



Visiting the Origin of Labour Movement Through Communist Lens in Kharagpur

Prof. Tapan Hazra, Associate Professor

Gourav Guin Memorial College

Chandrakona Road, Paschim Medinipur

Abstract

For histories of labour the word 'political' leans to a use over and beyond the activities of elected figures and cadre. It encompasses the full process of the creation and articulation of self interests. The mere task of historicizing the activities of the working class and the union movement implies the study of group identity, howsoever unarticulated these could be.

This is in sharp contrast to the mists of ideological dissimulation which follow its portrayal of capitalism 'growth'. Thus, the capitalist class as well as capitalists demand and develop reified and mystical concepts such as Adam Smith's 'hand of the market' or Hegel's 'global permanent capital'. I Movements for national and proto-national identities involve artificial admixtures of truth and fiction, ancient history and current myth. The interests of workers are much more down-to-earth and direct. The rise of labour as an ideologised 'factor of industry' in bourgeois economics was coextensive with the expansion of democracy in the first expanding sections of capitalist development. The latter process had to grapple with it and harness the ambitions of the working class to the plan of capital - whether any of these were schemes of imperial expansion in European nations, or of self determination in their colonies. But the attainment of dominance over workers always paid a price. Political advancements such as adult as well as women's suffrage, combination social rights assistance; and structural changes including the control of working conditions and technological processes all indicated the rising relevance of labour in modern society.

Keywords: Labour movement , Communist lens, Kharagpur, Political advancements

Introduction

In the this view it is necessary to ask the issue whether capitalist democracy is at all a stable type of political organisation, the very End of Times (a la Fukuyama), or an inherently unstable shape, given to authoritarian decay unless spurred forward by the ambitions of labour. Stated differently, we might take into account whether the labour movement is implicitly socioeconomic in nature, not in this or that phase of accumulation, nor philosophically as a vehicle of nationalistic or Leninism, but historically, as the inner consistency as well as unassimilable object of capitalist exploitation. These generalisations need to be verified in the micrologic of historical events, when the actions of workers take place in the background of a greater confluence of classes and



interests. Workers' movement differentia specific may be identified by such an investigation. Rather than examining class relations in colonial India as a whole, this article will focus on the behaviour of workers in Kharagpur in the early decades of the twentieth century in order to answer the broad theses raised above. For the first time, we see the politics of labour in action not as the movement of a single class but as part of a larger social movement. Here, I will argue the workers were aware of nationalist content in the labour movement of the 1920s and 30s, as shown by the following material. India's colonial rule made perfect sense in light of their experience with European supervisors; queries of democracy were translated into these issues as the correct to choose their leaders (such as the notorious "outsider") irrespective of the choices of the established unionists or factory owners; and the rise of popular ministries became an opportunity for them to launch mass hardships for long-standing demands. The findings today are based on research that will be referenced.

Origin of labour class in Midnapore: -Midnapore was an agriculture-based district and vast majority of its population were engaged in agriculture. Till the middle of 20th century the district's urban centres were mainly Midnapore town, Kharagpur and sub-divisional towns. The total population of Midnapore District was near about fifty one lakh in 1951. Only 6% of the total population lived in the town areas.ⁱ But the labour class in the modern sense of term (Term given by Karl Marx) conglomered in the railway town Kharagpur only. Kharagpur, having been an urban place where people from different states having different languages and cultures settled to live, witnessed the growth multi-cultural and multi-linguistic phenomenon. The multiracial and multi-linguistic components of Kharagpur did not bring forth the divergent element to the fore but assimilated and exhibited them into a common category of 'labour class' as most of them worked as labourers in the different sectors in the then Indian Railway at Kharagpur.

So the labour class identity harmonized the Bengalee, Oriya, Telegu, Gujrati, Punjabi, Keralian and other races of Indian people together. They organized themselves against the colonial exploitation before the origin of the Communist party in Midnapore in 1938. Before the coming of the Communist in the sense, the working classes of the Kharagpur were being organized by the trade unions under the influence of Congress party. But the local Congress committee as well as the provincial Congress committee tried to involve them into the main currents of national movement, though the Congressmen in the local level had shown little interest for working class. They avoided the working class for their own elite character. So the working class gradually lost their enthusiasm in favour of Congress.

Labour organization at the initial stage: -In the meantime the Communists intended to spread their influences over the working class of Kharagpur Railway. Communists in this district set up a trade union of the Railway labours which was known as Bengal Nagpur Railway Labour Union having its office at Kharida, Kharagpurⁱⁱ. Its president was Kalappa M.L.A. Nagpur, C.P. D.S. Ram Chandra Rao; a retired employee of the B.N. Railway was the General Secretary of Kharagpur Branch of this union. P.K. Das of Orissa, an employer of the B.N. Railway was the organising secretary. But from the



writings of Saroj Roy it was known that the Communists set up an organization for the interest of the labour of Kharagpur known as 'Congress Sramik Sabha' and this organisation worked in favour of the Communist in the guise of the Congress leaders.ⁱⁱⁱ This confusion became clear when we came to know following Narayan Choubey who wrote that the Trade Union of the Railway labour did not put up any close relation with INTUC, a mother labour organisation of Congress^{iv}. So the radical left-wing political leaders wanted to curb the influence of the Congress conducted Congress Sramik Sabha. The Congress Sramik Sabha took many measures to attract the labour but all were in vain. The labours were used to have been victimized at the whims of the Railway Company. But INTUC showed the casual sympathy towards the labour. This attitude of the Congress leaders forced the labours of the Kharagpur railway to inclination inclined towards the leftist leaders and they formed Bengal Nagpur Railway Union.

The radical Communist leaders under the Congress platform organised the agitation for the increase of dearness allowances of the labour and against the Railway Company's whimsical decision by which the labours were sacked from their work without notice. The agitation was popularized among the Railway labours within few days and the Congress Sramik Sabha under the leadership of the Communists got its success to increase Dearness Allowances. The Communists were agitating in the Sramik Sabha as the separate Communist organization was yet to be constituted. As a result of successful movement the party extended its mass base among labour and within 1940 its membership had risen up to six thousands.

Uniting Labourers under its Left organization: -The increase of the mass-base of the Congress Sramik Sabha from the month of February, 1940 might be explained in a different angle. Md. Ismail, Purendu Dutta-roy and Dharambir Singh of the Tatanagar, (Jamshedpur) came to Kharagpur.^v They altogether worked sincerely to set up a mass organisation of Railway Labour under the influences of the Communist on behalf of the labour sub-committee of the Kharagpur Town Congress Committee. With their utmost industry and intelligence they were able to create a condition in which communism could take its root among the workers.^{vi} Meetings were held from time to time. Saroj Roy and Deben Das also remained present at these meetings to mobilise the labour of Bengal Nagpur Railway at Kharagpur. Decisions were made at these meetings to organize agitation for the interests of the Railway labours simultaneously with an attempt to touch the Communist ideology at the grass root level in the urban area. It was also known that Balai Bose came to Kharagpur from Calcutta to take part in the organizational work as a representative on behalf of the labour of Bengal Nagpur Railway in Kharagpur.^{vii}

A Secret meeting of the C.P.I was held at the Kharida Congress office on 28th May, 1939 under the influence of Saroj Roy and Deben Das.^{viii} A small group of people from the different localities of Kharagpur were convened to remain present in this meeting with an object of forming labour union under the control of left-wing party. At this meeting a Labour Union under the influence of the C.P.I



was established named as of Bengal Nagpur Railway union.^{ix} But before the setting up of the labour union (B.N.R. labour union) by the Communist formally, there was an informal process which began around 1930 when the railway labours were being slowly organised for against the alleged the protest of sacking of the railway workers by the rail authority in Kharagpur. It was a very cruel and inhumane incident that the labourers of Kharagpur were being oppressed and exploited by the Railway authority for a long time. But they couldn't protest individually. It was the last means protect to livelihood for the labourers to form a labour union through which they could protest jointly against the whimsical decision of the Railway authority under the leadership of the Communist. Sacking from the job means losing the means of livelihood for labourers. The labourers were being organised for their existence and for their livelihood and they gave a slogan "*JO KARENGE CHANTNI, BANHO UNKI CHATNI*" from the platform of their union.^x

It was seen that labourers were marching in a procession with a red flag in 1931 and this event occurred probably on first March and they gave the slogans protesting the inhumane behavior and whimsical decision of the railway authority.^{xi} In the meantime the I.N.T.U.C. was very much afraid by watching the Communist Red flag in the procession of the labours. The Congress was trying to put up a close touch with the labours to keep up their dominance over the labour. They also organized meeting, procession, strikes against the cruel behaviour of the B. N. R. rail authority.

But the labours were not satisfied with the activities of the I.N.T.U.C. They were trying to establish their dominance in those areas where they worked. At this time Debendranath Das who was the worker of the Congress party and the Secretary of town Congress in the year 1931-32 became left-minded. He was involved in many activities organised by the Communist. For this reason he was sent to jail. After the release from imprisonment in 1937 he was hawking mats for his livelihood in Kharagpur town and thereby he came in touch with the labours.^{xii} Once again Das mobilized the labours in a sufficient numbers with leftist ideology. Mohini Mohun Mondal, another Congress leader turned to Communist, was also working the same business with Das to mobilize the labours in Kharagpur with leftist ideologies.

In March, 1938 Subhas Chandra Bose came to Kharagpur to inaugurate the annual session of District Congress Committee. There was factional trends between Kumar Debendralal Khan (M.L.C) and Kishoripati Roy (M.L.C) over the post of district Secretary. At last Debendranath Das was elected as the secretary of the Kharagpur town Congress committee; Debendralal Khan was elected as the president of the district Congress committee. A Congress office was opened at Kharagpur town at Dhekuabazar. The Leftist group of the Congress Party came frequently to this office at Dhekuabazar. According to Deben Das, it was revealed that Mohini Mondal and he himself decided to identify themselves as different political activists within Congress.^{xiii} They also decided that they would reveal their separate political identity by observing May-Day in the Kharagpur town. They constituted a separate committee with the help of the labours in Kharagpur. Local Labour Union was also



requested to co-operate with them to observe the May Day. But I.N.T.U.C rejected the proposal. In the meantime they communicated with Sibnath Banerjee, Debendranath Khan and others for observing May-Day for the first time in Midnapore. Banerjee and Khan were invited to observe the May-Day. Enthusiastic behaviour of the labours encouraged Das and Mondal and others to observe the May-day in the Kharagpur town. In 1938, the 1st May was very important in the history of the left-wing political movement in Midnapore. At Giri Maidan, the Red flag of the Communist Party was hoisted for the first time in the district of Midnapore under the President ship of Kumar Debendralal Khan.^{xiv} Sibnath Banerjee put up the National flag of India while Deben Das put up the red flag of the Communist party. Das also delivered a speech on the role of the labour class for constituting the Soviet Socialistic society and also on significance of observing the May-day.^{xv}

This event may be considered as one of the turning point in the history of the labour organisation in the district of Midnapore. Getting inspiration from this event ‘May Day’ the labour inclined towards the Communist ideologies in a big scale. The mobilization of the labour of Kharagpur around the Communist ideology might have been explained in two grounds. Firstly, the Communists were very eager and enthusiastic to mobilize the labours and workers in favour of communism and secondly, the Congress leaders became lethargic and idle to unite the labours under their control and they were being proved less efficient and unproductive to the labours compared to that of Communist leaders who stayed always with the labour not only at the times of their joys but also in sorrows.

Shifting of labour leadership:-So the shift in the leadership regarding mobilization of the labours from the Congress bloc to Communist- bloc changed the pattern of the leadership of the labours and workers in the district of Midnapore where the organised Communist movement was about to be spouted. At the same year in 1938 the Communists observed the November day on 7th November in the morning at the house of Kedar Upadhaya (Panditji) before a gathering of labours.^{xvi}

The influence of the Communists on the labour was increasing day by day and the Communist leaders gained popularity. So, the political equilibrium of the labour organisation was changed and it was shifted in favour of the Communists. Some of the labours who were more radicals wanted to establish their separate labour union with Deben Das as secretary and Subhas Chandra Bose as president. We remember that Bose came to Kharagpur at that time and delivered a speech in an open mass-meeting. The radical labours were very much influenced by the speeches of Bose.^{xvii} So they took initiative to set up another union among the labour of Kharagpur.

But the Communist leaders were worried watching the activities of the radical labours because for setting up separate union would split the unity among labours. The radical should have been restrained from doing this. Bankim Mukherjee who came from Calcutta to Kharagpur, made a successful effort to restrain the radical Communists in Kharagpur to form separate union. It was also noted that the Bidi labours and the labours in the Bata shop were united solidarity with in the Railway Labor Union in Kharagpur. Sukumar Sengupta wrote that at that time a room was hired for opening the party office



where whole time Communist workers such as Jatin Mitra, Narayan Choubey and Janardan Raol used to live and spent the whole time for the party work.^{xviii} All of them were very much active in organizing any kind of labour agitation in rail town.

From this time the Communists were accepted by the labours and the labours got partial success in meeting of their demands which they put up before Bengal Nagpur Railway Company such as enhancement of their daily wages, reduction of duty-hours, sacking from their work without any proper reason etc. The demands were raised by the labour under the leadership Communists and they organized the agitation taking these issues against Bengal Nagpur Railway Company. From these kinds of activities the labour class was encouraged and they started to keep their faith on the Communists. The Communists also successively expanded their dominance upon the labour and working class of the Bengal Nagpur Railway Company.

The labour activities in the initial stage:-

Labour front was one of vital platform where the Communist leaders imposed the importance for its class political consciousness and they insisted initially for a united formation. The labour front was treated as one of important mass fronts of the Communist party. Before the setting up of the Communist party in Midnapore many of the Indian National Congress leaders were associated with labour agitation of Kharagpur. Among the district committee members Saroj Roy and Deben Das kept a close contact with the labours on their own. On 28th May, 1936 a secret meeting of left-wing group of Congress was held at the latter office at Kharida, Kharagpur where they decided to organise the small group of the left-wing party in the different localities of Kharagpur with the object of setting up the labour union under the control of the left-wing political party.^{xix}

On the 29th November, 1939 they opened an office for labour class.^{xx} It worked for the enhancement of the political consciousness of the labour in the different sections of Kharagpur railway and the different kinds of workers living in the *Basti* (slums) area in the Kharagpur town. On 3rd May, 1940 the left-wing political leaders like Roy, Das, Md. Ismail and others assembled in a secret meeting at *Jhilli* at Kharagpur town where they constituted the Trade Union sub-committee with a view to facilitate the trade union activities of the labour and to recruit more labours in their organization.

The activities and functions of this committee were kept in secrecy but their meetings were held both secretly and openly. In an open meeting at the Strike Maidan at Kharagpur on 10th, May, 1940 Md Ismail, Tarapada Chakraborty, Deben Das and others Communist leaders condemned the government for the then externment order passed on them.^{xxi} They also urged the labour sub-committee of the Congress to agitate for the grant of bonus to the labour and also against the decision of the central government for the abolition of the labour welfare committee. The leaders, in the various meetings, also urged to all sections of people to fight for freedom of the country. From the above facts it was evident that the left-wing political leaders that stressed on awakening political consciousness of the labour in two means--- on the one hand, they wanted to enhance the political consciousness level



against the exploitation of the capitalist class and on the other hand they emphasised for organising the anti-colonial movements of the country.

The left-wing political activities in the labour front were not confined only at Kharagpur but also in the other municipal areas and rail stations areas of the district. They tried to organize the labour front in Shyamchak, Ballichak, Panskura, Mecheda and other railway stations where a handful labours worked.^{xxii} For this purpose they decided to set up camps for the labour in the different railway stations. The camp at Ballichak was set up on 3rd November, 1940 by the left-wing leaders.^{xxiii} After inaugurating the camp at Ballichak Deben Das, Md. Ismail and other Communist leaders addressed before the labour that the struggle with imperial government was a vital one and they should made themselves prepared to accept anti-imperial and anti-colonial ideology. The labours who participated in the camp were given bulletin in cyclostyled form and were also requested to distribute the same among the workers in their respective fields of work.

The programme was taken to popularize the left-wing political party before the labour front in the different railway stations. But this effort did not gain much success. This kind of strategy and technique was adopted at the moment when the Communist party was being isolated from the masses for their propagated “people’s war” theory, neglecting the nationalist sentiment during the Second World War.

Conclusion: -It was noted that the left-wing activity in the labour front was not to mention as the mark of attaining a satisfactory level except in the railway front at Kharagpur. There was no activity whatsoever in any other railway station areas in this district. At Kharagpur it has been already mentioned that Deben Das, Rabilal Mitra, Sukumar Sengupta, Saroj Roy, Narayan Choubey and others were the two important figures who tried to extend the party influences among the railway employees in the Bengal Nagpur Railway employees union and made some headway in the workshop branch but that attempt also was not extensive enough. Moreover, the Communist leaders continued to be clamorous to provoke the workers to protest programme until their demands were fulfilled. So it became evident that the left wing leaders were in a process of mobilizing the labours at Kharagpur around their ideology to struggle against capitalism, imperialism and against colonialism. There were attended usually 400 to 500 odd labours in those meetings organised by the left-wing leaders who raised the voice against the compromising character of the Congress in a war of anti-colonialism and anti- imperialism.^{xxiv} A section of labours considered that the Congress as a political party neglected the interests of the worker section and did not organise the programme for the minimum interests of the labour. As a result of this failure of the Congress party, the larger section of the working class in Kharagpur shifted under the umbrella of communism.



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