district in the face of severe repression.

The first organising committee of the Kisan Sabha in Cachar was formed at the initiative of the Communist leaders from Sylhet in which good number of the members were not Communist, rather they hailed from the family of big land owner. But when the permanent committee was formed it included all those who received their baptism in Communist ideology. The peasant class had no place in the agenda of any other political party, including the Indian National Congress. With the exception of Arun Kumar Chanda, the majority of the numbers of the Congress Party were more or less allied with the landed gentry of the district. So, only the Communist Party took up the case of the exploited peasants of the district. The Communist Party since its inception gave leadership to the peasant and motivated them to resist the greed of the land owners in an organised manner under the banner of the Kisan Sabha. The dedication and integration with the peasant life attracted the peasant class towards the Communist Party. The peasants have felt through their experience that resistance to any injustices always pays dividend.

The District Kisan Sabha had several branches lower down the order. Below the district committee, there was the regional committee. These committees played very significant role in organising and mobilising the peasants of different regions of the district of Cachar. During the Tebhaga Movement another organisation was created at the lower level only to carry out the movement which was Tebhaga Committee. The duty of the committee was to look after day to day problems arising out of the peasant movement. The most important task of these committees was to generate support for the movement through *baithaks*, meetings, assemblies, campaign, procession, *haat Sabha* and also through literature, postering and slogans.

Mobilising the peasantry:

There was no doubt that the Permanent Settlement had totally devastated the economy of Bengal. The majority of the peasants became restless. But as they had no leadership nor organisation or ideology, no organised and sustained movement could be launched. Whatever movement could develop remained sporadic outburst. The failure

of the Civil Disobedience Movement in the 1930's led to hear searching among the Socialists, Communists and the radical Congressmen. There was a new-found consciousness about the potential inherent in the peasant mobilisation in a country where the peasant constituted maximum percentage of the population. In this background, the All India Kisan Sabha was formed in 1936. Soon the organisation could spread its wings to several provinces including Bengal and Assam.²³³

In Surma valley, the Communist took the lead in organising the Provincial Kisan Sabha, In Sylhet district, Kisan Sabha was formed in 1936 with Lala Sharodindhu Dey as Secretary and it was known as Surma Valley Provincial Kisan Sabha.²³⁴ The branch of Kisan Sabha also formed in Cachar district in 1937 under the name '*Cachar Zila Kisan Sabha*' with Dwijendralal Sengupta as Secretary and Poresh Choudhury as President.²³⁵ The formation of Kisan Sabha was an epoch making event for the poor unorganized peasants of India. This gave sense of awareness, courage and confidence in the minds of the peasants.

The sporadic outburst and isolated peasant uprisings of India got a new momentum from 1936 onwards with the formation of the All India Kisan Sabha which attempted to organise the peasant movements of India. The formation of All India Kisan Sabha was a landmark in the development of Kisan movement in India for the Sabha gave the movement for the first time an all-India character. The Kisan Sabha from time to times organised meetings and kisan marches to induce to the Congress to implement a more radical agrarian reform policy. These extra parliamentary activities of Kisan Sabhas were encouraged by the left-wing within the Congress.²³⁶

Working class during the contemporary period:

The emergence of modern working class in India has its root with the establishment of British rule in India. It is the known fact that the working class and the proletariat and its movement was born in the womb of existing capitalist system in any society. In

²³³ Biswas, Girban Ranjan. *Peasant Movement in North East India (1946-1950)*. Regency Publications, New Delhi- 2002. Pp-46-47.

²³⁴ *Communist Survey, July 1936*. Office of the Deputy Inspector General Police, C.I.D. Memo. No.17596 dated August the 8th of 1936, 154/36 (Assam) Comm. File No. A-2(3) 36, II, Sub: Communism: General Activities.

²³⁵ *Assam Police Abstract of Intelligence*, No. 584, Cachar. Office of the Deputy Inspector General of Police (S.B), Shillong, dated 17 December, 1937.

²³⁶ Ghose, Sankar., *Socialism and Communism in India*. Allied Publishers, Bombay – 1971. Pp-82-83.

India, with the establishment of British rule, modern capitalist industries were established and began to grow since the latter half of the 19th century. So, like other parts of the world, the working class and its movements in India were directly linked with the introduction of the modern capitalist mode of production under the British regime. As it happened in the history of the proletarian movement elsewhere, so also in the history of early period of the working class movement in India, there were isolated attacks upon the modern machinery.²³⁷

The unrestrained exploitation by the capitalists before long made the workers' condition of life unbearable and consequently grievances began to accumulate among them. The workers of India in those days had not yet learnt to conduct organised protests against the capitalist system of exploitation. The workers' distress and resulting hatred against capitalism took the form of isolated attacks upon the machinery. The workers of India had to pass through a long period of several decades of unorganized or semi-organised form of struggles before they succeeded in organising themselves in trade unions as the primary form of organ of class struggle.²³⁸ However, the Indian working class gradually started to acquire more political and organizational awareness and organised various movements for their legitimate demands from the last two decades of 19th century.

In the history of the evolution of Indian working class movement, it is evident that in this country as a result of the ruthless exploitation of the capitalist class and with the increasing ill-treatment, the working class on the one hand learnt step by step to lead more and more organised form of movement and further strengthened itself for assuming more and more militant form of struggle. They did not hesitate to resort to their last weapon of strike and even general strike when the employers turned their legitimate demands.²³⁹

With the development of modern industry, the working class and their movement also developed in India. With the outbreak of the First World War the life of the Indian people in general and working class in particular had become desperate. No doubt the war came as a boon to the new rising industrial bourgeoisie and on the other hand as curse to the working class and toiling masses of India. The price rise began almost immediately since the war broke out. The prices of essential necessary

²³⁷ Goswami, Dharani., *Trade Union Movement in India: Its Growth and Development*. People Publishing House. New Delhi – 1983. P-2.

²³⁸ Ibid. P-8.

²³⁹ Ibid. Pp-11-12.

consumer goods such as kerosene, cloth, salt etc. rose abnormally high. As a result the people in general were hard hit and suffered most. Towards the end of the war the situation further worsened. The working class movement rose to high peak and the largest number of workers strikes took place all over India during this period.²⁴⁰

In this historical background, the working class formed their all India organisation-the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) in 1920 and with this historical event, the working class movement got a new momentum.²⁴¹ There was intense movement of the working class in India during the 1920s particularly in textile mills of Calcutta, Bombay and Kanpur, various strikes were organised by the working class. Most of those strikes were organised by the early Communists of India.

Working class movement in Assam:

The organised form of working class movement of India was mainly initiated by the Socialists and Communists. Like other parts of India, during the interim period of the two great world wars (1919-1939) a sense of class consciousness emerged amongst the wage-earning and peasant population of Assam which was infused mainly by the Socialist and Communist groups. As a result independent class organisation came into being to focus and resist exploitation of the labourers. In the beginning of the period under review wage-earning population in this province comprised primarily the immigrant labourers who worked mainly in the tea gardens. The latter already were fettered with problems, both financial and otherwise ever since the beginning of the tea industry in the 19th century. These problems were further aggravated immediately after the First World War when there was a simultaneous rise in the prices of all daily necessities. Between 1913 and 1920, the cost of living in the province shot up by about thirty-three to fifty percent. Yet in the tea gardens, the rate of wages in force had remained unchanged for a quarter of a century. Further in some gardens the cash earning of the labourers were even decreased during this period.²⁴² Under the

²⁴⁰ Goswami, Dharani., *Trade Union Movement in India: Its Growth and Development*. People Publishing House. New Delhi – 1983. P-34.

²⁴¹ Ghose, Sankar., *Socialism and Communism in India*. Allied Publishers, Bombay – 1971. P-54.

²⁴² *Report of the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee, 1921-22*, Government of Assam, 1922. P-35.; Bhuyan, A.C. *Political History of Assam* (Vol. II.) Publication Board of Assam, Guwahati-1999. P-235.

circumstances the volume of dissatisfaction grew amongst the labourers. The price rise at this period affected other wage-earners as well.

The Non-cooperation Movement (1921-22) for the first time gave scope to the Surma valley tea labourers to organise themselves in their protests and legitimate demands. In contravention of the Congress programme, the fourth resolution of the Surma Valley Conference, held in September 1920, gave direct encouragement to the tea labourers to non-cooperate with their European employers.²⁴³

In the Chargola valley of Karimganj sub-division, tea labourers struck work on and from 2 May, 1921 demanding an increase in the rate of their wages. However, the historic labour exodus from Chargola and Longai-valley in Karimganj subdivision had started with the return of 750 men, women and children from Anipur T.E on 3 May.²⁴⁴ Within a few days about one thousand labourers deserted the gardens the employers were forced to apprehend the seriousness of the situation especially within the context of large scale desertion becoming the final option of the labourers. The latter conferred among themselves on 6 May 1921 and observed that “unless something is done to satisfy the coolies, the gardens throughout the valley risk losing the greater part of their labour force.”²⁴⁵ Thereby the management unanimously agreed to six annas and four annas increase for men and women respectively per day, considering these increases to be “justly due and absolutely necessary.”²⁴⁶ By about the middle of the month, between six to seven thousands *coolies* had left the gardens. Two gardens in the Chargola valley had lost practically their entire labour force, and all gardens but one in the valley lost from 30 to 60 percent.²⁴⁷

In Assam, during the period of Chargola exodus, there was no trade union, nor was there any activity of the AITUC though one of the important objectives of latter was to promote trade unionism in the localities where it had not yet penetrated. The Labour Enquiry Commission, appointed by the Government of Assam in 1921, to examine the causes of labour unrest, wished that even in the absence of trade unions labour grievances in Assam should not be ignored; rather it should receive the best

²⁴³ Bhuyan, A.C. *Political History of Assam* (Vol. II.) Publication Board of Assam, Guwahati-1999. P-14.

²⁴⁴ Guha, Amalendu. *Planter-Raj to Swaraj Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826-1947*. Indian Council of Historical Research. New Delhi - 1977. P-129.

²⁴⁵ *Report of the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee, 1921-22*, Government of Assam, 1922. P-14.

²⁴⁶ Bhuyan, A.C. *Political History of Assam* (Vol. II.) Publication Board of Assam, Guwahati-1999. P-238.

²⁴⁷ *Assam Legislative Council Proceedings*. Vol.I, 1921, Secretariat Administration (Record & Library) Deptt. Assam Secretariat, Dispur, Guwahati-6. Pp-889-93.

attention of the authorities.²⁴⁸ In spite of this remark of the commission the authorities in Assam remained indifferent to the labour problems as the latter could not be forced to look into the matter by any organized trade union activity.²⁴⁹ It was only after the emergence of the Communists in the Surma valley, the cause of the labourers of the valley effectively taken by the Communists.

The Chargola exodus was the first independent trend of the labour movement of the Surma valley which provided direct encouragement to the labourers during the subsequent period to rise against all sorts of exploitation by their employers at the initiative of the Communists. The outcome of the Chargola exodus in the context of labour movement was insignificant however; as the economic side was totally ignored while only emotional and political aspects gained undue prominence. As a result most of the deserted labourers returned to their gardens when their emotions subsided in the face of hard realities. Yet, leaving aside the emotional and political issues the Chargola exodus undoubtedly made the labourers conscious of their united strength in their fight against their employers.²⁵⁰ However, it was the Non-cooperation Movement itself which directly encouraged the labourers to ventilate their grievances.

The Nankar Rebellion of Sylhet district:

The Nankar Rebellion of the Sylhet district was the most militant, organised, widespread and spontaneous peasant movement of Surma valley. In comparison with other peasant movements of Indian history, Nankar Rebellion was the most long lasting and effective peasant movement which did not stop without fulfilling the main demands of the movement. Nankar is a socio-economic system within the zamindari system which was a part of medieval Indian feudal society. The term 'Nankar' emerged from the Urdu word 'Nun' which means bread and the Nankar system indicates a socio-economic system of agrarian society where the landlords used to maintain their slaves in return of bread or food and nothing more.²⁵¹ To be more precise it can be said that 'Nun' means bread. The tenants who render their services to the zamindars without any wage but only for bread or food, they were known as Nankars. Another perception is that, the term 'Nankar' emerged from the term Non-

²⁴⁸ *Report of the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee, 1921-22*, Government of Assam, 1922. P-106.

²⁴⁹ Bhuyan, A.C. *Political History of Assam* (Vol. II.) Publication Board of Assam, Guwahati-1999. Pp-237-241.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.* Pp-237-238.

²⁵¹ Bhattacharya, Ajoy. *Nankar Vidroha*. (Vol. I), Muktaadhara, Decca - 1986. P-14.

Kar (Kar means tax and Non-Kar means no tax). The tenants who used to receive a portion of tax free land from the zamindars in return of their free and obligatory services to the zamindars were known as Nankars.²⁵²

The State Acquisition Act of 1950 of the East Pakistan Government used the term ‘service tenure-holders’²⁵³ in place of ‘Nankar.’ In fact the Nankars were the tenants who enjoyed a portion of tax free land from the zamindars but in return they were bound by the zamindari norms to render obligatory services to the zamindars on the basis of the will of the zamindars. It is generally believe that that the Nankar system within the zamindari system of Sylhet district emerged during the Mughal period²⁵⁴ and the system developed and became more and more exploitative nature during the colonial period.²⁵⁵ During Mughal period, land tenure and land revenue system was reorganized in India in a large scale and as a result of which, different land tenure systems emerged in different parts of India in varied names which were mainly derived from the Urdu language. So, it can be assumed that the Nankar system emerged as a new socio-economic relation in the agrarian society of Sylhet during the rule of the Mughals.

In Sylhet district, there were some synonyms of Nankar system like *Beggar* system, *Chakran* system etc.²⁵⁶ Further the zamindars used to maintain a group of Nankars for coercive purpose who were used as knaves (*Lathials* in local tem). Those Nankars were known as Kiraan.²⁵⁷ The men folk were obliged to take up *lathis* in defence of their respective master’s interests against rebellious tenants and rival zamindars, whenever so asked. The women folk had to perform miscellaneous domestic services in their master’s house holds and were often used also as concubines. Under the law, Nankars had no right to the land they lived on and could be ejected there from any time by their zamindars.

The storm centre of the movement was Lauta-Bahadurpur, where a prolonged class war was carried on between the zamindars and Nankars, involving clashes and

²⁵² Mohammad, Tajul. *Sileter Duishoto Bochorer Andolon*. Agami Prakashani, Dacca-1995. P-85.

²⁵³ *The State Acquisition and Tenancy Act*. (XXVIII of 1951), Dhaka Law Reports-2007. P-55.

²⁵⁴ Chakraborty, Ratanlal. *Ouponibeshik Amole Sileter Bhumi Byabosthya*. Aziz, Mohammad Abdul; Rahman, Mohammad Habibur; Bashar, Mohammad Abul; Imam, Shubhebdou & Fattah, Abdul Fateh.(Edited) *Brihattar Sileter Itihas(Vol. I)*, Brihattar Sylhet Itihas Pranayan Parishad, Sylhet -1997. P-231.

²⁵⁵ Chakraborty, Ratanlal. *Protirodh Andolon O Krishak Vidraho*. Islam, Sirajul (edited) *Bangladesher Itihas (Vol.I)*. Asiatic Society, Dacca-1993. P-221.

²⁵⁶ Bhattacharya, Ajoy. *Nankar Vidroha*. (Vol. I), Muktaadhara, Decca - 1986. P-14.

²⁵⁷ Mohammad, Tajul. *Sileter Duishoto Bochorer Andolon*. Agami Prakashani, Dacca – 1995. P-85.

casualties on both sides. This abominable system was more deep rooted among the Muslim zamindars than among their Hindu counterpart. Also, a majority of several thousand Nankars were Muslims. Led by the Kisan Sabhas, they refused to serve their masters any longer and defended their lands against the landlords' private armies. Thus, In Sylhet, the CPI was able to build up a united platform of Hindu and Muslim peasants in certain pockets of their influence against all provocations.²⁵⁸

In Sylhet, the prospect of an effective class organisation on the basis of Hindu Muslim unity was some what brighter despite minor communal clashes engineered here and there. By 1945, a militant struggle for occupancy rights and for the abolition of certain feudal obligations developed among a class of serfs, known as Nankars. They were attached to the households of zamindars.²⁵⁹ In this system, the zamindars could adopt any coercive measures against the Nankars. Though the Nankar system emerged during the Mughal rule, we can not say that there was no such system in India before the advent of the Mughals. As the basic nature of the Nankar system was slavery and this type of class organisation emerged in the society with emergence of economic class structure and the division of society into economic class which was determined by the basic mode of production as propounded by Karl Marx. In the sages of history, different old socio-economic systems abolished from the society as result of class antagonism and reorganization of the society took place which is the basic nature of the history of the human society. From this point of view, the Nankar system was nothing but the reconstruction and reorganization of the ancient slave system.²⁶⁰

The condition of the Nankar society was very deplorable. Even the female folk of the Nankars were not free from zamindary exploitation and oppression. In Sylhet, all most all the zamindars and even middle peasants used to keep and maintain a group of Nankar tenants. Those tenants, in this system were known as '*Nankar Proja*', '*Khanebarir Proja*', '*Hadua Proja*', '*Beggar Proja*', '*Chakran Proja*' etc.²⁶¹ From the early phase of the system, various individual Nankars raised in protests and anger against the zamindary oppression, the result of those protests were nothing but the eviction and physical harassment of the Nankars who were at that time not

²⁵⁸ Guha, Amalendu. *Planter-Raj to Swaraj Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826-1947*. Indian Council of Historical Research. New Delhi - 1977. Pp-300-301.

²⁵⁹ Ibid. P-300.

²⁶⁰ Bhattacharya, Ajoy. *Nankar Vidroha*. (Vol. I), Muktdhara, Decca - 1986. P-14.

²⁶¹ Ahmed, Sharif Uddin (Edited). *Sylhet: History and Heritage*. Bangladesh Itihas Samiti (Bangladesh History Association). Dhaka-1999. P-271.

organised and unable to organise any collective resistance against the zamindary oppression.

Although a continuation of the land administration and land tenure system of the Mughal times, the Nankar system was a particularly debilitating and anachronistic one which the British supported for their own interest. The practice of having bonded labourers in exchange of food (the word *Nan* means bread), found a favourable climate in Sylhet where landlessness and poverty were widespread, and where small to medium size zamindars outnumbered the big ones. The distribution of the peasant population in terms of religious and class divisions, with a mix of other national and sub-national populations thrown in (the Manipuris in Bhanugach, for example), was also an advantage for the practitioners of the system.

Historians have discussed the complex nature of the origins of the system, but no clear consensus has emerged as to why the system operated in its particular form at a particular geographical area. However, in the end, the economic, political, social and cultural practices of an area, together with its demographic peculiarities were the shaping agents for the evolution of a particular social system. In Sylhet, the zamindars were known for their vicious drive to hold on to their land, title and privileges. Unlike their counterparts in the North and West Bengal, they had very little grounding in liberal education, or broad humanistic outlook on life. Their attachment to the concepts of family or *khandan*[□] was also perhaps more pronounced and parochial. Whatever be the reasons, the operation of the Nankar system was an advantage to them, and they tried to protect it from any challenge.²⁶²

However, historical discussion is less conclusive on the reasons why the Nankar uprising began to take place all around eastern Sylhet after the First World War. There have been many suggestions, but these remain only provisional and rather tentative in the absence of solid historical evidence. Historians agree on the general grounds, but run into blank areas as soon as the analyses of specific revolts are taken up. If we make a list of possible reasons, the following may be included:

(a) the extreme brutality of the zamindars (Nankar uprising did not take place, or was of very low intensity, where the zamindars was tolerant of his subjects); (b) the backs-to the wall situation of the peasantry – a desperate situation that called for

[□] *Khandan* is a social concept based on the belief of the superiority of a particular family.

²⁶² Ahmed, Sharif Uddin (Edited). *Sylhet: History and Heritage*. Bangladesh Itihas Samiti (Bangladesh History Association). Dhaka-1999. P-271.

desperate remedies; (c) the initial success of one revolt igniting avenging attitudes among the Nankars of an adjacent area, largely through personal contacts; (d) the common hatred against the zamindars, the police and the administration; (e) the question of honour among the Nankars (often, someone would join an uprising to take revenge against a murder, a rape, or an insult); (f) the political leadership and organizational work of leftist (mostly communist) parties and their rank and file; (g) the capricious land sales, transfers, auctions and other practices, that put families out of their land overnight, etc.²⁶³

The main centre of the Nankar rebellion was Sylhet district. Though, the epicenter of the Nankar rebellion was located in remote corner of the country, it can not be regarded isolated event from the main current of the peasant movement of India. In spite of its localized nature, it was the reflection of the anger against exploitation of the contemporary socio-economic condition of agrarian India.

First phase of the Nankar Rebellion:

During the First World War, there took place a high level of consciousness among the peasantry and working class of India. Its impact was also felt on the Nankar society of Sylhet. During that period, Nankars of Sylhet district also started to take initiative to organise some collective resistance against zamindari exploitation. At the initial stage of the rebellion or struggle, emotion of the Nankars was the main determinant against the outburst and anger of the Nankars against the landlords and by projecting their anger, the Nankars wanted to get rid of the zamindari oppression.

The individual outburst of anger of the Nankars took a new dimension during and after the war. At that period, it has been noticed that the Nankar Rebellion acquired the organised and semi-organised form to some extent and the revolt of one place inspired the Nankars of another place to rise in similar form of revolt.²⁶⁴ So, the phase of the Nankar Rebellion during the First World War may be regarded as the first phase of the Nankar Rebellion of Sylhet district.

The socio-political condition which was created among the peasantry and working class toiling masses of India during and after the First World War was not utilised in a successful revolutionary way due to various hurdles. Firstly, only a

²⁶³ Ahmed, Sharif Uddin (Edited). *Sylhet: History and Heritage*. Bangladesh Itihas Samiti (Bangladesh History Association). Dhaka-1999. P-272.

²⁶⁴ Bhattacharya, Ajoy. *Nankar Vidroha*. (Vol. I), Muktaadhara, Decca - 1986. P-37.

political organisation of the working class and peasantry could lead the revolutionary spirit of the peasantry and working class, but there did not take birth any revolutionary party or organisation of the Indian proletariat on the ideological basis at that historical point. Secondly, though the revolutionary spirit and emotion emerged among the peasantry and working class, the revolutionary ideology was almost totally absent among the Indian peasantry and wage earning masses. In the agrarian Sylhet, the Nankar tenants constituted a greater portion of the rural population. During the colonial period, out of about 30 lakh total population of Sylhet district, almost 10% were constituted the Nankar tenants.²⁶⁵

During the post war period, some locally organised outburst of the Nankars took place in different pockets of Sylhet district against zamindars and mirasdars. But in those outburst, there was no proper leadership among the agitating Nankars and were easily suppressed by the zamindars. At that period, though the revolt of one village inspired the oppressed Nankars of another village, but there was no coordination among those revolt and outburst. So, it can be regarded that those uprisings were nothing but the expression of anger of the Nankars and their revolt were sporadic outburst in true sense.

After the First World War, the Nankars of Sukair village under Sunamganj subdivision of Sylhet first rose in organised resistance against zamindari oppression during 1922-1923.²⁶⁶ From Sukair, the revolt spread to Gouranga and Bualjur village. The Nankars of those villages for the first time openly refused the call and order of the zamindars for any obligatory services. In this revolt, the leadership was provided by Brajabashi Das of Sukair village. The second instance of this type of revolt was found in Kulaura village of Sylhet during 1931-1932,²⁶⁷ after almost a decade of the revolt of Sukair. The Nankars of Kulaura were more organised and politically conscious than the Nankars of Sukair. There the Nankars refused to render any service to the zamindars without proper wage.²⁶⁸ Those isolated revolt of the Nankars failed to achieve their goal mainly due to the absence of proper leadership, ideology and revolutionary organisation of the toiling masses. Without proper ideology, leadership,

²⁶⁵ Wadud, Abdul., (Edited) *Nankar Krishok Bidraha Sharok*. Beanibazar Sanskritik Command. Sylhet – 2009. P-11.

²⁶⁶ *Report on the Administration of Assam for the year 1922-23*. Government of Assam. Assam Government Press. Shillong.

²⁶⁷ *Report on the Administration of Assam for the year 1930-31 to 1933-34*. Government of Assam. Assam Government Press. Shillong.

²⁶⁸ Bhattacharya, Ajoy. *Nankar Vidroha*. (Vol. I), Muktaadhara, Decca - 1986. Pp-45-46.

organisation and definite aim or base political line, no movement can bring any change in the prevailing condition of the society. These are the pre-requisite of any socio-political movement as well as communist movement. After the First World War, the socio-political condition of India was very fertile for communist movement but there was no communist party or organisation in the country and the spell of Communism was also totally absent among the Indian peasantry and working class. The first phase of the Nankar Rebellion was ended with those isolated revolt and sporadic outbursts which were failed and suppressed by the zamindars.

The peasant movement of Bhanubil:

The peasants of Bhanubil who were mainly comprised of the Manipuri community had a long history of their struggle against the zamindary oppression. The Manipuri peasants of this area were fighting for tenancy rights against their zamindars. The zamindar of the estate of Bhanubil was Ali Amzad Kha of Pritimpasa and the peasants were mainly from the Manipuri community.²⁶⁹ The Manipuri peasants had a long tradition of isolated revolt against the zamindar. The main demand of the peasants of Bhanubil was to attain tenancy right over their land. For several times, the peasants rose in revolt under the banner of their traditional village '*panchayat*' organisation but could not attain success and the zamindar cruelly suppressed those revolts.

In spite of zamindary suppression, the rebellious Manipuri peasants did not sit in silence. In 1931, the Manipuri peasants of Bhanubil rose to more organised form of revolt against the zamindar under the leadership of Manipuri *Purahita* (priest) Baikunta Sharma.²⁷⁰ The peasant sought help from the Congress leaders in support of their revolt. At that time, the important Congress leaders of Sylhet district were – Biresh Mishra, Kripesh Chandra Dutta, Barindra Kumar Das. Among them, only Biresh Mishra was a left minded Congress leader.²⁷¹

When in 1931, the revolt was started the second phase of the Civil Disobedience Movement was going on. The Congress leaders decided to utilise the

²⁶⁹ Bhattacharya, Ajoy. *Nankar Vidroha*. (Vol. I), Muktaadhara, Decca - 1986. P-61.

²⁷⁰ *Intelligence Report to the Dy. Inspector General of Police from Superintendent of Police (D.I.B), Sylhet*. D.O. No. 5483/30-31, dated 25th August 1931. File No. A-2(8)31, Part II, Sub: Communism; General Activities.

²⁷¹ *Report on the Administration of Assam for the year 1930-31 to 1933-34*. Government of Assam. Assam Government Press. Shillong.

sentiments of the agitating peasants in favour of the Civil Disobedience Movement. They linked the peasant movement of Bhanubil with the Civil Disobedience Movement and gave birth to a massive peasant movement in Bhanubil area. The Congress entrusted the leadership of the Bhanubil movement to Purnendu Kishore Sengupta.²⁷² The Congress leaders decided to uphold the peasant movement of Bhanubil of Sylhet district where the peasants themselves had already organized a resistance against the oppressive measures taken by the local zamindar. This movement marked the beginning of a new kind of peasant movement that gradually penetrated into neighbouring areas of Sylhet and Cachar districts.

Amongst the Congress leaders, Khirode Chandra Deb of Karimganj was regarded as the master mind of the movement. Purnendu Kishore Sengupta of Kalaura did much to organize the peasants with the help of Baikuntha Sharma, a leader of the local Manipuri community. Saralabala Deb took up the task of organizing the women of Bhanubil area. All these four leaders had to undergo different terms of imprisonments during the years 1931-34. Sharma was arrested and imprisoned twice.²⁷³ After the end of the Civil Disobedience Movement, the Congress leaders drifted themselves from the Bhanubil movement. Only a few left-minded leaders remained associated with the movement. This clearly indicates that the Congress was never concerned with the interests of the peasantry and working class of India. Sometimes, the Congress leadership utilised the sentiments of the militant peasantry when the former felt the necessity of the latter to fulfill the motive and interest of the Congress organisation. In spite of the fact, the militant peasants of Bhanubil did not give up their weapon and they continued their movement to fulfill their legitimate demand. The British Government, with the help of zamindar decided to suppress the movement. The government issued eviction notice to the peasants and send armed forces to Bhanubil. Prominent leaders of the movement including Baikunta Sharma were arrested. In spite of the suppressive measure of the government with armed forces and zamindar, the militant peasant continued their movement under the leadership of Lila Sharma, daughter of Baikunta Sharma.²⁷⁴

²⁷² *Report on the Administration of Assam for the year 1930-31 to 1933-34*. Government of Assam. Assam Government Press. Shillong.; Sarma, Chanchal Kumar. *Surma Upatyakar Krishak O Sramik Andolener Itihas.*, Oriental Book Company Pvt. Ltd. Calcutta 1990. Pp-4-5.

²⁷³ Ahmed, Sharif Uddin (Edited). *Sylhet: History and Heritage*. Bangladesh Itihas Samiti (Bangladesh History Association). Dhaka-1999. Pp 255-256.

²⁷⁴ Op. cit.

When the Congress leaders left Bhanubil, one of the erstwhile revolutionary named Dwarika Goswami initiated to give Communist character to the Bhanubil movement. In this regard, he communicated the Communists of Calcutta and responding to his appeal, Communist leader Bankim Mukherjee visited Bhanubil area.²⁷⁵ After the formation of Kisan Sabha in Sylhet district in 1936, the Communists established their control over the Bhanubil movement and they strongly intensified on the movement to organise it on the Communist line.²⁷⁶ The British got panicked and ordered for severe repression but that also could not break the backbone of the movement. More the repression more was the resistance.

After the election of 1934, the Congress entered into the central Legislative Assembly. The left minded Congressmen of Sylhet brought the suppressive and sinister steps of the government and zamindar in the Central Legislative Assembly through the Congress leader of Bengal K. C. Niyogi and communicate the same to Krishna Menon of England. Some students of Shibpur Engineering College took photographs of the suppressive measures of the government and zamindars when the zamindar destroyed the houses of the poor peasants with elephants. Those students went to Bhanubil when the leadership of the movement was under the full control of the Congress. Those photographs were sent to Krishna Menon and Mr. Menon produced all those photographs to Miss Wilkinson, member of the Labour Party of England and Mr. Menon came to India with Miss Wilkinson. They visited the Bhanubil area to observe the situation. After observing the inhuman situation of Bhanubil, Miss Wilkinson returned to England and placed the matter of Bhanubil in the British parliament. After that the government and zamindars stopped the inhuman suppressive measures in Bhanubil but they did not grant tenancy right of land to the peasants. In this situation the peasants attacked the zamindars with revenue boycott. When the Congress coalition government was formed in Assam in 1938, the government assured the agitating peasants of Bhanubil that a bill would be passed in the assembly for the interests of the peasants. So, the peasants withdrew the revenue

²⁷⁵ Bhattacharya, Ajoy. *Nankar Vidroha*. (Vol. I), Muktaadhara, Decca - 1986. P-69.

²⁷⁶ *Assam Police Abstract of Intelligence, No. 128, Sylhet*. Office of the Deputy Inspector General of Police (S.B), Shillong, dated 25 August, 1936.; Sarma, Chanchal Kumar. *Surma Upatyakar Krishak O Sramik Andolener Itihas.*, Oriental Book Company Pvt. Ltd. Calcutta 1990. P-7.

boycott²⁷⁷ Ultimately, the Government of Assam had to amend the Sylhet Tenancy (Amendment) Act, 1943, which granted tenancy rights to the peasants of Bhanubil.²⁷⁸

The peasant movement of Bhanubil had a wide-spread repercussion which was raised in the House of Commons in England and a group of members of British parliament visited Bhanubil to get the information of the movement. The Bhanubil Satyagraha took place at a time when awareness for social and economic justice was getting prominence in national as well as regional political scene. In Bengal, a nucleus of Communist Party was working since late twenties. In Surma valley, the influence of both the Congress Socialists and Communists had decided to work within the Congress fold, they continued to organize labourers and peasants under the Congress banner. The Bhanubil movement gave these political forces a chance to consolidate themselves with a view to coming in the open. Thus, in the context of the Surma valley, the Bhanubil movement may be regarded as a demarcating line between traditional Congress politics on a non-class basis and the emergence of a new kind of movement based on class struggle.²⁷⁹

The Nankar Rebellion and the peasant movement of Bhanubil area were the most significant peasant movements of Sylhet district. Under the initiative of the Communists, those two peasant movements had reached their zenith and ultimately brought positive results to the life of the peasantry. No doubt, these movements were led by the Communists when they emerged in the political scene of Surma valley. But it is wrong to say that these two peasant movements of Sylhet district were initiated by the Communists. The objective condition of the peasant society of Sylhet gave birth to the uprising of those two peasant movements which were initiated by the peasantry itself. Afterwards the Communists of the valley organized those peasants' uprisings on the basis of their own political line. The peasants of Bhanubil also rose in revolt from their own initiative and their revolt was nothing but the outburst of anger against zamindary oppression and exploitation. After the emergence of the Communists in Surma valley, they took active steps in those movements and tried to

²⁷⁷ *Assam Police Abstract of Intelligence*, No. 654, Cachar. Office of the Deputy Inspector General of Police (S.B), Shillong, dated 25th July, 1938.; Sarma, Chanchal Kumar. *Surma Upatyakar Krishak O Sramik Andolener Itihas.*, Oriental Book Company Pvt. Ltd. Calcutta 1990. P-7.

²⁷⁸ *Assam Act of 1943, The Sylhet Tenancy (Amendment) Act, 1943*, Published in the Assam Gazette of the 16th. June 1943. Secretariat Administration (Record & Library) Deptt. Assam Secretariat. Dispur, Guwahati - 6. P-76.

²⁷⁹ Ahmed, Sharif Uddin (Edited). *Sylhet: History and Heritage*. Bangladesh Itihas Samiti (Bangladesh History Association). Dhaka-1999. P. 257.

organise the peasantry for a militant struggle to establish the right of the toiling peasants. With the emergence and interference of the Communists, the peasant movement of Sylhet district became more and more militant and acquired class character.

Some other communist peasant movements in Sylhet district:

The formation of the Kisan Sabha in Sylhet district is an important land mark in the history of the peasant movement of Surma valley. The branch of All India Kisan Sabha was formed in Sylhet district in 1936 with Lala Sharodindhu Dey as Secretary. At the initiative of Surma valley Kisan Sabha, the first peasant conference was held at Behali of Sunamganj sub-division of Sylhet. This conference was presided over by Communist leader Bankim Mukharjee. To initiate the peasant movement, the conference adopted the following charter of demands:²⁸⁰

1. If a particular area of land remained under the possession of a particular tenant for 12 years or more, then the tenant should be granted the ownership right over said land.
2. The right to construct Pucca houses and well on the possessed land of the tenants should be granted.
3. The illegal tax like 'Abwab' and 'Nazrana' should be abolished.
4. The Nankar system should be abolished.
5. The surplus land of the tea garden area (grant land) should be distributed to the tea garden labourers.
6. Oppression of peasants should be abolished and all sort of social injustice from the peasants should be removed.
7. Land revenue should be collected in cash instead of kind.
8. The money receipt (*Farog*) should be issued to the tenants by the zamindars.

This peasant conference of Behali had a great impact on the peasant society of Sunamganj as well as Sylhet which provided a great impetus to the peasant movement of the district in the subsequent years. It is to be mentioned here that, though the Nankar tenants were organising various isolated revolt against the inhuman

²⁸⁰ *Communist Survey, July 1936*. Office of the Deputy Inspector General Police, C.I.D. Memo. No.17596 dated August the 8th of 1936, 154/36 (Assam)Comm. File No. A-2(3) 36, II, Sub: Communism: General Activities.; Sarma, Chanchal Kumar. *Surma Upatyakar Krishak O Sramik Andolener Itihas.*, Oriental Book Company Pvt. Ltd. Calcutta 1990. P-8.

oppression of their landlords, but there was no formal demand for the abolition of the Nankar system. It was only after the formation of the branch of the All India Kisan Sabha in Sylhet in 1936, the voice for the abolition of Nankar system was first raised by the Kisan Sabha in its first district conference held at Beheli in 1936.²⁸¹

The peasant consciousness gradually improved in Surma valley. Anger against zamindars was given vent to on 27 December 1937, in peasants' meeting held at Saleswar (Sylhet) where the zamindars were openly charged with maintaining a luxurious standard of living at the expense of their tenants. It was alleged that the zamindars always behaved rudely with their tenants, forcibly ejected them from their lands without offering legitimate reasons for their actions, subjected them to compulsory labour throughout the year, demanded paddy from them in addition to their rents as well as free supply of commodities on the eve of each festival. It was further alleged that they did not give proper receipt against any payment.²⁸² It was pointed out that the peasants did not always get sufficient food and clothing nor proper medical care in case of illness. Further the systematic exploitation by village *mahajans* and other usurers worsened their already deplorable condition.²⁸³

Everywhere the peasants were asked to organise themselves against exploitation. In a number of conferences the peasants' rights and privileges were explained and they were told that the lands that they cultivated actually belonged to them.²⁸⁴ The conferences also demanded the abolition of the system of zamindarship.²⁸⁵ To give due importance to the peasant movements, the organizers of the second session of the Surma Valley *Pradeshik Krishak Sanmilan* held in February 1938, invited, among others, the all-India Socialist leaders like Jayaprakash Narayan and Sahajananda Saraswati.²⁸⁶ Biresh Chandra Mishra advised tenants in a meeting held at Daser Bazar (Sylhet) on 11 April 1938 to collect funds to meet the expenses of

²⁸¹ *Communist Survey, July 1936*. Office of the Deputy Inspector General Police, C.I.D. Memo. No.17596 dated August the 8th of 1936, 154/36 (Assam)Comm. File No. A-2(3) 36, II, Sub: Communism: General Activities.; Sarma, Chanchal Kumar. *Surma Upatyakar Krishak O Sramik Andolener Itihas.*, Oriental Book Company Pvt. Ltd. Calcutta 1990. P-8.

²⁸² *Assam Police Abstract of Intelligence*, No. 78. Sylhet. Office of the Deputy Inspector General of Police (S.B), Shillong, dated 22nd. January, 1938.

²⁸³ *Assam Police Abstract of Intelligence*, No. 274. Sylhet. Office of the Deputy Inspector General of Police (S.B), Shillong, dated 18th February, 1939.

²⁸⁴ *Assam Police Abstract of Intelligence*, No. 41. Sylhet. Office of the Deputy Inspector General of Police (S.B), Shillong, dated 8th February, 1938.

²⁸⁵ *Assam Police Abstract of Intelligence*, No. 78. Sylhet. Office of the Deputy Inspector General of Police (S.B), Shillong, dated 22nd. January, 1938.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

the cases instituted against them by the zamindars and proposed to start peasant organisations in Beani Bazar, Karimganj and Sylhet.²⁸⁷

Peasant movement thus gradually gained prominence in the Surma valley. Peasants were asked to stage a demonstration on 3 September 1938 even before the Assam Legislative Assembly over the question of land revenue reduction.²⁸⁸ Communists advised them to reoccupy lands which they were earlier compelled to hand over to their zamindars in settlement of their debts. As a result, bitterness against the zamindars deepened further. The government however, always sided with the zamindars. When a fiction developed in the zamindary estate of Bhatipara (Sylhet), the government posted armed-guards in 1939 in the name of protecting the zamindar's property. This caused bitter resentment amongst the local tenants who retaliated by threatening the administration saying that Satyagraha would be started by them if armed-guards were not withdrawn immediately.²⁸⁹ The peasants no longer remained survile to systematic exploitation by government officials and others. They became conscious of their rights owing to active Socialist and Communist propoganda. Great emphasis was laid everywhere on the unity of peasants and labourers. Marxist doctrines were propogated in the meetings held under the red flag, though all were asked to remain united under the Congress tricolour²⁹⁰ as the Communists were banned during that time.

The number of *Kisan Sabhas* in Sylhet went on increasing during the years 1937-40 and peasant movement also took place in various parts of the district. An organised kisan movement raised its head in the Sunamganj sub-division of Sylhet. By 1938 tenants succeeded in winning their immediate demand for the suspension of zamindary rent collection in one case and remission in another.²⁹¹ In 1938-39 there was a considerable tension between landlords and tenants in Karimganj sub-division. The third annual session of the Surma Valley Krishak Conference was held at

²⁸⁷ *Assam Police Abstract of Intelligence*, No. 78. Sylhet. Office of the Deputy Inspector General of Police (S.B), Shillong, dated 22nd. January, 1938.

²⁸⁸ *Assam Police Abstract of Intelligence*, No. 274. Sylhet. Office of the Deputy Inspector General of Police (S.B), Shillong, dated 18th February, 1939.

²⁸⁹ *Assam Police Abstract of Intelligence*, No. 60. Sylhet. Office of the Deputy Inspector General of Police (S.B), Shillong, dated 7th January, 1939.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁹¹ *Report on the Administration of Assam for the year 1937-38*. Government of Assam. Secretariat Administration (Record & Library) Deptt. Assam Secretariat, Dispur, Guwahati-6. P-I

Moulvibazar in March 1939, with Abul Hayat in the chair.²⁹² The Karimganj sub-divisional Krishak Conference was held at Tegheria (Baraigram) on 28-29 May 1939, under the leadership of Suresh Chandra Deb, then a leftist Congressman.²⁹³ In the early months of 1939, the landlord-tenant conflict rose to such a height in Gouripur, Bhatipara and Selbores estates of Sunamganj that the government had to rush a party of armed police there to maintain peace. About this time, a Communist-led peasant march to Shillong to present a memorandum of demands to the government created much sensation. In connection with the agrarian trouble, a large number of participants were arrested and convicted under the Defence of India Rule by November 1940. Out of fifteen Congressmen so arrested, at least nine appeared to be Communists. Jagneshwar Das and Jatindra Kumar Bhattacharya were amongst them.²⁹⁴

The peasant movement of Bhatipara and Bongshikunda:

Inspired by the peasant conference of Beheli, the peasants of Bhatipara and Bongshikunda organised a powerful movement. The branch of Kisan Sabha was formed in Bhatipara in 1937 which provided leadership in this movement.²⁹⁵ The important Kisan Sabha leaders in Bhatipara movement were – Subal Chandra Das, Ali Munsu, Abdul Karim Modal, Jain Uddin Munsu, Taiyab Ullah Munsu, Haji Musa Ullah, Abdul Momin Modal, Haji Sanjay Ali, Sarafat Ali Modal, Jahar Modal and Haji Gulam Hussain. The Nankar tenants actively supported and joined in the movements of the peasants of Bhatipara.²⁹⁶ The main demands of the peasants were to grant tenancy rights to the peasants over their possessed land. The main slogan of the movement was ‘No Payment of Land Revenue’. The government and the zamindar took suppressive measure against the movement. The police charged *lathis* on the agitating peasants and dispersed various meetings, demonstrations of the peasants who were rent strikers.

²⁹² *Report on the Administration of Assam for the year 1938-39*. Government of Assam. Secretariat Administration (Record & Library) Deptt. Assam Secretariat, Dispur, Guwahati-6. P-I

²⁹³ *Notes on the Political Activities of Sureshchandra Deb*, File No. C-319/1942, Confidential B, 1942.

²⁹⁴ *Assam Legislative Assembly Proceedings*, 23 November, 1940. (Saadulla's reply to Karunasindhu Roy) P-1717-9. Secretariat Administration (Record & Library) Deptt. Assam Secretariat, Dispur, Guwahati-6.; Guha, Amalendu. *Planter-Raj to Swaraj Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826-1947*. Indian Council of Historical Research. New Delhi - 1977. Pp-246-247.

²⁹⁵ *Report on the Administration of Assam for the year 1937-38*. Government of Assam. Secretariat Administration (Record & Library) Deptt. Assam Secretariat, Dispur, Guwahati-6.

²⁹⁶ Mohammad, Tajul. *Sileter Duishoto Bochorer Andolon*. Agami Prakashani, Dacca – 1995. P-56.

Though there was no death case has been found in this movement but open clashes took place between the peasants and police in various places. Many peasants were arrested and about 800 fake criminal cases were instituted against the agitating peasants by the landlord. Among the peasantry, Rajendra Kumar Nandi emerged as the most important leader in this movement. Prominent Communist leaders actively associated in this movement were – Chittaranjan Das, Secretary of the Sylhet District Organising Committee of the CPI, Jatin Das, Dayamoy Das, Debendra Chandra Dutta, Rohini Kumar Das, Rabi Dam, Radharanjan Deb, Ghyan Chandra Das etc. The main leader of this movement was Lala Sharodindhu Dey, the prominent Communist peasant leader of Surma valley.²⁹⁷ With the joining of the Nankar tenants, the movement became a mass movement. As almost all the Nankars of Bhatipara joined the agitating peasants, the zamindars faced a great problem to use the Nankars knaves to suppress the movement. The administration also came forward to help the zamindars and send Gorkha soldiers to suppress the movement.²⁹⁸

The Communists of Surma valley always rendered their support and actively joined all the political movements of the peasantry and working class of the valley with their full strength. In support of the peasant movement of Bhatipara and protest against police firing on the peasants, the Communists organised many protest meetings, demonstrations etc. in various places of the district which was confirmed by the Intelligence Report of the police. A public meeting was held at Govinda Charan Park, Sylhet town, on the evening of the 21st April, under the presidency of Babu Chandra Binode Das M. A., B. L., pleader, Sunamganj. About 150 persons attended. The object of the meeting was; I) To protest against the firing on the strikers of the Digboi (Assam) Co. and II) To express disapproval of the orders under section 145 CRPC promulgated on some Bhatipara tenants. Babu Hemango Biswas of Mirashi, P. S Chunarighat, Dwarikananth Goswami and Jyotirmoy Nandi (ex- convict), Mohitosh Purkayastha (a student of M. C. College, Sylhet) and the president delivered speeches.²⁹⁹

Like the peasant movement of Bhatipara, the Bongshikunda peasant movement was also a communist peasant movement of Sylhet district. The peasants of Bongshikunda rose in revolt against zamindary exploitation in 1938 under the banner

²⁹⁷ Sarma, Chanchal Kumar. *Surma Upatyakar Krishak O Sramik Andolener Itihas.*, Oriental Book Company Pvt. Ltd. Calcutta 1990. Pp-11-12.

²⁹⁸ Mohammad, Tajul. *Sileter Duishoto Bochorer Andolon.* Agami Prakashani, Dacca – 1995. P-57.

²⁹⁹ *Assam Police Abstract of Intelligence*, (1920- 47) Vol. :XXIX, dt. 29 April, 1939.

of the Kisan Sabha.³⁰⁰ Initially the Kisan Sabha submitted a memorandum to the zamindars of Gouripur demanding improvement of the condition of the peasants but did not get any positive response from the zamindars. By failing in their attempt in constitutional way, the Kisan Sabha started to prepare ground to start a movement against the zamindari exploitation. Various secret meetings and distribution of leaflets were carried on large number. Ultimately, the peasants under the help of the Communist workers started the movement by boycotting land revenue. By adopting various coercive measures, the zamindars failed to suppress the movement of the peasants. With out finding any alternative way to suppress the movement, the zamindars ultimately offered a proposal to the Kisan Sabha leaders for a compromise to settle the dispute and get rid from the agitating peasantry and the Kisan Sabha accepted this proposal. At that time the zamindars of Gouripur was living in Calcutta and invited a delegation to Calcutta. So, the Kisan Sabha sent a delegation to Calcutta. The important members of the delegation were – Suresh Chandra Deb of Karimganj, Lala Shorodindhu Dey, Purnendu Kishore Sen (a left minded Congressmen), Nityananda Talukdar and Eswar Talukdar. After prolonged discussion between the zamindars and the delegation a compromise settlement was reached. The important provisions of the settlement were:

- 1) The use of *Shantiram*[□] will be abolished permanently.
- 2) The collection of Khutgari tax^{□*} will be abolished.
- 3) No tax will be collected from the fishermen who collect fish from the field during the rainy season.
- 4) The zamindars will provide seating arrangement at his court for the tenants.
- 5) No illegal tax will be collected from the ryots and tenants.

But the zamindars refused the proposal of the Kisan Sabha to reduce the revenue and the Kisan Sabha delegation accepted it without any protest.³⁰¹ The peasant movement of Bongshikunda was successful one which gave an impetus to the on going peasant movement of Sylhet district.

³⁰⁰ *Report on the Administration of Assam for the year 1938-39*. Government of Assam. Secretariat Administration (Record & Library) Deptt. Assam Secretariat, Dispur, Guwahati-6. P-I.

[□] There was a pair of shoe of leather at the court of the zamindars of Gouripur and this shoe was known as *Shantiram*. The shoe was generally used for punishment of the tenants if any one disobey the order of the zamindars and remain disobedience towards the zamindars.

^{□*} *Khudgari* was a tax which the zamindars used to collect from the small businessmen if and when the land their boats at the bank of the river.

³⁰¹ Mohammad, Tajul. *Sileter Duishoto Bochorer Andolon*. Agami Prakashani, Dacca – 1995. Pp-59-60.

Peasant movement in Cachar:

The Cachar district was not free from peasant unrest under the colonial rule. Like the peasants of Sylhet district, the peasants of Cachar district also rose in various resistant movements and also fought for their various demands. In Ryotwari System of Cachar, no extra legal authority of the mirasdars was recognized. But by flouting all norms, the mirasdars used to evict the peasants and transfer lands to get more rent. They also imposed extra economic coercion like *abwab* and *hod-beggari* etc. which was rampant in the Permanent Settlement areas but not permissible in ryotwari areas. But the mirasdars of Cachar, through system of *Paikan* and *Chakran* used to exact *hod-beggari*, *Nazrana* etc. in some areas of Cachar by application of force. Like the peasants of Sylhet, the peasant of Cachar also fought against these illegal exactions but except a non-political organisation like *Cachar Zila Krisak Sammelani*, no peasant organisation with a clear ideology existed at that time. In the absence of any organisation, the sporadic outburst was ended with the defeat of the peasant.

In the whole of Cachar district including Hailakandi, the money-lending class had already established themselves as neo-zamindar. The neo-zamindar did not belong to traditional zamindar class nor agriculture was their primary source of income. They had no social status equivalent to zamindar. However, this *mahajan* class could grab vast amount of land through usury. They used to take away the major share of the produce of *Bhagchasi*. Thus, within a few months of harvesting, say in the month of *Agrahayan* or *Pous*, *Bhagchasi* were converted into day labourers. They found it difficult to procure two meals a day. By the beginning of the 20th century the condition of the peasants of Cachar who were once self-sufficient started deteriorating.³⁰² In 1937 majority of the peasants of Cachar entered into the death trap of indebtedness. The situation became so alarming that the government of Assam had to constitute a Debt Conciliation Board to give relief to the peasants.³⁰³ But the situation did not improve.

With the formation of the Communist Party in Sylhet, due emphasis was laid on the organisation of the peasantry in Cachar also. Under the initiative of the individual Communists isolated peasant uprisings took place in different areas of Cachar.

³⁰² Biswas, Girban Ranjan. *Peasant Movement in North East India (1946-1950)*. Regency Publications, New Delhi- 2002. Pp-71-72.

³⁰³ *Report on the Administration of Assam for the year 1937-38*. Government of Assam. Secretariat Administration (Record & Library) Deptt. Assam Secretariat, Dispur, Guwahati-6. P-II.

Around this time, the famous zamindars of Hailakandi ‘Chakraborty family’ earned notoriety for the ruthless exploitation of the peasants by forceful imposition of *hod-beggari*, *nazarana* etc. After the formation of the branch of Kisan Sabha in Cachar, a movement was organized in Hailakandi against the oppression of the ‘Chakraborty Family’ of Hailakandi. This family was regarded as the most powerful landlord family of the district. Its power grew as Hirendra Chakraborty; one of the members of the family was inducted in the Muslim League Ministry of Saadulla. The Kisan Sabha organized a procession with the help of the Congress (mainly CSP) which paraded through the streets of Hailakandi demanding the resignation of Hirendra Chakraborty from the Ministry. The procession was attacked by paid musclemen of the zamindars family. Numbers of processionists including Dr. Brojendra Bhattacharjee, a Congress leader, were injured.³⁰⁴

In order to build peasant movement in Cachar against such illegal coercion, Lala Sharodindhu Dey, Secretary of the Surma Valley Kisan Sabha, came to Cachar to organise Kisan Sabha, peasant movement and to provide leadership to the agitating peasants. In 1937, the branch of All India Kisan Sabha also took birth in Cachar district under the name “*Cachar Zila Kisan Sabha*”.³⁰⁵ Lala Sharodindhu Dey, Secretary of Surma Valley Kisan Sabha took initiative to form the branch of Kisan Sabha in Cachar district. In this regard, Lala Sharodindhu Dey was assisted by two advocate brothers – Romesh Choudhury and Poresh Choudhury, Monmohan Bhattacharjee and Mohitosh Purkayastha – activist of Students’ Federation. Ultimately, *Cachar Zila Kisan Sabha* was formed with Dwijendralal Sengupta as Secretary and Poresh Choudhury as President. During 1938-39, a mass awareness took place among the peasants of Cachar district.³⁰⁶ The formation of Kisan Sabha in the district of Cachar heralded a new beginning in the peasant movement.

Second phase of the Nankar Rebellion:

After the formation of the Kisan Sabha in Sylhet, the Nankar Rebellion got a new momentum and the Kisan Sabha started to organize the Nankars under its banner to

³⁰⁴ Ahmed, Sharif Uddin (Edited). *Sylhet: History and Heritage*. Bangladesh Itihas Samiti (Bangladesh History Association). Dhaka-1999. P-263.

³⁰⁵ *Assam Police Abstract of Intelligence*, No. 584, Cachar. Office of the Deputy Inspector General of Police (S.B), Shillong, dated 17 December, 1937.

³⁰⁶ Sarma, Chanchal Kumar. *Surma Upatyakar Krishak O Sramik Andolener Itihas.*, Oriental Book Company Pvt. Ltd. Calcutta 1990. Pp-72-73.

give it a Communist character. The phase of the Nankar Rebellion started after the formation of the Kisan Sabha in Surma valley in 1936 and can be regarded as the second phase of the historic Nankar Rebellion which continued till the 'People's War Phase' of the Indian Communists.³⁰⁷ In Sylhet district, the Nankar Rebellion also raised its heads in different areas with the active support of the Communists under the banner of Kisan Sabha.

During 1938-39, the Nankars of Rofinagar village rose in revolt against their mirashdars. The main demands of the Nankars were the amendment of the Sylhet Tenancy Act, 1936, and also the abolition of the Nankar system. As a part of their revolt, the Nankars of this village refused *hod-beggari* i.e. the obligatory service to their mirashdars. The zamindars with the help of force failed to suppress the movement and instituted various false cases against the agitating Nankars. During the harvest season, the court in behalf of the mirashdars declared section 144 of IPC on the cultivated lands of the Nankars. But the Nankars, with the active help of the Kisan Sabha leaders, started to cut and brought entire crops to their *Khamar*.³⁰⁸ The police arrested important leaders like Karunasindhu Roy, Lala Sharadindhu Dey, Rajendra Nandi, Subal Das and others. Under the war time crisis, the revolt became weak and the Nankars gradually again became the slaves of their mirashdars. In Rofinagar revolt, the local Kisan Sabha leaders were – Romesh Brahmachari, Rajendra Doctor and Subal Das. Farman Ali and Kadam Ali of the village emerged as the important leaders from the Nankars.³⁰⁹

Simultaneously with the revolt of Rofinagar, the Nankars of Ronikheli also gave birth to a similar revolt against the mirashdars. From Kisan Sabha, Biresh Chandra Mishra, Jiten Bhattacharjee and Muhammad Bedar Bokth and from the Nankars Takbir Ali was the most important leader in this area. During the same time, the Nankars of Bhadeshwar village also rose in revolt against inhuman exploitation of the mirashdars.³¹⁰ In Karimganj sub-division of Sylhet district, the Nankars organised

³⁰⁷ Aziz, Mohammad Abdul, Rahman, Mohammad Habibur, Bashar, Mohammad Abul, Imam, Shubhebdul & Fattah, Abdul Fateh.(Edited) *Brihattar Sileter Itihas(Vol. II)*, Brihattar Sylhet Itihas Pranayan Parishad, Sylhet – 2006. P-214.

³⁰⁸ *Report on the administration of Police Department for the year 1936*, by Inspector General of Police, Assam, To the Chief Secretary to the Government of Assam, No. 9935, Shillong, the 14th June 1937.

³⁰⁹ Bhattacharya, Ajoy. *Nankar Vidroha*. (Vol. I), Muktaadhara, Decca - 1986. Pp-111-112.

³¹⁰ *Ibid*. P-119.

a powerful revolt against zamindar Najrul Islam Choudhury and Nurul Islam Choudhury (Soab Mia and his brother).³¹¹

Working class movements in Surma-Barak valley:

The phase of labour struggle during the years 1937-40 was a turning point in Assam's history in more than one respect. From the very beginning, these struggles, directed against British capital, had clear anti-imperialist character as well as a broad left-nationalist orientation. The number of strike affected tea gardens all over the province increased from 13 in 1937 to 17 in 1938 and 35 in 1939. Lakhimpur and Cachar were the districts most affected. As a sequel to the labour upheaval, as many as 106 labourers in 12 tea gardens were victimized in the form of discharge, dismissal or forced repatriation during the period from November 1938 to October 1939, as per official admission.³¹² Banned during the years 1934 – July 1942, the Communist Party of India carried on its underground activities under the cover of mass organisations. It viewed the Congress as a national front of all anti-imperialist forces and was keen in using its platform. It stood for a socialist unity within the Congress.³¹³

In Surma valley, the peasant movements were basically organised and backed by the Communists. But in the working class movement, apart from the Communist led All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), the Congress backed Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) was also active in the working class movement of the valley. During colonial period, the working class in the Surma valley mainly comprises of the tea garden labourers who were the worst sufferers of the Capitalist exploitation. Before independence, 365 tea gardens were in Surma valley and 80-90 percent were owned by the European planters.³¹⁴ The colonial planters brought the labourers in this valley as well as in the whole of Assam from Bihar, Orissa and Santhals of Bengal. Although, far removed from the epicenter of the labour revolt, Surma valley plantations also did not lag behind.

After the Chargola exodus, the second phase of the tea garden labour movement in Surma valley was started in 1930's under the communist leadership. On behalf of

³¹¹ Bhattacharya, Ajoy. *Nankar Vidroha*. (Vol. I), Muktaadhara, Decca - 1986. P-124.

³¹² Guha, Amalendu. *Planter-Raj to Swaraj Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826-1947*. Indian Council of Historical Research. New Delhi - 1977. Pp-244-245.

³¹³ Ibid. P-250.

³¹⁴ Sarma, Chanchal Kumar. *Surma Upatyakar Krishak O Sramik Andolener Itihas.*, Oriental Book Company Pvt. Ltd. Calcutta 1990. P-79.

the Communist Party, Digendranath Dasgupta, one of the founders of CPI in Sylhet was entrusted by the party to build up trade union in this valley. Haridas Bhattacharjee, Ashu Sen and Manik Choudhury were given the duty of organising tea labourers. By their efforts, the *Sylhet-Cachar Cha Mazdoor* Union was formed in 1938.³¹⁵ In Cachar district, on behalf of this organisation, Moni Roy, Gopendralal Roy, Shudangshu Ghosh, Preeti Das Purkayastha, Sitaram Baroi, Nabin Maji, Biswanath Teli, Shrish Purkayastha and Taposhi Pasi started work among the garden labourers of the district. The main demands on which this union was formed were (1) Permanent work to the labourers, (2) No labour can be removed from work under any excuse, (3) To reduce work load, (4) To provide medical facility to the labourers, (5) To maintain privacy of the female labourers, (6) Increase in wage, (7) Granting ownership right to the labourers on the surplus land of tea gardens and (8) Nationalisation of tea industry etc.³¹⁶

In the year preceding 30 September 1938, there were three tea garden strikes in Sylhet, each of one day duration. In that year, five tea gardens in Cachar were also in strike, involving some two thousand workers and a loss of 6,326 man-days.³¹⁷ The *Sylhet-Cachar Cha Mazdoors Sangathak* Committee was formed in 1938, at the initiative of Barin Dutta, Prabodhananda Kar and others. In the 1938 Cachar strikes, this committee circulated a large number of leaflets among the workers. Renamed *Sylhet-Cachar Cha Bagan Mazdoor Unoin*, it was registered under the Trade Union Act on 27 April 1939.³¹⁸ With A. K. Chanda as its President and Sanat Kumar Ahir as Vice-president, the union had a membership of about 900 in two circles of Cachar. They paid an annual membership fee of two *annas* per head. The Rege Committee (1946) noted that during the war years the union had to carry on its activities in the plantations stealthily because of a lack of freedom movement. Under the circumstances it became practically defunct.³¹⁹

³¹⁵ *Assam Legislative Assembly Proceedings, 14 November, 1940.* (Govt's Reply to A.K. Chanda.) P-1313.

³¹⁶ Sarma, Chanchal Kumar. *Surma Upatyakar Krishak O Sramik Andolener Itihas.*, Oriental Book Company Pvt. Ltd. Calcutta 1990. Pp-81-82.

³¹⁷ *Annual Report on the Working of Tea Districts Emigrant Labour Act (Act XXII of 1932) for the Year Ending 30 September 1938.*

³¹⁸ *Assam Legislative Assembly Proceedings, 14 November, 1940.* (Govt's Reply to A.K. Chanda.) P-1313.

³¹⁹ Guha, Amalendu. *Planter-Raj to Swaraj Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826-1947.* Indian Council of Historical Research. New Delhi - 1977. Pp-242-243.

The world economic crisis of 1930's left its impact on the tea industry also. To get rid of the crisis, the European planters increased exploitation of the labourers. As a result, many strikes took place in tea gardens. In a labour meeting held in Cachar on 28 March 1939, S. S. Batliwala, a Socialist leader of Bombay, gave a call for a strike saying that a general strike was now necessary from all the labourers to achieve their demands. Its echo was found everywhere in the province. There was an "epidemics of strikes" in 1939 in a number of tea gardens of Cachar and Lakhipur.³²⁰ During 1938-39, five tea gardens of Cachar districts confronted with labour strike. These were- Lalachera, Mainagarh, Allenpur, Borakhai and Arunabandh. The striking labours of Allenpur and Borakhai marched to Silchar with a procession and a meeting was held at Silchar in their support. It is for the first time that the urban people of Silchar expressed their solidarity with the striking labourers of the tea gardens.³²¹

Among all the tea garden strikes of Cachar district, the most significant among them was the strike in the Arunabandh T. E that commenced in early April 1939 and continued forty days.³²² The main grievances of the workers were heavy work load, ill-treatment by the management and a lack of freedom of movement in plantations. This well organised strike was able to mobilise popular support, from almost every walk of life.³²³ For many days, the labourers of the garden were placing their demand before the authority but they were not getting any response from the authority regarding their legitimate demands. Suddenly they burst out in anger and started the strike. The behaviour of the manager of the garden worked as spark among the labourers. The strike of the labourers was started on 10 April 1939.³²⁴

Immediately after the incident, trade union and Communist leader of Cachar Barin Dutta, Digen Dasgupta and Gopen Roy appeared in the garden. They organised a labour meeting in the garden and decided to continue the strike for indefinite period. In this meeting, a strike committee was formed with Shudangshu Ghosh as in-charge. The organizers made an appeal to the local people from all walks of life to render

³²⁰ *Report on the Administration of Assam for the year 1938-39*. Government of Assam. Shillong.

³²¹ Ahmed, Sharif Uddin (Edited). *Sylhet: History and Heritage*. Bangladesh Itihas Samiti (Bangladesh History Association). Dhaka-1999. P-259.

³²² *Annual Report on the Working of Tea Districts Emigrant Labour Act (Act XXII of 1932) for the Year Ending 24th August 1940*.

³²³ Guha, Amalendu. *Planter-Raj to Swaraj Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826-1947*. Indian Council of Historical Research. New Delhi - 1977. P-243.

³²⁴ Op. cit.

their help to the agitating labourers by supplying money, paddy and rice etc.³²⁵ Apart from the trade union leaders, the activists of Kisan Sabha also took active part in organising the historic labour strike of Arunabandh Tea Estate. Prominent among them were Mohitosh Purkayastha, Tarapoda Bhattacharjee, Achinta Bhattacharjee, Moni Roy, Motilal Jaygirdar etc. They received commendable support from Sanat Kumar Das, a leading socio-political activist of Udharbond. The workers who took leading part were – Mandhadari, Chamtu Bhumij, Lalu Bhumij and others. The organised movement by the tea workers against the oppression taught the peasants of the surrounding villages that their only way to resist oppression is organise resistance. The local peasantry under the guiding spirit of Kisan Sabha joined hands with their fellow brothers. The peasant provided food and cloth to the striking workers for about a month. That was the first instance of a worker-peasants alliance, a precondition for a social revolution. But this could not live long.³²⁶

Even the Communists of Sylhet came forward to support the agitating labourers of Arunabandh Tea Estate. They organised a public meeting at Habiganj, Sylhet and decided to collect funds, cloth and rice for the agitating labourers which has been recorded by the Intelligence branch of the police which states, “a public meeting was held at Habiganj Town Hall on 10th May under the presidency of Babu Anil Kumar Ray. About 30 persons attended. The object of the meeting was to discuss the present situation of the labour strikers at the Arunabandh Tea Estate in Cachar district and to devise means for helping them. Babus Hemango Biswas, Gopesh Chandra Biswas, Satyendra Chandra Ray, Trailakya Nath Dutta gave short speeches and resolved to raise subscription and collect rice and cloth for the suffers of that place.”³²⁷

During the labour strike of Arunabandh tea garden, the management from the very beginning decided to deal with the striking labourers firmly. Immediately twelve of the striking workers were retrenched and expelled from the garden. Not only *Cha Bagan Mazdur Union* but also Cachar District Congress Committee came to the support of the striking labourers. Arun Kumar Chanda was the President of the Cachar District Congress Committee at that time. The Communists of the valley also lent their all out support for making the strike a success. In the wake of the movement it

³²⁵ *Assam Police Abstract of Intelligence*, No. 969, Sylhet. Office of the Deputy Inspector General of Police (S.B), Shillong, dated 7 June, 1939.; Sarma, Chanchal Kumar. *Surma Upatyakar Krishak O Sramik Andolener Itihas.*, Oriental Book Company Pvt. Ltd. Calcutta 1990. P-83.

³²⁶ Goswami, Atul. (edited) *Land Reforms And Peasant Movement: A study of North-east India*, Omsons Publications, Guwahati- 1986. P-214.

³²⁷ *Assam Police Abstract of Intelligence*. Vol.: XXXIX dt. 20 May, 1939.

was decided to observe May Day at Silchar and Udharbond. At both the place the Day was observed with procession and meetings.³²⁸

As the labour situation in plantations of both the valleys was going out of hands, the Bordoloi Government set up the Tea Garden Labour Unrest Enquiry Committee on 23 May 1939, for a probe. The committee consisted of F. W. Hockenul, Baidyanath Nukherjee, A. K. Chanda, Debeshwar Sarma and a retired high court justice. The government warned that strikes, lockouts and such other activities were unwelcome and that it would not hesitate to enforce mutual forbearance, if necessary. Due to the Congress party's persuasion and an official assurance, the strike was indiscreetly called off, when the committee visited the Arunabandh T. E. The twelve militant workers, who had been turned out of the tea garden along with their families, were not taken back. The Indian Tea Association decided on 1 July 1939 not to cooperate with the committee any longer. Accordingly, Hockenull withdrew from it, and the committee became totally defunct.³²⁹

Another notable strike took place in the Allenpur T. E of Cachar. On 30 July 1940, about 200 working women there spontaneously went on a strike demanding higher wages and decrease in work load. By 3rd August, the entire labour force in the garden struck work at the instance of the union. A 200 strong procession of strikers proceeded to Silchar. Several organizers, including Gopendranath Roy were arrested. All strikers there after, returned to work on 8th August. Digen Dasgupta, another Communist organiser of the Union, was prevented under section 107 CRPC, when he tried to organise labour strikes in Shamsernagar and other tea estates in Moulvibazar sub-division.³³⁰

With the outbreak of the World War II, the Congress Ministry of Assam had to resign under the direction of A. I. C. C. Sequel to the developments; *Defence of India Act* was promulgated and enforced. The tea gardens were protected areas and, so far, the trade unionists managed to sneak there with the help of the sympathetic labourers. But under the new circumstances both the government and tea garden authorities

³²⁸ Ahmed, Sharif Uddin (Edited). *Sylhet: History and Heritage*. Bangladesh Itihas Samiti (Bangladesh History Association). Dhaka-1999. P-260.

³²⁹ *Assam Legislative Council Proceedings*, 1939. P-323-30. Government of Assam, Assam Government Press. Shillong.

³³⁰ *Assam Legislative Assembly Proceedings*, 14 November, 1940. (Govt's Reply to A.K. Chanda.) Government of Assam, Assam Government Press. Shillong. P-1313.; Guha, Amalendu. *Planter-Raj to Swaraj Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826-1947*. Indian Council of Historical Research. New Delhi - 1977. Pp-243-244.

maintained strict vigil that made maintenance of contact with the garden labourers difficult. So, during the years of the war there was a lull in trade union activities, till the curtain was again lifted in 1945.³³¹

Some other working class movement of the valley:

Apart from the tea garden workers, other marginal workers of the Surma valley also organised various resistance movements under Communist influence for their legitimate demands. In 1940 the Surma Valley *Dak Mazdoor* Union was active in organising the Khalasis at Chhatak and Fanchuganj steamer stations in Sylhet. Some of the Sylhet Communists were also working in the Bengal and Assam Railroad Workers' Union.³³² The Surma Valley (Shillong) Motor Workers' Union, with its headquarters at Sylhet, was registered on 6 May 1939. Besides, there was the Sylhet Scavenger's Union, with Kaliprasanna Das as its Secretary in 1940.³³³ The strike of the workers of Chhatak Cement Factory was also a significant Communist labour movement of Surma valley. Before independence, the Chhatak Cement Factory was the only modern industry in Surma valley. During 1940-41, the CPI workers formed a union of the labourers of this cement factory with Karunasindhu Roy as President and Angira Kumar Sharma as Secretary.³³⁴ In 1946, this union organised a labour strike which lasted for 36 days. The main demands of the labourers were pay increase, regularization of work, giving monthly pay in place of daily pay and to provide habitation and medical facility.³³⁵ This strike of the labourers had its great impact among the peasants of the area and large number of peasants came forward to support their fellow workers. Due to mass support, the authority failed to suppress the

³³¹ Ahmed, Sharif Uddin (Edited). *Sylhet: History and Heritage*. Bangladesh Itihas Samiti (Bangladesh History Association). Dhaka-1999. Pp 260-261.

³³² *Report of the Political Situation in Assam dated 26 August, 1940* by J. C. Dutt, Deputy Central Intelligence Officer, Shillong. File No. A-8(8A)/40, Police Department, Special Branch, Govt. of Assam.

³³³ *Assam Legislative Assembly Proceeding – 1940*. P-1313.; Guha, Amalendu. *Planter-Raj to Swaraj Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826-1947*. Indian Council of Historical Research. New Delhi - 1977. P-244.

³³⁴ *Assam Police Abstract of Intelligence*, No. 654. Sylhet. Office of the Deputy Inspector General of Police (S.B), Shillong, dated 12th June, 1942.

³³⁵ *Intelligence Report to the Dy. Inspector General of Police from Superintendent of Police (D.I.B), Sylhet*. D.O. No. 5483/25, dated 24th September 1946. File No. A-3(7)46, Part II, Sub: Communism; General Activities.

movement. Ultimately, the Congress Government of Assam solved the unrest in this cement factory by appointing adjudicator.³³⁶

Under the Communist influence, the different labour union took efforts to organize movements for the interests of the working class. The organizations like – *Sylhet Cachar Cha Mazdur Union, Dock Mazdur Union, Cachar Press Workers' Union, Dhangar Union* formed during the period also took up the independent programmes for consolidating the working class. The activities of these unions did not go beyond organizing meetings and processions but these programmes also helped creating political awareness among the workers. Most of the active workers of these organizations were Communists and in majority cases presidents were made from amongst the liberals just to camouflage the real Communist character of the unions. In this way the Communists successfully expanded their mass base and this mass support helped them in getting important portfolios in the Congress organization itself.³³⁷ Amalendu Guha observed that: “the phase of labour struggle during the years 1937-40 was a turning point in the history of Assam in more than one respect. From the very beginning, these struggles, directed against British capital, had a clear ant-imperialist character as well as a broad left nationalist orientation. They inspired not only the ant-imperialist student masses of both the valleys, but also the people on the cool heights of Shillong.”³³⁸

Peasants movements after the election of 1937:

Side by side with the trade union movement, the Communists also tried to expand their support base amongst the peasants. The resistance offered by peasants of Bhanubil had already proved that the peasantry could fight their cause valiantly if conditions were favourable. The leftists wanted to consolidate this awareness of the peasantry. We have already seen that trade union movement in the late thirties had its origin and base in the district of Cachar. That could not be otherwise since tea industry was most important economic sector of this district. Similarly, peasant movement developed first in Sylhet district because zamindars under the Permanent Settlement were the most dominant economic as well as social force of that district.

³³⁶ Sarma, Chanchal Kumar. *Surma Upatyakar Krishak O Sramik Andolener Itihas.*, Oriental Book Company Pvt. Ltd. Calcutta 1990. P-90.

³³⁷ Ahmed, Sharif Uddin (Edited). *Sylhet: History and Heritage*. Bangladesh Itihas Samiti (Bangladesh History Association). Dhaka-1999. P-260.

³³⁸ Ibid. P-260.

The situation arose out of the blending of political and peasant movement in the district of Sylhet was aptly described by the District Magistrate of Sylhet on February 23, 1934, in his letter to the Chief Secretary:³³⁹

The various Raiyats' and peasants' societies, whose activities in this district gave cause to a good deal of anxiety some two years ago, at the time of the revival of the Civil Disobedience Movement, suggested that Communist agitators might be at the back of the movement....The activities of these peasants' workers' societies have of course considerably diminished since that time and have now apparently dwindled down to the holding of one or two conferences during the year in the various subdivisions. These bodies, however, offer Communist agitations a convenient focus for the propagation of their principles....

The formation of the Congress ministries in 1937 proved a powerful stimulus to peasant organisation. All through 1938 big peasants' struggles took place in all the provinces of India, and in many cases won partial success against attempted rent increase, against evictions and against forced labour and illegal exactions and for reduction of rents. At the same time gigantic peasant marches and demonstrations, reaching to 30,000 and 40,000 strong, the publication of weekly papers, song-books and leaflets and the initiation of peasant schools proved the growing strength and consolidation of the movement. Strong pressure was exerted on the Congress ministries to secure reforms and counter the influence of landlords on these ministries.³⁴⁰ In the Surma valley of Assam also the pressure was created on the government for agrarians reforms. The demand for tenancy legislation in Sylhet was voiced by Karunasindhu Roy, a Congress candidate from Sunamganj, in his 1937 election battle. He and Moulana Bhasani separately introduced two tenancy bills in the assembly for Sylhet and Goalpara respectively. They held the view that the abolition of Permanent Settlement was desirable and that, even short of this extreme step, substantial relief could be given to the oppressed tenants by introducing some of the salutary changes brought about in Bengal through tenancy legislation. Even before their consideration by the assembly, these bills had to be referred to the Governor General in Council for a clearance. The initial constitutional hurdles having been overcome, the proposed tenancy (Amendment) bills for Sylhet and Goalpara were

³³⁹ Ahmed, Sharif Uddin (Edited). *Sylhet: History and Heritage*. Bangladesh Itihas Samiti (Bangladesh History Association). Dhaka-1999. P. 261.

³⁴⁰ Dutt, R.P. *India Today*, Monisha, Calcutta - 1997. Pp-276-277.

substantially modified at the official initiative and passed as official bills in 1943.³⁴¹ The said Tenancy (Amendment) bill was passed as an Act that is the Sylhet Tenancy (Amendment) Act, 1943 was mainly framed at the official level. The bill was introduced in the assembly by Karunasindhu Roy under the pressure of the Kisan Sabha and peasantry.

The Surma valley Kisan Sabha activists initiated a vigorous campaign against the exploitative character of the Permanent Settlement. The first conference of the Surma valley Kisan Sabha was held at Beheli of Sunamganj sub-division of Sylhet which was presided over by Bankim Mukherjee, the prominent Communist leader of Bengal. Karunasindhu Roy, who led a remarkable campaign in and around Beheli village against the payment of Choukidari tax during the Civil Disobedience movement, was the central figure of the Sunamganj Conference. Next year, the Kisan Sabha Conference was held at Beanibazar of Karimganj sub-division with Muzaffar Ahmed in the chair.³⁴² The significant feature of these peasant conferences was that discussions were not only confined to the problems of the peasants, but also the overall political scene of the country which was reflected in the speeches and the resolutions. In this conference, the demand of the abolition of the Nankar system of Sylhet was intensified by the peasant leaders.³⁴³ After the conference, the peasants organised various meetings, rally and demonstrations and demanded the abolition of the Nankar system, otherwise the Nankar Rebellion will become a mass and militant peasant movement. Prominent Kisan Sabha leaders associated with Nankar Rebellion were Ajoy Bhattacharjee, Jatindra Bhattacharjee, Bires Chandra Mishra, Lal Mohan Roy, Matangini Das etc.

Communist movement during the Second World War:

With the out break of the Second World War, Communists were opposed to the war efforts till Soviet Russia was attacked by Germany. Most of the Communist workers were arrested during 1939-40 under Defence of India Act for obstructing war efforts. Thus the growing peasant movement of the valley had received a check for the time being. The Communists had to change their stand when Soviet Russia became a

³⁴¹ Guha, Amalendu. *Planter-Raj to Swaraj Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826-1947*. Indian Council of Historical Research. New Delhi - 1977. P-246.

³⁴² *Assam Police Abstract of Intelligence*, No. 584, Cachar. Office of the Deputy Inspector General of Police (S.B), Shillong, dated 17 December, 1937.

³⁴³ Ibid.

victim of German aggression.³⁴⁴ Now the Indian Communists changed their stand on the war and accepted the war as a Peoples' War and decided to co-operate the British Government in its war efforts.

During the people's war phase, the Communists all over India were not interested to organise any militant peasant and the working class movement because they thought that, it may hamper the Communist policy of people's war. But during this period, the Communist Party came out from its earlier underground situation. As a result of the withdrawal of the government ban from the party, the Communists intensified on the organizational work and large success was achieved by them in this aspect. The CPI also tried its best to win over the nationalist masses; but its success was limited. This was because of its reluctance to take such popular actions as were likely to hamper war efforts. War definitely brought a setback to workers' and peasants' class struggle which were at their peak in 1939 and early 1940.³⁴⁵ The period 1942-45 was a period of great trial for the entire kisan movement. In August 1942, a ruthless attack was launched by Imperialism on the entire national movement. The arrest of the Congress leaders was followed by heavy repression. Alongside this developed an extreme breakdown of the country's economy. The landlord-trader, hoarders and black marketers in alliance with the corrupt bureaucracy played havoc with the lives of millions. The masses of the peasantry were overtaken by famine and ruin, the poor impoverished kisans died like flies in Bengal and some other provinces.

Thus, a great responsibility falls on the shoulders of the Communists for the organised kisan movement. In fulfillment of this responsibility, the All India Kisan Sabha and its provincial branches consistently agitated for the release of the national leaders and the setting up of a national government; bravely fought against forcible collection of war funds; and defeat the bureaucrat, the hoarders and black marketers in every village.³⁴⁶ In the Communist Survey³⁴⁷ by the Intelligence Bureau, Home Department, Government of India observed that: "the 'Official' policy of the Communist party towards the present movement is of participating only in 'legal and peaceful' demonstrations, protesting against repression and demanding the release of

³⁴⁴ Ahmed, Sharif Uddin (Edited). *Sylhet: History and Heritage*. Bangladesh Itihas Samiti (Bangladesh History Association). Dhaka-1999. P-263.

³⁴⁵ Guha, Amalendu. *Planter-Raj to Swaraj Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826-1947*. Indian Council of Historical Research. New Delhi - 1977. P-293.

³⁴⁶ Dutt, R.P. *India Today*, Monisha, Calcutta - 1997. P-279.

³⁴⁷ *Communist Survey, August to September, 1942*, dated, 8 Oct. 1942.

the Congress leaders on the ground that their liberty is an essential pre-requisite to the formation of a national government.”

The Communists in Surma-Barak valley remained very active in the peasant and labour front since their emergence in the valley. During the banned condition, the Communists of the valley like other parts of the country worked from the platform of the Congress. Due to their relentless effort, the Congress became very popular among the common masses of the valley. At the same time many of the Congressmen became admirer of the Communists. A notable feature of the leftists politics is that they tried to woo any incident that flared up in the labour front by immediately jumping into the fray with the purposive motive of increasing their dominance and influence over the working class.³⁴⁸

In 1938-39, the workers of the Kisan Sabha expanded their activities, and in Karimganj sub-division tension between land-lords and tenants rose high. In the wake of this tension the Karimganj sub-division Kisan Conference was held at Tegharia (near Baraigram junction of modern Karimganj district) on May 28 and 29, 1939. Suresh Chandra Deb was chief organizer of the conference and he was helped by Communist workers.³⁴⁹ Jagneshwar Das, who subsequently became one of the most valiant leaders of the peasants, rose to prominence during this period. About this time a march of the peasants to Shillong was undertaken by the Kisan Sabha which was first of its kind in the state. The Kisan movement actually helped in bringing about a bridge between the Hindus and the Muslims of the peasantry and in 1940 at least 21 Muslim peasants were convicted along with their Hindu brethren in connection with the agrarian troubles.³⁵⁰

Nankar Rebellion during the Second World War:

The Nankar rebellion of Sylhet district entered into the period of Second World War with out bringing any positive result. The war opened new prospects to the revolt but at the same time produced various hurdles for the peasant and other mass movements. With the beginning of the war, the British Government of India enforced the ‘Defence of India Rules’ in order to face any sort of emergency and to maintain law

³⁴⁸ Bhuyan, A.C. *Political History of Assam (Vol. III)* Publication Board of Assam, Guwahati-1999. P-146.

³⁴⁹ *Notes on the Political Activities of Sureshchandra Deb*, File No. C-319/1942, Confidential B, 1942.

³⁵⁰ Ahmed, Sharif Uddin (Edited). *Sylhet: History and Heritage*. Bangladesh Itihas Samiti (Bangladesh History Association). Dhaka-1999. P-262.

and order situation in the country when national liberation and other allied movements of the country were in their peak. By 'Defence of India Rules' any socio-political movements were considered as harmful by the government. With the beginning of the war, the national liberation and other allied movements of the toiling masses of India took a new turn and there were prevailing unrest among different section of the Indian masses. This was for the first time in the history of freedom movement; people became more conscious as well as organised and militant in their struggle against all sorts of exploitation and injustice. But the situation which had emerged both inside and outside the country failed to bring about any revolutionary changes which would have been possible. In the name of defence of India, the government started to suppress all the revolutionary upsurge of the Indian masses with heavy hand.

With the outbreak of the war, and also due to the adoption of the People's War policy, the withdrawal of government ban from the CPI and subsequent release of their leaders from the jail, the Indian Communists intensified their activity on students, rich peasants, middle class and educated class. Due to their apparent support to the British Indian Government in its war efforts, the Communists were not able to organise any militant movement during the war period. By intensifying on the organizational activity, the Communists ignored the interests of mass political movement during that period. The Communists of Surma valley also ignored the interests of the poor peasantry of this valley. Due to the ignorance mass movements by the Communists, various peasant movements and mainly the Nankar rebellion of Sylhet became very weak.

In spite of the fact, peasantry of this valley did not remain silent during the war period. After the outbreak of the war, the first organised peasant movement took place at Debpur (1941-42) in Sylhet district under the banner of the Kisan Sabha.³⁵¹ The main demand of the movement was to introduce the system of paying the land revenue in cash instead of kind. This was a common demand of the peasantry of Sylhet from past long, but during 1941-42, it became the burning demand of the peasantry. The programme of the movement included boycott of land revenue, organising meetings, rally, petition and deputation. Important leaders associated with this movement were – Suresh Biswas, Nagendra Dey, Bipin Dey, Wahidullah,

³⁵¹ *Assam Police Abstract of Intelligence*, No. 654. Sylhet. Office of the Deputy Inspector General of Police (S.B), Shillong, dated 12th June, 1942.

Romesh Nath, Bonku Bihari Nath and others. The movement did not attain any militancy and ultimately failed to achieve its main demand and suppressed by the government. Though the movement failed, it carries most significance as it was organised under the suppressive situation in the name of defence of India.³⁵²

Peasant movement in Cachar during the World War II:

The peasant movement in Cachar district got a new direction after the first conference of Kisan Sabha in 1940 at Silchar with prominent Communist leader Abdul Momin the chair. The conference adopted the a charter of demands: (1) Land to the tillers, (2) Eviction to be stopped and resisted, (3) Land revenue to be paid in cash, (4) Money receipt or *Farog* is to be obtained on payment of rent, (5) The Second World War to be opposed.³⁵³ The conference gave a call to organise peasant movement to resist soaring prices of essential commodities and black marketing which was the product of war time situation.³⁵⁴ As a result of the clarion call of the Communists and Kisan Sabha, the peasant activists carried out vigorous propoganda to prepare the peasants as well as common masses against all eventualities. At that time, the black marketers and profit mongers created a 'Rice Syndicate' in connivance with the government to exercise monopoly control over purchase of rice to feed the army during the war period. The Kisan Sabha leaders drew a lesson from Bengal that unless preventive measures are taken they can not save the people from famine. They took the initiative to organise the people against the 'Rice Syndicate'. A huge meeting took place in Hailakandi town which adopted the following decisions:

- (1) A mass petition be submitted to the government against the 'Rice Syndicate'.
- (2) Public meetings be organised to educate the people against monopoly procurement of rice and its impending result.
- (3) A march be led to Shillong to submit memorandum to the government demanding dissolution of the 'Rice Syndicate'

As many as 5000 people joined the procession in Hailakandi town to demand the dispersal of the 'Rice Syndicate'. The incident took place during 1942-43. On

³⁵² Bhattacharya, Ajoy. *Nankar Vidroha*. (Vol. II), Mukthadhara, Decca - 1986. Pp-35-37.

³⁵³ *Intelligence Report to the Dy. Inspector General of Police from Superintendent of Police (D.I.B), Cachar*. D.O. No. 2451/23-27, dated 17th September 1931. File No. A-2(6)40, Part II, Sub: Communism; General Activities.

³⁵⁴ Biswas, Girban Ranjan. *Peasant Movement in North East India (1946-1950)*. Regency Publications, New Delhi- 2002. P-76.

seeing the angry mood and organised strength of the Kisan Sabha, The Assam Government decided to dissolve the syndicate and the people were saved from a catastrophe. About the same time, along with the movement against 'Rice Syndicate', a cooperative movement under the initiative of the Kisan Sabha was organised in Silchar sub-division. The centres of this movement were Lakhipur, Attarotillah, Kamrangabusti, Harinagar, Udharbond and Borkhola. Cooperative societies were formed in different villages to meet the scarcity of salt, and cotton fibres. During the war, shortage of cotton fibre very adversely affected the Manipuri community. Besides, there was alarming shortage of salt, mustard oil, sugar etc. The Kisan Sabha and societies approached the government, procured all essential commodities and sold them through fair price shops. The pioneers of the cooperative movement in Cachar were Irabat Singh, Sitaram Baroi, Moni Roy, Bhagirath Singha and others.³⁵⁵

The Communists also brought peasants' grievances to official notice. In fact, the condition of the peasantry in most of the places improved by the end of 1943 due to bumper winter crop, although, the cultivators in some places had earlier discontinued cultivation fearing that their produce might be forcibly taken away by the defence department for military consumption. Irabat Singha, a noted Communist leader of Manipur, came to Cachar and organised a Kisan Party in November 1943 amongst the local Manipuri peasants. In Sylhet, a Communist organised peasant meeting discussed ways and means of growing more paddy and urged the government to settle the kisans on the railway lands in order to bring additional lands under tillage. What ever might be the political motives of the Communists behind this effort, they undoubtedly helped affected workers and peasants to fight against the prevailing scarcity. On the other hand, the CSP as a political party had no independent role during this period of crisis as most of its leaders participated in the Communist led movements.³⁵⁶

The Communists were not very interested in organising militant peasant and working class movement during the people's war phase and intensified on the organizational work. But it can not be regarded that the Communists totally gave up the policy of organising any movement of the working class and peasantry. Though the Communist Party of India was speaking in favour of the British Government in its

³⁵⁵ Biswas, Girban Ranjan. *Peasant Movement in North East India (1946-1950)*. Regency Publications, New Delhi- 2002. Pp-76-77.

³⁵⁶ Bhuyan, A.C. *Political History of Assam (Vol. III)* Publication Board of Assam, Guwahati-1999. Pp-171-172.

war efforts, they were very active in their propaganda taking the advantage of the withdrawal of government ban from the party. The Surma valley was no exception in this regard. The District Intelligence Branch (D.I.B), Sylhet in its report³⁵⁷ on 2nd May, 1942 states:

“The Communist workers of the district of Sylhet are making intense propaganda to spread communistic ideas among the people in the garb of anti-fascism. Though, they are posing to anti-fascist support, they do not seem to be sincere. It will appear from the publication of their organ “*Sanghati*” dated the 23rd. March, 1942 and 6th April 1942, that their object is to excite hatred and contempt towards the Government established by law in British India and also to drive the mass people towards chaos and disorder. Their hidden object is to seize power by force, when there will be an opportunity, by attacking the thanas and other government institutions.

In consideration of their apparent anti-fascist propaganda, we are probably giving them undesirable scope in organising meetings and conferences to enable them to organise their party all over this district.”

In another report³⁵⁸ it states,

“The Communist Party has got a good footing in the kisan, labour and student fronts and it had made much progress in the organisation in this district. Though, at present they are showing sympathy with the Soviet Union in the Nazi attack and want cooperate with the British in the war effort, the underlying principles of the party to overthrow the present government has gained ground, and the party is making much headway.”

A golden opportunity offered itself to the Communists to uplift its sinking images during the railway and postal employees’ agitation. War had also brought on financial strain on them and no measure whatsoever was taken by their authorities to redress their grievances. Before 27 January 1945 as many as four hundred and sixty five individual memorials were submitted to the Railway Board from Dibrugarh alone demanding an increase in their basic pay and dearness allowance and supply of unadulterated rations. Gourisankar Bhattacharya, a leading communist leader of Brahmaputra valley was the Secretary of the Bengal and Assam Railways Employees Union and this helped Communists to guide the movement to a reasonable extent. In November 1945, under the Communist initiative railwaymen at Badarpur, Lumding

³⁵⁷ *Intelligence Report to the Dy. Inspector General of Police, from Superintendent of Police (D.I.B) Sylhet, D.O. No.3760/24-41, dated the 2nd May, 1942. File No. A-3(6) 42, Part. II, Sub: Communism: General Activities.*

³⁵⁸ *Intelligence Report to the Dy. Inspector General of Police, from Superintendent of Police (D.I.B) Sylhet, D.O. No. 1341/5-42, dated the 16th. Feb., 1942. File No. A-3(6) 42, Part. II, Sub: Communism: General Activities.*

and Mariani observed anti-retrenchment day. As many as five meetings were held at Badarpur and Gouhati during the same month demanding pay increase and other things. By the end of 1945 the Railway Board, however, rejected their demands put forwarded through their federation. The railwaymen gave a threat of general strike if their demands were not fulfilled.³⁵⁹ The Communists of Surma valley were very active to establish a good link between railway employees and the Communists throughout the province.

In the conclusion of this chapter, regarding the working class and peasant movement during the period under review it can be summarized that though the leadership at the national level was aware and at times expressed concern for the plight of the working class and peasants since the second half of the nineteenth century till 1920, none thought of politicizing these classes to serve the causes of the national movement. The leadership did not take up the task in right earnest till 1930. The reasons for this cleavage between the working class and the national movement may be sought in the attitude of the leadership at the national level as well as social background of the leaders and activists at the regional and local levels. The Chargola Exodus of 1921 and Bhanubil peasant movement of early thirties showed it beyond doubt that the exploited people were eager and ready to involve themselves in the mainstream of the national movement in the hope of improving their lot. But the Chargola Exodus, in spite of the national prominence it received, could not be utilized for forging a greater and permanent consolidation of the labour class – a consolidation which might have extended the support base of the national movement to a greater extent. The fate of the Bhanubil Peasant Movement, of course, different because the Congress Socialists and the Communists took the chance to use the movement as the starting point of their future programmes of action. Unfortunately the outbreak of the Second World War and the subsequent difference of opinion between the Communists and the Socialists did not allow the consolidation of this new awareness. At the end of the Second World War, the necessity to bring the workers and the peasants was felt by the Congressmen, Congress socialists and Communists alike. But this contest between the different political forces had nothing to do with the course of the national movement of this valley because no new programme for attaining national freedom was taken at the national level after the

³⁵⁹ Bhuyan, A.C. *Political History of Assam (Vol. III)* Publication Board of Assam, Guwahati-1999. Pp-191-192.

Second World War. In spite of the fact, the peasant movements of the valley under the Communist leadership provided a hard blow to the colonial rulers and the agents- the zamindars and landlords and indirectly played a dominant role in the national movement of the valley though they were not politicized by the leadership.