

Mapping the Pathways to anti-British Demonstrations: Contextualizing the Labour Agitations of Bengal, 1939-43

Dr. Sukanta Pramanik

Assistant Professor of History, Kalyani Mahavidyalaya, Kalyani Nadia,

Abstract: *Bengal witnessed several labour agitations during 1939-43. Apart from a few instances of other industrial sectors, most of the strikes occurred in Jute Mill and Cotton Mills. To some extent, the labour agitations of Bengal contained sabotage activities also. Usually, their economic grievances were the motivating factors to be a part of agitations. But over time, their grievances were channelized into anti-British action. In that process, several political parties and their leaders played an important role. Political parties like Congress Socialist Party, Forward Bloc, Bengal Labour Party etc. were the guiding force of these labour agitations. In many cases, wartime terror, anxiety and tensions aggravated the situation. Labourers positively responded to the political parties' call to fight against fascism and imperialism. In some cases, leaflets and posters which were part of underground literature mobilised the Bengal labour class. Thus, the pathway was turned into anti-British demonstrations where economic issues were amalgamated with nationalist issues. Some labour disturbances played a significant role to make Quit India Movement more intense in Bengal.*

Keywords: Wartime anxiety, Economic grievances, Labour Agitations, Political parties, Nationalist wave.

During 1939-43, Bengal turned out as the ground of multiple protests. The protests were organised against the War efforts of the British, activities of the Bengal Government, programmes of the Congress High Command and anti-people policies of the British. So far as the 'protest' was concerned, it was Bengal where radicalism got priority in the protest movement. It must be said that Bengal politics during the period of 1939 to 1943, turned Bengal into the appropriate ground for the next intense mass movement in 1942. In this respect, the most notable protest came from the working class. In the beginning, their protests were centred on their economic grievances. But over time, their grievances were channelized into anti-British actions. In that pathway, the contemporary political parties played an important role. Low wages, political propaganda, demand for war bonuses and extra wages for extra work etc. accelerated labour troubles throughout Bengal which was fully utilised by the political parties. In several meetings and conferences, the

political leaders talked about the rationality of labour agitations to get their sympathy. Thus, efforts had been made to mix up labour issues with political issues. Congress Socialist Party, Forward Bloc, Bengal Labour Party etc. played an important role in this respect.

Thus, usually, the protests took place to meet the workers' demands during War days and also to secure the worker's interest. But along with these, efforts were also given to combine these demands with nationalist issues, especially anti-fascist propaganda. Calcutta and its adjacent places witnessed many labour agitations during this period. The most important fact was that to some extent the working class spontaneously participated in anti-British demonstrations which paved the way to turn the Quit India Movement in Bengal more intense.

So this paper will seek to explore the major trends of labour agitations in Bengal for 1939-43 which ultimately prepared the pathways to anti-British demonstrations. Moreover, there will be a concise deliberation regarding the nature of labour agitations during the concerned period.

Second World War, Bengal Politics and the Bengal labour class.

With the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, Bengal politics acquired a new dimension as the agitations of Bengal labour classes played an important role to make the anti-imperialist struggle more intense. During this crucial period, some political activities in Bengal aggravated the situation. Political parties emphasised two specific techniques: (i) to involve the peasants and labourers in anti-British agitations to intensify the movements and (ii) to motivate these people, they had taken up the issues for expressing protest which affected the common people. In this respect, the most notable protest was organised on 18 August 1939. On that day, a meeting of about 300 disaffected jute mill labourers was held at Kalsapa (near Uluberia) under the presidency of Babu Bankim Chandra Mukherjee, M.L.A, and other noted labour leaders who made speeches criticising the Bengal Ministry and aimed at a general strike in the Jute Mills.¹ Indeed, during this period, the Second World War and the immediate dangers due to War compelled the political parties to launch anti-British propaganda with more intensity. From 1939 to 1943, politics in Bengal faced stiff challenges. The War brought up new contradictions.

With the beginning of the Second World War, a lot of anxiety, terror and tensions were generated. In this scenario of Wartime terror and insecurity, there was a large-scale exodus of people including the labour class from Calcutta. On the other hand, due to War, a new opportunity for work also arose which attracted the labour classes to leave one place. And it must be said that this new opportunity for work was not only for men but women also. However, on 18 December 1941, rumour was rife that Chittagong, Digboi and Madras had been bombed. Up to 19 December 1941, about 3000 casual labourers of Cossipore and Chitpore areas of Calcutta including jute press workers and carters, left the city owing to panic. Exodus of people from Calcutta owing to panic was reported:

23/12/41—35,000 from Howrah; 35,000 from Sealdah.

24/12/41—35,000 from Howrah; 20,000 from Sealdah (most by labourers).²

Labour protests also took place and political parties played their role in this matter also. Usually, the protests took place to meet the workers' demands during War days and also to secure the worker's interest. But along with these, efforts were also given to combine these demands with nationalist issues, especially anti-fascist propaganda.

On 1 March 1942, an anti-fascist rally by the Bengal Labour Party was organised at Sraddhananda Park. Small processions converged on the park from Howrah, Khardah, Barrackpore, Titagarh, Hajinagarh, Entally and Watganj. A meeting was held with Abdur Rahaman Khan as president. In this meeting, the speakers condemned Germany's aggression on the U.S.S.R, 'the torch bearer of freedom' for the world proletariat; advocated fullest support to Allied war efforts and exhorted Indian workers and peasants to fight Fascism and Imperialism and establish their own Raj.³

With the labour issues, Bengal politics got a new dimension. Due to low wages, Bengal witnessed several labour strikes during this period. It is a notable feature that in some cases, workers intended to resort to Satyagraha as a protest technique. With time, a leftist essence was included in these labour strikes. Organisations like the 'Bengal Labour Party' (BLP) and Communist leaders like Charu Chandra Banerjee became keen to spread Communism throughout Bengal.⁴ They attacked drastically the sincerity of Britain regarding effectively aiding Russia against Germany and demanded permission to raise a red army of Indian workers for despatch to Russia. At the same time, they condemned the mill owners for the exploitation of workers and advised the latter to unite to realise their grievances. Price rise, low wages, unemployment, long working hours etc. became acute problems for the workers. Taking this opportunity, the Communists began to mobilise the workers. Thus, Communist leadership combined labour discontent with the Communist ideology. In many cases, it was found that the Bengal Labour Party conducted propaganda among dock workers and jute mill workers of Bengal and repeatedly made attempts to organise a general strike among them. However, from March 1940 onwards, the BLP started functioning on a scale intended to cover the whole of India under the new name of the Bolshevik Party of India (BPI).⁵

From Economic Grievances to anti-British Demonstration

From 1939 to 1943, Bengal witnessed many labour strikes. In this respect, a grave situation arose at the Hukum Chand Jute Mill where pending workers' dues doubled. According to the market news, the managing agents were in a very serious financial position. Though, at that time the workers were quiet, a curfew order was imposed. Besides, strikes occurred in the departments of the Anglo-India Jute Mills, Mohini Mills, Kushtia Mills and also in the Dhakeswari Cotton Mills against reduction in wages. However, according to the report of the Dacca Commissioner, Dhakeswari Cotton Mills had a

repercussion on a strike in the Lakshmi Narayan Cotton Mills near Narayanganj.⁶ The strike continued and the workers of the Dhakeshwari Cotton Mills were stated to be willing to assist them. Strikes also took place in Bangeswari Cotton Mills, ascribed to Red agitators who were said to have been active since the mills took up the marking of bondage cloth. However, the trouble here originated from the holiday issue. The Mill authority decided that if a holiday was given for the *poush sankranti* festival the employees must work on the preceding Sunday. Besides, during this period most of the labour troubles existed in jute mills. In this respect, Anglo-Indian Jute Mills, Kedarnath Jute Mill and the Fort William Jute Mill faced some strikes mainly due to economic reasons. Towards the close of 1941, many strikes occurred in the jute mills due to non-payment of wages. For instance, on 09 December 1941, about 54 coolies out of a total of 1000 of the New India Jute Press struck work as a protest against non-payment of wages.⁷ Similarly, 59 coolies of the Ocean Jute Press struck work at 8 a.m. on 10 December 1941 and 18 *khalasis* out of a total of 200 of the Lohia Jute Press struck work on 18 December 1941 due to non-payment of their wages.⁸

However, the most important industrial agitation took place on 22 February 1942 at Hazra Park in Calcutta. On that day, a meeting of 100 Corporation workers was held under the auspices of the Calcutta Corporation Employee's Association with Ziauddin Ahmed, Councillor, in the chair. Some resolutions were adopted at this meeting. These were: (i) reintroduction of the old system of attending office twice daily as against four times at present; (ii) 25% war bonus; (iii) establishment of a separate hospital for Corporation Employees; (iv) provision for families in case of air-raid casualties; (v) extra wages for extra work; (vi) reinstatement of dismissed workers; (vii) storage of foodstuffs for emergencies; (viii) advance payment of a month's wages to send families outside Calcutta and the deduction of the amount in 12 instalments.⁹ Again on 24 February 1942, a meeting of 200 scavengers was held in the *bustee* at Grove Lane under the presidentship of Sakina Begam who was restricted from addressing meetings for one year by an order issued by the Commissioner of Police, Calcutta, on 25 November 1941. She observed that the Corporation authorities had not yet redressed their grievances. That's why, demands were raised for an increment of Rs. 4; free lodging at a safe distance from Calcutta; adequate arrangement for a supply of food in the event of bombing and reinstatement of dismissed hands.¹⁰

It must be said that a great number of labourers of some mills and factories only struck work on economic grounds and the demands which would not have been conceded during normal times, were readily met by the employers the strike was called off. But it is also true that these labour disturbances added extra fuel to the 1942 disturbances in Bengal. During the Quit India Movement in Bengal, the role of Bengal labour was also mentionable. Bengal labour did not participate spontaneously in it. Indeed, the deteriorating economic condition forced them to be a part of agitators. Lack of employment, low wages, price rise etc. worsened the living condition

of labour. Bengal witnessed several labour agitations, *hartals*, demonstrations etc. during this period.

So far as the labour agitation was concerned, it was Calcutta where many industrial workshops witnessed labour strikes and agitations. From the beginning of December 1942, these labour agitations were noticed. On 21 December 1942, about 310 workers of the Government Port Timber Depot, Cox and King's Paharpur, Garden Reach, struck work. The strike ended on 29 December 1942. Within the same period, the strike continued among the workers of Kesoram Cotton Mill, Garden Reach. Besides, on 18 December 1942, about 900 labourers of the Fuse section of the Cossipore Gun and Shell Factory staged a stay-in strike.¹¹ Approximately, the same period also witnessed the strikes of Still Products Company, 96, Garden Reach Road, Brooke Bond Tea Company, Hide Road, Bhartiya Electric Steel Works, Ballygunge, etc.

However, with the beginning of the Quit India Movement, the labour class was swept away by nationalist sentiments. In Bengal also, it was found that to some extent the working class spontaneously participated in anti-British demonstrations. Indeed, in the wake of the Quit India Movement, the jute belt of Bengal was largely quiescent. The workers at Birla Jute Mill at Budge Budge in 24-Parganas struck work for a day on 10 August, protesting against the arrest of Congress leaders.¹² On the same ground, about 1,287 workers out of a total of 6,025 workers of India Jute Mill struck work from 17 to 20 August. On account of Gandhi's fast in February 1943, four jute presses and one steel rolling mill in Ghusiary, Howrah were closed down for one day on 23 February 1943.¹³ Though, in most of the cases it was found that low wages became the bone of contention between the mill owners and the working class. Over time, this issue was amalgamated with the wave of nationalist movements. On 26 October 1942 about 808 workers of Anglo-India Middle Jute Mill went on a protest against the revised rates of wages for manufacturing camouflage cloth which led to the loss of workers' earnings. Members of the 'Chatkal Mazdoor Seva Samity' played a leading part in the strike, which indirectly affected 3,109 workers.¹⁴ In the last week of December 1942, several strikes took place in Hooghly. In almost all cases, the demand of the workers was the full payment of wages as a large number of them wanted to hurry to their native villages.

Table- 1
Strikes of four jute mills towards the close of December 1942

Sl. No.	Name of the Jute Mill	Workforce involved	Strike Started Ended	Result
1.	Wellington	3,892	25.12.42.....28.12.42	Successful
2.	Hastings	4,360	25.12.42.....1.1.43	Successful
3.	Presidency	Not known	28.12.42.....29.12.42	Unsuccessful
4.	Luxmi Narayan	Not Known	28.12.42.....30.12.42	Unsuccessful

Source: Basu, Nirban, *The Working Class Movement- A Study of Jute Mills of Bengal 1937-47*, K.P. Bagchi and Co., Calcutta, 1994, p. 198

Issues like sick leave, casual leave with pay, sufficient food supply etc. played an important role in labour agitations in Bengal during this period. At Birla Jute Mill, 1,800 workers started a strike on 18 January 1943, demanding a holiday on Muharram, an increment in wages in proportion to the working hours, a supply of rations to workers who lived with families outside the mill compound, and bonus, as given last year.¹⁵ The strike indirectly affected 4,200 workers. However, in the first half of 1943, the situation worsened as some issues appeared as a danger to the working class. The most notable among them were the grave food situation and in particular, the curtailment in rice rations to industrial workers; acute shortage of coal leading to occasional closure of the mills and; requisition of some mills by the military.

Union-centric agitation was also noticed among the workers. However, rivalry and factionalism among the labour unions marked an important feature of the worker's protest rally. For instance, at the beginning of 1942, about 15 members of the Cossipore Branch of the Bijli Mazdoor Union (white), headed by Nur Muhammad Ramzan, Rouf Khan and others were said to have since broken away from the union and joined Abid Hossain, the labour leader of the Beliaghata, who was trying to organise a new union of electric workers of Cossipore area under the name of the 'Bengal Electric Worker's Union' with Khan Bahadur Md. Sulaiman, M.L.A as president and himself as secretary. On the other hand, factionalism reached its climax when it was found that on 3 March 1942, owing to old rivalry, members of the Indian Seamen's Union (I.S.U) and the Indian National Maritime Union (INMU) came to a clash at Wellesley Square East and received injuries. But along with this trend of factionalism among labour unions, it must be said that sometimes labourers also played an important role to spread the anti-fascist propaganda.

Sometimes labourers were also urged to stand against the British government by abstaining from their work. In this scenario, the event of 2 September was most astonishing. On that day a meeting of about 50 persons was organized by one Dhirendranath Mandal of Narayanpur, police station Rampurhat, in which the labourers were asked not to work at Surichua (Santal Parganas) where an Aerodrome was being constructed.

Gandhi's fast in February 1943 influenced the working class very deeply. In February 1943, members of the Revolutionary Socialist Party of Howrah appealed to the workers to observe *hartal* on the day of Gandhi's fast. They also formed a labour union known as the 'United Labour Union' to which the unions of the workers of engineering firms at Howrah were affiliated. They held a private meeting where it was decided that factories would not be allowed to work and for this purpose, the workers were instructed to conduct sabotage activities by removing the essential part of the machinery stealthily.¹⁶ It was also decided that a leaflet in connection with Gandhi's fast and their duty would be distributed, among the workers of the engineering firms. In this meeting, Haripada Majumdar, a prominent member of the Revolutionary Socialist Party (formerly Anusilan Terrorist Party) and

president of the Guest, keen Williams Workers' Union was present. An attack on an Assistant Manager at Khardah Jute Mill and an affray at Hindusthan Cotton Mill occurred in Barrackpore Sub-Division.

Strikes occurred at the National Carbon Company, Messrs. Saxby and Farmer, Kohinoor Rubber Works and certain other smaller factories. A feature of recent strikes was their increasing frequency. These were conducted by members of the Indian Federation of Labour. Although pledged to a policy of avoiding strikes, this body in practice was finding it difficult to control the effects of its agitation and hence, it became the cause of several recent strikes including three in the last fortnight in the important National Carbon Company. The principal points at issue in this dispute were certain cases of dismissal and demand for the provision of food at cheap prices.¹⁷ In this situation, the Congress Socialist party was working particularly with the Revolutionary Socialist Party and one set of plans which had come to light contemplated attacks on *thanas* and courts, the looting and distribution of foodstuffs and the establishment of National *Panchayats*. The disturbance of August and onwards, failed because the people were not organised and there were also plans to secure control of the Trade Union Movement with the object of establishing an ascendancy over labour.¹⁸

However, by utilising the economic grievances of the labour class, many revolutionary organisations tried to motivate them to engage in the anti-British struggle. The most motivational speech came from a Hindi leaflet named *Inclabi Mazdoor* which was printed and published by the journal *Rakta Rabibar*¹⁹. The leaflet contained some slogans like *Long Live Inclabi Paltan*, *Long Live Peasants*, *Long Live Lal Jhanda*, *Long Live Free India* etc. In this leaflet, the labour class was asked to destroy the police stations, courts etc. It was also hoped that after destroying the British government, a national government would be established. It was said: We give signal to the *Inclabi Mazdoor Sangha Paltan* to get ready and go forward to destroy the British Government, occupy the police stations, court etc—we will establish our government after destroying the British Government.²⁰

Thus in many cases, it was found that propaganda machinery played a significant role to channelize the economic grievances of the working class into anti-British demonstrations. It must be remembered that almost all this underground literature contained some radical anti-British slogans which inspired the Bengali labour classes very deeply. On the one hand, they supported and inspired the labour agitations and on the other hand through this literature the Bengali labour classes were reminded of the exploitative nature of the British government and thus the hope was kept alive on the ground that after ending the British colonialism in India, the working class would be entitled to enjoy economic rights and privileges.

Nature of the Labour Agitation

The labour agitation of Bengal for the period of 1939-1943 was marked by several important factors. The most interesting fact is that with the outbreak

of the Second World War, the financial position of industrial workers became quite stronger throughout India.²¹ It was applicable in the case of Bengal also. Usually the Wartime demands for labour and the realisation of Indian businessmen regarding the growing demand for increased industrial played a significant role. Even during 1937-38, when most of the part of the world faced recession, Indian manufacturing output did not fall.²² But it was the price rise of consumption goods which generated a lot of grievances among the labourers. Therefore, statistics of strikes showed that most of the disputes were over economic issues. To solve the industrial disputes, the British government recognized trade unions and the mediatory role of the labour department of the central government. To maintain industrial relations by giving the trade unions a structural form, the British government enacted the Indian Trade Unions (Amendment) Bill in November 1943 when B.R. Ambedkar was the member in charge of the Labour Department in the Viceroy's Council.²³ But the situation changed when the Quit India Movement was launched. However, the Wartime regulations prohibited strikes under Rule S1-A of the Defence of India Rule. But it made provisions for compulsory adjudication of industrial disputes. In this scenario, the C.P.I (Communist Party of India) and R.D.P (Radical Democratic Party) leaders were involved in trade union work and they could achieve success as advocates for the working class in conciliation and arbitration proceedings. The government was confused with their 'dubious' political past. For instance, the governor of Bengal Sir John Herbert was unhappy that a former of such leaders accused in the Meerut Conspiracy Case, R.S. Nimbkar, had become the Labour Adviser to the Central Government.²⁴

However, during Quit India Movement, the economic grievances of Bengal labour classes were tactfully channelized into anti-British demonstrations and this was the alternative tradition of using economic grievances as a mobilising factor for nationalist political agitation existed in India. Many of the left-wing groups who supported the Quit India movement (like the C.S.P; R.S.P; and the Forward Bloc) had been practitioners of this pattern of agitation.²⁵ But the basic weakness of these tactics lay in the fact that the business classes were doing well out of the war and industrial labourers wished to remain employed when the industry was on the upswing and would willingly accept collective bargaining if the employers reciprocated.

Thus, labour agitations of Bengal during 1939-43 acquired a new dimension as their economic grievances were channelized into anti-British demonstrations. Usually, the main contribution to this pathway came from the contemporary political parties who adopted the process of mobilising the labourers by using their economic grievances and this was one of the traditions of mobilising factors. So far as the mobilization is concerned, it was the nationalist sentiments in the wave of the Quit India Movement in 1942, that played an important role to turn the labour agitations of Bengal into anti-British actions. To some extent, the underground literature had an effective role to make the pathway of labour agitations into anti-British action. The

most important factor was that with the outbreak of the Second World War, several labour strikes turned Bengal into a protest ground. Economic issues like low wages, price rises, non-payment of wages etc. were the main factors for these labour agitations. The political leaders effectively used their grievances and were quite able to make understand them that with the ending of British rule, their economic problems will be solved automatically. As a result, with the outbreak of the Quit India Movement, to some extent, the labour classes of Bengal also participated in anti-British demonstrations.

Notes and References (Endnotes)

1. Fortnightly report on the political situation in Bengal for the second half of August, 1939, Home Department, Political Branch, File no. 19/39, West Bengal State Archives (hereafter WBSA)
2. Fortnightly confidential report on political situation in Bengal during the second half of December 1941, File no.13/41, Home Department, Poll Branch, WBSA
3. Fortnightly confidential report on the political situation in Bengal during the 1st half of March, 1942, File no. 31/42, Home Department, Poll Branch, WBSA
4. Fortnightly confidential report on the political situation in Bengal during the second half of July, 1941, file no. 13/41, Home Department, Poll. Branch, WBSA
5. In Bengal, the reins of the party held by Nirmal Sen Gupta, Promode Sen, Biswanath Dubey and Sisir Roy. Note on the Bolshevik Party of India by the Bengal Special CID Branch, Dated 24/03/1943, File no. 12/1/43- Home Poll(I), National Archives of India (hereafter NAI)
6. Report on the political situation in Bengal for the second half of December, 1939, *op. cit*
7. Fortnightly confidential report on the political situation in Bengal during the second half of December, 1941, *op. cit.*
8. *ibid*
9. Fortnightly confidential report on the political situation in Bengal during the 1st half of March, 1942, *op. cit.*
10. *ibid.*
11. Fortnightly confidential report on political situation in Bengal for the 1st half of January, 1943, file no. 39/43, WBSA
12. Nirban Basu, *The Working Class Movement- A Study of Jute Mills of Bengal 1937-47*, (Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi and Co., 1994), p. 197
13. Monthly statistics of strikes of India, 1943, Government of India, Home Department, political (internal), file no. 12/6/43POLL (1), NAI
14. Basu, *The Working Class Movement.*, p. 197
15. *ibid.*, p. 198
16. Mr. Gandhi's fast. Reaction of political parties to the fast. Government of India, Home Department, political (1), file no.19/5/43 poll (1), 1943, NAI
17. Confidential fortnightly report on the political situation in Bengal for the 1st half of June, 1943, Government of India, Home Department, Political (internal), file no. 5/5/43-POLL (I), NAI
18. *ibid*

19. Congress Socialist Party was the staunch supporter of Quit India Movement. Rammanohar Lohia and many others of this party published an underground journal which was known as *Red Sunday*, written in red ink. The proposal of Quit India Movement was accepted on Sunday, 9 August 1942. The secret journal *Rakta Rabibar* or 'Red Sunday' was often found posted on a wall in Basudevpur *hat*, p.s. Sutahata, Midnapore. Police seized this propaganda material from the houses of a number of revolutionaries in Bengal
20. Leaflets brought to the notice of the I.B, office of the D.I.G of police, file no. 250 B-43 (Jugantar), WBSA
21. Partha Sarathi Gupta, ed., *Towards Freedom, Documents on the Movement for Independence in India, 1943-44*, part-3, (New Delhi: ICHR, OUP, 1997), 2207
22. Morris D. Morris, 'The Growth of Large Scale Industry to 1947', In Dharma Kumar, ed., *The Cambridge Economic History of India*, Vol.II, (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1984) 610
23. Gupta, *Towards Freedom*, 2207
24. *ibid.* p. 2208
25. *ibid*