

# GANDHI, GANDHIANS AND LABOUR: THE BENGAL SCENARIO, 1920–47

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*Gandhi's advent in Indian political arena (1919) created a new chapter in mass politics and mobilization in India and affected almost all the social classes not excepting the industrial workers. The relationship between national movement and working class movement came to be seriously questioned. As Gandhi had novel ideas about political goals and methods, he had also his own ideas about the capital-labour relationship. But within the Indian National Congress, Gandhi's views did not pass unchallenged. His ideas came to be contested by the radical nationalists and the leftists. Particularly as in the complexities of Bengal politics, the latter were more powerful, Gandhi's ideas found only a few adherents who remained as a small unstable coterie. Even the professed Gandhians in Bengal did hardly follow his ideas of labour organization. Gandhi strongly warned against the labour becoming a pawn in the hands of the politicians, but this was exactly what the labour became in Bengal as in most other parts of India and the Gandhians, along with others, had no small share in making them so.*

**A**N ENTIRELY NEW CLASS IN INDIAN SOCIETY, namely, the industrial labour class, emerged in the second half of the 19th century in the wake of the development of modern industries. However, the industrial labour in India, a predominantly agricultural country, remained numerically small but they were concentrated in certain decisive centers like Bombay, Cawnpore and, above all, Calcutta and its surrounding districts in Bengal. As both the nationalist political movement and the industrial labour movement in India originated, more or less, at the same time from the second half of the 19th century, the relationship between the two, in different stages, is a topic of great historical interest.

## I

Almost from the very beginning the working class, even though in a most sporadic form, began to register their protest against wretched conditions. Side by side, efforts to improve the material and moral conditions of Indian workers had been started by a handful of philanthropists like Sashipada Banerjee in Bengal or N.M. Lokhunday in Bombay. However, such philanthropic efforts were quite distinct from the spontaneous strikes which broke out from time to time and moreover men like Banerjee or Lokhunday were also, more or less, cut off from the mainstream of the national movement of their days.

Professor Bipan Chandra (1977, 327–359) has pointed out that the attitude of the nationalist leadership in general represented by the main body of the Indian National Congress, prior to 1905, towards the growing industrial capitalism had three notable features — (i) positive hostility to all regulatory measures and acts of Government, passed mainly under the influence of English philanthropists and textile manufacturers which threatened the interests of the nascent Indian national bourgeoisie, (ii) general indifference and near total absence of active sympathy for the workers and (iii) a marked difference in the attitude towards labour employed in indigenous capitalist enterprises and labour in European owned industries. The nationalist leadership was cautious so that the organized labour unrest did not tend to undermine the growing indigenous enterprises.

Gradually towards the close of the 19th century a few nationalist leaders came to view the labour-capital relationship in a larger perspective (Chandra 1977, 385–393). It was not fortuitous that this attitude was prominently visible first of all in Bengal Presidency in Eastern India where educated employees and professionals constituted a sizeable group but indigenous capitalists were few in numbers (Chandra 1977, 390). This change of attitude on the part of the nationalists is connected with the efforts of the Extremist School which contrasted with the tactics of the Moderates to win over the masses (Levkovsky 1966). The Extremists were particularly powerful in Bengal during the Swadeshi days (1905–08). Strikes were nothing new, but their number, organization and political connections during the Swadeshi days make the period a distinctive phase in the history of Bengal's labour movement. But the Swadeshi political agitators seldom did anything which could generate class consciousness among the proletariat (Chowdhury 1971, 48–49). They did encourage labour agitation in the foreign enterprises but tried to give it a pronounced anti-colonial shape.

However, the strike-movements of the period did not result in stable unions which would continue up to the later periods of nationalist agitation. Strikes also became infrequent after 1908. The increasingly non-Bengali composition of the labour force hindered the nationalist leaders of the province to get a popularity comparable with what Tilak had over the Maratha workers in Bombay as evidenced during the Tilak trial. Thus, the possibility of any alliance between nationalism and labour unrest as an alternate to individual terrorism failed to materialize (Sarkar 1977, 242–43, 251). The unions which suddenly sprang up in Bengal during the height of the Swadeshi movement disappeared soon without leaving behind any trace. Until the end of the World War I in 1919, no proper trade union movement got off the ground in Bengal.

## II

Building up a mass movement on involving the participation of the working class of Bengal proved a problem of considerable magnitude to its political leaders, because of the increasingly non-Bengali composition of the force in Bengal. The difficulty could be overcome only with the advent of a charismatic all-India leadership in the post-World War I period which would possess sufficient appeal to move the masses of all communities in all provinces (Ray 1979, 10). Herein lay the significance of the rise of Mahatma Gandhi in the Indian political arena in 1919.

The war caused a sharp rise in the prices of food grains and other necessary commodities. Naturally, the workers became restive though workers had real grievances; they needed leaders and organization to give expression to them. One of the most significant features of the new situation was the interest taken in labour problems by a section of the nationalist leadership, who had so far neither cared for them nor realized their importance. This made the post-war strike wave different from the pre-war strikes (including these in the Swadeshi period) which were small in number, sporadic in nature and without any guiding purpose. This was due to a qualitative change that came at that time in the nature of the political movement of the country. From the elitist constitutional phase, the Indian National Congress was moving into a populist agitational phase. The Congress under Gandhi's leadership was becoming a mass-oriented organization, committed to political action through non-violence. In the face of this, the issue of the industrial labour was bound to become more pertinent (R. Chatterjee n.d., 83–86). While philanthropic and social reform orientations were not completely outdated, a more direct attention to the cause of the working mass was now called for.

Still, on the whole, the nationalists remained rather reticent on the issue of labour and did not favour the mobilization of the working classes for broadening the boundaries of their political struggle. The small coterie of Gandhians in Bengal within the mainstream Congress organisation was no exception. However, the miniscule involvement of the Gandhians with labour politics has received little scholarly attention in contemporary historiography (Bandyopadhyaya 1984; S. Chatterjee 2002; Prayer 2001). While it is true that involvement of Gandhians with labour was impeded because of their inability to build up an organisation of their own, their involvement and participation did not merit a total erasure within the mainstream historical thought of twentieth century India. In the present article, an attempt will be made to describe the attempts of the Gandhians to translate his ideas in the labour field and to evaluate the extent of their success in Bengal.

As Gandhi had novel ideas about political goal and method, he had his own ideas about the capital-labour relationship also (Kripalani 1975, 78). He considered the workers as partners, working for public good, and mill owners as their trustees. Any quarrel between them must be settled through arbitration mutually agreed upon. He also laid down in his own way the functions of the trade unions. His conception of the work of the trade union was that they were not merely to agitate for the rights and organize strikes. They had to work for the social advancement of the labourers and other members of their families. For this purpose he placed before the labour organizations schemes of constructive work such as organization of crèches, day schools for the education of their children night classes for the adults, enforcement of prohibition, etc. The Ahmedabad Textile Labour Association, locally known as *Majoor Mahajan*, founded in 1918 by Gandhi himself, distinctly reflected Gandhian thoughts on the problems of labour, employer-employees' relations and method of tackling it (Gandhi 1949, 259–64).

Marxist writers, however, opine that Gandhi's views of capital-labour relationship was in real sense a theorization of the very naïve words of the Ahmedabad mill owners and this sophistry was trumpeted before the world as the novelty of Gandhian method for resolving labour-owner disputes. It was nothing but restraining the workers from the militant class struggle against the capitalists, promoting class peace and class collaboration and ultimately perpetuating the existing society based on capitalist exploitation (Sen 1977, 153). However, such blatant denigration of Gandhi's ideas is actually rather an over-simplification of a very complex process and therefore is open to serious criticism as our following narrative will unfold.

The Congress, for the first time, passed a resolution regarding labour in its 35th session held at Amritsar in 1919. It urged the provincial committees and other affiliated associations to promote labour unions throughout the country with a view to improving the conditions of the labouring classes and securing for them a fair standard of living and a proper place in the body politics of India (Ramanujam 1967, 14). Next year, in 1920, at Nagpur the Congress adopted an even more pointed resolution expressing the opinion that Indian labour should be organized with a view to improving and promoting their well being securing to them their just rights and also preventing the exploitation of Indian labour and Indian resources by foreign agencies and that the AICC should appoint a committee to take effective steps in that behalf (Ramanujam 1967, 16). Then came the Non Co-operation Movement (1920–22), at the clarion call of Gandhi which provided the indirect psychological background to a militant labour movement.

In Bengal, it started in the industrial complex around Calcutta where the ground had already been prepared by the Khilafat agitators. Started by carters, tramwaymen and taxi-drivers in the city and by workers in the jute mills, it spread to the colliery mining area of Western Bengal, and finally spread even to the far-off tea gardens in the Dooars and Darjeeling and Surma Valley (Bamford 1925). The Committee on Industrial Unrest in Bengal (1921) in its report mentioned altogether 137 strikes within a short period of July, 1920–March, 1921.<sup>1</sup> Thus the working class struggles had already reached their peak even before the Non Co-operation Movement was formally launched. This had led some scholars to conclude that the labour movement of Bengal of this period and the Gandhian Non Co-operation Movement differed in regard to timing and objectives.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the overall impact of the Non Co-operation Movement should not be underestimated.

One should specifically mention the roles of Gandhians in the coal- and tea-workers movement. In the Ranigunj coalfield, trade union activity was carried on energetically in January, 1921 by two Swamis, Viswananda and Darsanananda, with the active help of the Bengali and Marwari capitalists who were fighting with the European Managing Agencies for the control of the coal trade and mining. Deputed to the coalfields by a Labour Association formed at the Nagpur Congress in 1920, Swami

1. Report of the Committee on Industrial Unrest in Bengal, Calcutta, 1921.
2. See, for instance, Bose 1981.

Viswananda, Dip Narayan Singh and Chandra Bansilal Sahay formed two Labour Associations at Barakar and Ranigunj with the financial support of rich Marwaris (Ray 1974). The unequivocal government version was that the unrest in the coal area was almost entirely due to alien political elements.<sup>3</sup> Curiously the Swamis, the self-professed followers of Gandhi, in their speeches inculcated the “Bolshevik Principle” of equality between the rich and the poor (Ray 1974). But, in fact, the Non Co-operation agitators in the collieries did not aim their movement at the Indian capitalists, though their action scared Indian and European colliery owners alike (Ray and Ray 1977). All the ten reported strikes during the period took place in European collieries. The strikers, predominantly uneducated aboriginals and low caste men, looked upon Darsananda, a representative of Gandhi and a “god come to earth who will bring blindness, barrenness among women and flooding of its unless they followed his advice” (Ray 1974). The government was afraid of prolonged strikes in the coalfields.<sup>4</sup> Rumours of an impending general strike in the coalfields widely circulated even during the middle of the year 1921. The general economic unrest prevalent among the coalminers continued to be encouraged by the Non Co-operators but such a general strike eventually failed to materialize.<sup>5</sup> After 1922, the labour movement in the Ranigunj coalfields considerably weakened. The primary reason was that after the end of the Non Co-operation movement, the interest of the Congress agitators in labour affairs declined almost everywhere and the Bengal collieries were no exception. Further, it has been alleged that the trade union movement in Ranigunj collapsed due to misappropriation of union funds by Darsananda which utterly discredited him and the Gandhian non-co-operation in general (Ray and Ray 1977).

Also for the first time, a relationship between the nationalist movement and the labour movements in Darjeeling district was established during the Non Co-operation Movement. “Swaraj” was in the air among the Gurkhas though few understood what it meant. Dalbahadur Giri, a dismissed government servant and a local firebrand Congress leader of Kalimpong

3. GOB, Political Branch, F. No. 39/1921, D.O. Letter No. 20878, dated February 19, 1921 from the Chief Secretary, Government of Bengal to the Secretary, Home Department, Government of India.

4. GOB, Political Branch, F. No. 39/1921, D.O. Letter No. 156, dated January 28–30, 1921 from the Secretary, Home Department, Government of India, to the Chief Secretary, Provincial Governments.

5. GOB, Political Branch, Confidential F. No. S.C. 395/1924.

fomented agitation among the Gurkhas in the name of Gandhi. He popularized the slogan: “uproot the tea plants and grow maize or paddy instead”. Tea garden labour came to believe that British rule was soon to end and the hated tea-garden managers would also go. They began to measure up tea-gardens for division of cultivable lands among themselves.<sup>6</sup> The tea-garden planters alleged<sup>7</sup> that in 1921 paid agitators were sent by the Non Co-operation Organization in Bengal with the specific object of stirring up the tea-workers against the managers and proprietors. The government reports, however, showed that only sporadic unrest instigated by the Non Co-operators continued for some time and although in July 1921 there were several strikes, they were all spontaneous and unorganized without any direction from a Central Agency.<sup>8</sup> Even the Darjeeling Planters’ Association admitted that within a short time there was the complete collapse of the movement. Soon Giri was arrested and sometimes after his release he expired. With him, the agitation in the gardens also ended. In any case, the Gandhian movement, even if vaguely, carried a message of freedom to the Darjeeling tea labour, cut off from the outside world. But due to the lack of an organizational infrastructure, no trade union movement with the name grew out of this agitation.

Among tea garden coolies in the Dooars also, the first sign of unrest was visible during the years 1920–22, the Non Co-operators had been quick to take advantage of the economic discontent of the coolies. They urged the coolies to take over the land and management themselves. A wide-spread rumour to the effect that on a certain date conveniently moved forward from time to time, a terrible storm would destroy all those who had not then declared for Gandhi.<sup>9</sup> Prophecies were consistent with the cosmogonical belief-system of the aboriginal tribes from whom the Doors plantation labour was drawn. The Intelligence Branch reported<sup>10</sup> that labour unrest from the Darjeeling hill gardens spread further downhill in the Dooars in July, 1921 and later on in the month of February, 1922

6. Majumdar 1993, 16. See, also, *People’s Age*, 2.12.1945.

7. Report of the Royal Commission on Labour in India, Vol. VI, Part I, London, 1931, p. 49.

8. IB, 1921, Fortnightly Report of the Government of Bengal on the Political Situation 1921–22.

9. GOB, Political Branch, Conf. F. No. S.C. 395/1924, History of the N.C.O. Movement and the Khilafat Agitation in Bengal (Printed Report).

10. IB, 1921, Fortnightly Report of the Government of Bengal on the Political Situation 1921–22.

the unrest manifested itself in attempts to boycott tea garden hats in Jalpaiguri. The movement, however, proved to be sporadic in nature. A great deal was done to restore the confidence of the workers by concessions and propaganda undertaken by the Indian Tea Association. With the end of the Non Co-operation Movement, the Dooars tea workers again became dormant without any formal organization. But in Darjeeling and Doors, unionizations of workers were started by the Communists after two decades or more with the end of the World War II.

Apart from coal and tea numerous strikes took place in the jute mills of Bengal during 1920–21. Although the strikes were mostly due to economic reasons, the credit for organizing the jute mill labour politically should go primarily to the Khilafat workers. Orthodox Gandhian labour organizers were then few in number in Bengal. One such worker Pandit Krishna Kumar Shastri, living in Titagarh had been actively working since 1918 among the jute mill labour in the Barrackpore Sub-Division of the North 24-Parganas district. He saw Gandhi several times in Calcutta in January, 1921, held a large number of meetings in different places in the mill area and preached, among other matters, Hindu-Muslim unity, formation of arbitration courts, giving up liquor and toddy and boycott of law courts and foreign goods. Both Hindu and Muslim mill hands looked on him with respect.<sup>11</sup> After the end of the Non Co-operation Movement there was, however, no further report of Shastri's activities in the area.

The handling of the Surma Valley tea-garden labour exodus and the subsequent Eastern Bengal Railways and the Chandpur steamer strikes was regarded as the crowning success of the Non Co-operators in Bengal (Broomfield 1968). Historians and political observers, however, are sharply divided over the question that to what extent the Chandpur affairs can be regarded as a success of Gandhian principle of non co-operationism. According to one view point (Bamford 1925), the hardship faced by the striking coolies was solely due to the machinations of the nationalists. The nationalists were unable to protect the workers against the hardships that accompanied the strike and, as their primary objectives were political, they often neglected the real interests of the labour (Broomfield 1968). According to another viewpoint (R. Chatterjee 1974), the whole affair was a great victory of the BPCC over the Government. C.R. Das and the Provincial Congress under him had only translated the principles of the Nagpur reso-

11. IB, Calcutta, No. 1920, "The N.C.O. Movement in Bengal, January, 1921", Weekly Confidential Report from the S.P., 24-Parganas, dated 29.01.1921.

lution into practice and thus the elitist Congress was metamorphosed into a new national body championing the cause of the poor masses. Leading Gandhians of the day did not agree. When the difference of opinion between C.F. Andrews, the humanitarian, and C.R. Das, who politicized the Champur issue, came to the fore, Gandhi himself came in support of Andrew's stand. Gandhi wrote in *Young India*: "We seek not to destroy capital or capitalists, but to regulate the relations between capital and labours. We want to harness capital to our side. It would be folly to encourage sympathetic strikes."<sup>12</sup> Finally Gandhi arrived in Bengal in August, 1921 and strongly advised immediate calling off the strike. The advice was accepted.

Meanwhile, a small group of orthodox Gandhites within the BPCC who since the Nagpur Congress had reluctantly followed C.R. Das suspecting that he was not a true follower of Gandhi was confirmed in its suspicions by Das's encouragement of labour disputes. When in June, 1921 Das openly admitted that he was using the strikes in Eastern Bengal for political gain, the leader of the Gandhian group in Bengal, Professor J.L. Banerjee, resigned from the BPCC in protest. The rebels were supported by the Calcutta Marwaris, a group of "staunch Gandhites" in Bengal, who as employees were naturally opposed to strikes.<sup>13</sup>

It has been rightly suggested that the Bengal politicians of Das group having no substantial connection with the capitalist class of Bengal, who were either Europeans or Marwaris, were recklessly pushing their mass campaign among the labouring classes without giving much attention to constructive labour organization and trade union activity. Under these circumstances, the breach between the Working Committee of the All India Congress, dominated by the Gandhians and the BPCC under Das and his lieutenants began to widen.

The situation since the days of the Non Co-operation Movement in the early 1920s demanded that specific relationship between the political mass movement and the labour movement must be clearly defined (R. Chatterjee 1984, Ch. 4). There were clear suggestions that the Congress should be more positive and must do something to bring the working class into the movement led by it. But the Congress leadership was vertically divided in their opinion about the relationship between national movement and labour movement. One group led by C.R. Das was urging the Congress to act in unison with the working class and to create a genu-

12. *Young India* 1921 (no specific date available).

13. Government of India, Home (Pol) Deposit 46, June, 1921.

ine people's movement. For another group, led by Gandhi himself, this was an unproductive and hence unacceptable strategy, Gandhi was very few of the Congress leaders who opposed joining the AITUC since its inception in 1920. To the Indian National Congress, the issue posed a serious problem. If it adopted the line advocated by Das, it would create a very powerful movement no doubt but the process might unleash forces beyond its control. The inclusion of the working class would require a much greater recognition of the needs of the working class than its middle class leadership would find acceptable. Moreover, it would certainly alienate the indigenous industrialists, a large number of whom had been consistently financially helping the Congress. Das was defeated in this great debate and Gandhi's strategy of a close collaboration with the indigenous bourgeoisie prevailed.

An examination of the Congress resolutions from 1923 to 1930 shows that during these years, no resolution was adopted in the AICC in regard to labour (R. Chatterjee 1984, 135–36). The only exceptions were Motilal Nehru's resolution at the Gauhati Congress (1926), which emphasized the need for carrying out constructive programme of the Congress with special reference to the organization of labour, Gandhi's resolution in 1928 almost on the same lines, and another resolution in 1928 protesting against the Trade Disputes Bill and the Public Safety Bill, on the ground that the Bills would restrict the organized labour movement. Furthermore, a resolution moved by Sardar Patel and adopted by the AICC (Bombay, May, 1927) clearly ruled out the question of collaboration between the Congress and the AITUC — the apex body of the trade unions on the labour issues. This trend in the Congress policy continued up to 1934.

It was clearly revealed during the Civil Disobedience Movement days (1930–34) that compared to all other social classes, the organized labour as a whole all over India did not identify itself with the movement. Excepting a few instances in the Western India, the overall contrast with the days of Non Co-operation Movement a decade ago is glaring (Sarkar 1976). Professor Sumit Sarkar has rightly argued that the vastly enhanced role of distinctively bourgeoisie groups (i.e. merchants and traders) within the Congress in the All India plane accounted for the growing passivity of the Congress in regard to industrial proletariat.

The Gandhians were always a minority within the extremely faction-ridden Bengal Congress. But also the followers of C.R. Das, in spite of all his rhetoric could be of little importance in the mobilization of labour. Das's interest in labour work inspired many of his followers in Bengal initially. The Bengal Government's reports on labour activities in Bengal during the

period between December, 1922 and March, 1924<sup>14</sup> show that the BPCCC under the leadership of the Swarajya Party of Das intervened in almost every labour-employer dispute and seized the leadership of the labour in the province. But slowly and gradually a change came in the attitude of the Swarajists, particularly after the death of Das in 1925, Subhas Bose the de facto successor of Das, admitted that generally speaking the charges that the Congress had not been taking interest in labour struggles were justified.<sup>15</sup> Excepting the occasional individual initiatives of a few leaders like Subhas Bose, the Congress as an organization remained totally indifferent. As a natural corollary the impact of the newly established Communist Party was rapidly increasing upon the workers. The success of the leftist organized mammoth working class demonstration during the AICC session (December, 1928) in Calcutta made the Congress leadership including Gandhi himself alive to the danger of alienating the labouring masses. In the same AICC session, Gandhi himself drafted a resolution that was passed, laying down a program of work among city labourers (Brown 1977, 40). In pursuance of that, the BPCCC of which Bose was the President, passed a resolution deciding that “the labour movement shall have to be carried on irrespective of all question of Indian or foreign capitals, there shall be no distinction of capitalists on the score of nationality”. Such pious words, were however, never translated into deeds by the Congressites, whether Gandhian, non-Gandhian or anti-Gandhian.

### III

Things began to take a turn around the mid-1930s. This, however, was due more to the exigencies of the changing political scenario than any inherent change in Gandhian policy or philosophy. In the Karachi Session (1931) the Congress adopted a labour programme.<sup>16</sup> The resolution promised to the labour, in case of Swaraj, the following provisions: (a) a living wage for industrial workers, limited hours of work, healthy working conditions, protection against the economic consequences of old age, sickness and unemployment, (b) freedom of labour from conditions bordering on serfdom, (c) Protection of women workers including adequate provisions for maternity leave, (d) Prohibition against employment of children of

14. Government of India, Home (Pol) F. Nos. 25/1923, 25/1924 and 112/1925.

15. *Indian Annual Register*, Vol. 2 (1928): 25.

16. *Indian Annual Register*, Vol. 2 (1931).

school going age in factories and (e) right of labour to form unions to protect their interest with suitable machinery for settlement of disputes. But there was no question of implementing this policy as soon the Congress was declared an unlawful body.

After the ban on the Congress had been lifted, the Congress Working Committee, which met at Wardha in June, 1934, realized that the organization of labour should brook no delay and so advised responsible Congressmen to engage in constructive activities like organization of industrial labour (Lakshman 1947, 28–29). Meanwhile, the Government of India Act of 1935 provided for the first time election in the labour constituencies for provincial assemblies and the exigencies of electoral politics did not permit the National Congress to neglect the industrial workers any longer. In April, 1936, the Congress Working Committee formed a Labour Committee to keep in touch with labour movement, to help the workers to organize unions working on principles and policies of the Congress and to develop cooperation between the Congress and the labour movement. Actually, however, not much progress was made in that direction.<sup>17</sup> Then the election manifesto on which the Congress fought the provincial elections in 1937 stressed the right of labour to organize and to strike for the protection of their interests.

The election held in 1937 which established the Congress ministries in 7 out of 11 provinces increased the dilemma of the Congress High Command on the labour issue. The Congress could no longer remain idle by passing pious resolutions; it had to translate them in their day to day activities. Under these circumstances, a crisis developed between the Left Wing and the Right Wing of the Congress about the relation between the “mass organization” of the peasants and workers and the Congress organization. While the Right Wing discouraged mass politics, the Left wingers actively encouraged their growth and the formation of a national united front of all progressive elements under the Congress banner.<sup>18</sup>

The All India Congress Labour Committee stressed the urgent necessity of devising measures to implement the programmes envisaged in Congress election manifesto in respect of industrial workers in the Congress-ruled provinces and to foster the growth and development of healthy and strong trade union movements.<sup>19</sup> After much deliberation, the

17. AICC, File No. L.8–14 of 1937; also File No. G-24 of 1938 (NMML).

18. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 01.07.1937: Press Statement by J.L. Nehru.

19. AICC, File No. G-24 of 1938 (NMML).

Committee recommended a uniform programme with regard to labour (October, 1937).<sup>20</sup> No follow-up action of these proposals, however, was actually taken. Since 1938, the Labour Sub-Committee met infrequently. After the outbreak of the World War II and the consequent resignation of the Congress ministries (December, 1939), the Labour Committee became for all practical purposes defunct.<sup>21</sup> Perhaps the end, for the time being, of the necessity of adjusting the provincial administration to the growing labour movement was the main reason behind this.

As the Congress Labour Committee, established in 1936, composed of diverse political elements within the Congress and having to accommodate almost contradictory view points, failed to make any concrete impact, the orthodox Gandhians decided to have an exclusive labour organizations of their own with a definite ideology propounded by Gandhi, opposed to the path of class struggle. According to a resolution of the Working Committee of the Gandhi Seva Sangha (November, 1937), the organization of the Gandhian constructive workers, a Labour Sub-Committee was established in 1938 with headquarters at Ahmedabad. The aims of the Labour Committee aims included building up of effective organization of the industrial workers, securing the redressal of grievances of workers through mutual consultation between employers and employees or through arbitration where they could not amicably settle. If all the means of peaceful settlement failed, the Committee would organize strikes or other forms of suitable agitation, always to be based on truth or non-violence.<sup>22</sup> With effect from March, 1939, the Labour Sub-Committee was transformed into the autonomous Hindusthan Mazdoor Sangha. The organizers, however, later admitted that the actual activities of the Mazdoor Sangha were extremely limited.<sup>23</sup> Of the very few labour unions successfully formed on this line, there was not a single one in Bengal.

The Bengal politics differed in many respects from the all-India political pattern at that time. After the Provincial Assembly election of 1937, as it turned out, there was never to be a Congress Ministry in an undivided Bengal because of its peculiar communal composition. The disappointed Congress politicians of Bengal, Right or Left, Gandhians or Non-Gandhians had to turn to agitational politics willingly or unwillingly as their last resort.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

22. AICC, File No. G-56 of 1937-38 (NMML).

23. AICC, File No. P-1 (Pt. 2) of 1946 (NMML).

Meanwhile, a group of orthodox Gandhians (known as 'Khadi' group in Bengal political circles) led by Dr. Suresh Chandra Banerjee, who belonged to "Abhoy Ashrama" of Dr. P.C. Ghosh, a long-time member of the Congress Working Committee and all-India Executive Committees of various Gandhian organizations formed the BLA during 1934.

The BLA took up the trade union work among the workers particularly in the Calcutta Industrial area. But curiously enough unlike the Gandhians in Ahmedabad the BLA from the very beginning started working within the BPTUC with other leftist and Communist groups.<sup>24</sup> Like the Bengal Labour Party, the CPI (then banned and known as 'Ganasakti' group), the CSP, the Royists, the Ganavani group (or the Communist League), the Workers' League, etc. In the 1937 election Dr. Suresh Chandra Banerjee fought and won the Calcutta City and suburbs labour constituency on a Trade Union Congress ticket and joined Congress Parliamentary Party in the Assembly. The BLA with other leftist groups took part in many strike struggles of the day. There was little especially "Gandhite" in their activities which could differentiate them from other left groups.

The BLA had no organizational relationship with the Gandhi Seva Sangha or Hindusthan Mazdoor Sangha. Clearly opposed to the Gandhian idea, the BLA almost openly advocated labour uprising leading to mass revolution. Dr. Suresh Chandra Banerjee, delivering a speech (on the occasion of a rousing reception given to him after his release from long period of imprisonment) in October, 1937, declared that the establishment of the Majdoor Raj was an inevitable aim of workers movement and that it meant a total change of both the shape and substance of the present society. He proclaimed that the Congress and the labouring class scarcely differed as regards the basic aim of the freedom struggle. However, the Congress was a platform for both the rich and poor, but the trade unions should champion the cause of labour and aim at a class-less society.<sup>25</sup>

But in spite of such revolutionary talks, there were frequent allegations, not only by the rival trade union organizations but also in Intelligence Reports that the BLA had important Marwari and Bengali financiers who were interested in using the BLA for agitation in British concerns. According to a police report,<sup>26</sup> as early as in late 1938 the BLA leaders admitted privately that they were looked upon as a reactionary organization in Ben-

24. SB, File No. 929/35; Report on Communism in Calcutta by D.C., dated 09.04.1936.

25. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 25.10.1937.

26. SB, File No. 519/38 (Pt. II). Reports dated 23.09.1938, 25.10.1938.

gal and had been losing most of its influence over the workers in their old places of influence.

Another problem for the BLA group was the challenge thrown by the Muslim League Labour Minister Suhrawardy and his group who propagated among Muslim workers strongly against the anti-Muslim attitude of the Gandhi-led Congress. According to the Intelligence Branch reports,<sup>27</sup> the BLA leaders found that it was essential at the stage to conceal the BLA's connection with the Congress and to bring the non-political TUC colour more to the limelight. At the same time, they decided to preach against the tendency to mix religion with trade union politics and to employ more Muslim organizers to inspire the confidence of the Muslim workers. Such attempts, however, did not succeed much. All the Muslim workers reportedly left the BLA dominated Executive Committee of the Calcutta Electric Supply Workers Union and the Oriental Gas Workers Union and in some cases even the ordinary members had been demanding their subscriptions back. The Hindu leaders of the BLA were also chary of going about their normal trade union activities among the Muslim workers. Thus, by the end of the 1930s the division between the BLA and the Muslim workers of Bengal seemed to be complete. The position was not so pathetic to that extent for the leftist groups within the BPTUC.

Thirdly, the problem of the Gandhian labour organizers in Bengal reached its climax when the increasing Bose-Gandhi controversy particularly since 1938 ultimately led to Subhas Bose's suspension from the Congress (August, 1939). But Bose's forte was Bengal Congress. The BPCC was suspended and an ad-hoc committee was installed. Bose carried almost the whole Congress-supporting masses in the province with him. The official Congress was rendered mainly a paper organization in Bengal. The labour movement in Bengal was also not free from the effects of this division. In the labour front, the BLA the CSP and the CPI groups joined the official camp while the BLP and Forward Bloc sided with the suspended BPCC. Continued differences and dilemma were reported within the BLA throughout 1939 over the attitude to Bose and the split within the Congress. By the end of December, 1939, a final breach came within the ranks of the BLA. While after much dilemma, Suresh Chandra Banerjee, Deben Sen and some of their supporters remained within the official Congress, a section of important junior leaders like Dayaram Beri and Bolai Mohapatra sided with the Bose

27. SB, File No. 516/38, Report dated 15.08.1938.

Group.<sup>28</sup> The Gandhians found it impossible to carry on their propaganda in the emotionally surcharged political atmosphere of Bengal. Two labour sub-committees one dominated by the Bose Group and the other appointed by the official BPCC existed side by side. None of the rival BPCCs, however, had much concrete activities among workers. The BLA leaders were soon disillusioned with their short-lived honeymoon with the CPI.

Taking advantage of the cleavage between the CPI and the Boseites, the official Congress was anxious to strengthen itself through an alliance with the CPI. Accordingly the BLA and the CPI decided to work jointly for the BPTUC sponsored candidates, Ananta Sarkar (BLA) and Sakina Begum (CPI) for election to the labour seats in the Calcutta Corporation elections of 1940.<sup>29</sup> But by June, 1940, Dr. Suresh Chandra Banerjee was disillusioned in his hope of a joint action with the CPI under the banner of the BPTUC.<sup>30</sup> In August, 1940, he advised the BLA workers to increase the membership and strengthen the various unions on their own than to take part in the Communist-dominated BPTUC and desired to form a bloc in the Congress and labour fronts for fighting the Communists in future.<sup>31</sup>

Gandhi sanctioned in December 1940, a plan of Dr. Suresh Chandra Banerjee for a more extensive agitation amongst the labour. But the Government of Bengal noted with satisfaction in January, 1941, that no development had occurred in the labour fields as a result of the individual Satyagraha movement and there was every likelihood that the movement on the present<sup>32</sup> lines would not arouse any considerable interest in the future. Meanwhile, Dr. Banerjee had been arrested in January, 1941, in connection with the individual Satyagraha movement. Ananda Chowdhury of the Khadi group had been made the formal head of the BLA during Dr. Banerjee's absence.<sup>33</sup> In March, the BLA leaders decided that henceforth they would intervene only in those labour disputes where the workers so wished prior to their strike action.<sup>34</sup> The arrest and internment of the most of the prominent BLA leaders throughout 1941 put the Association almost in a moribund condition. It was feared that it would completely disinte-

28. SB, File No. 518/39, Reports of April, 1939, and January, 1940.

29. SB, File No. 518/40, Reports dated 08.03.1940, 09.03.1940.

30. SB, File No. 518/40, Reports dated 11.06.1940, 13.06.1940.

31. SB, File No. 518/40, Report dated 06.08.1940.

32. Government of India, Home (Poll) File No. 3/7/1940 of 1940, Appreciations from the Government of Bengal, dated 27.12.1940, 03.01.1941.

33. SB, File No. 518/41, Reports dated 09.02.1941, 22.02.1941.

34. SB, File No. 518/41, Report dated 02.03.1941.

grate if the rest of its organizers were also arrested. The BLA organizers decided mainly to keep the unions alive (such as among the daily workers of Kidderpore and workers of Kesoram Cotton Mill of Metiabruz and the jute mills of Budge Budge) as nothing more could be done at that stage and to keep themselves aloof from the active trade union activities.<sup>35</sup>

Then came the Quit India Movement of August, 1942. During the second half of August, 1942, strong and determined efforts were made to bring about strikes in factories all over Bengal. The BLA, which had virtually become the labour front of the official Congress, took the lead. The FB, CSP and RSP, for all practical purposes, worked together with the official Congress. Police reports indicated that Marwaris backed by G.D. Birla financed the contemplated strikes in mills and factories.<sup>36</sup> Important strikes during the period included those in the cotton mills of Hooghly (mostly under the Indian ownership), Keshoram Cotton Mills of the Birlas in Metiabruz and a large number of engineering concerns in Howrah and Calcutta (most of them being small Indian concerns). But almost everywhere the strikes had generally centered round demands of an economic nature on which negotiations were possible. Settlements were reached by mutual negotiations or through compulsory settlement, usually within a day or two and in some cases within a few hours.<sup>37</sup> Since the end of September, the labour situation in Bengal was rapidly returning to normal.

In short, in Bengal during the Quit India days, there was no militant political strike as in Jamshedpur or Ahmedabad, the two main centers of Gandhian labour movement. Even in cases of Jamshedpur and Ahmedabad, the critics of the 1942-movement argued that these were really not labour strikes but closures by the management with the help of the nationalist political workers. Almost everywhere in India, the indigenous industrialists supported the Quit India movement. As in Bengal the majority of the factories were European concerns, the agitators could not make much headway. Even in most Indian concerns, as the pro-war groups like the Communists were much stronger, the nationalists could not ensure any prolonged struggle.<sup>38</sup>

The Quit India days clearly showed the weakness of Gandhian labour organizers in Bengal. At the All-India level also, the activities of the Hindusthan Mazdoor Sangha came practically to a standstill since August, 1942,

35. SB, File No. 518/41, Reports dated 28.06.1941, 08.11.1941, 09.12.1941.

36. Government of India, Home (Poll), File No. 3/16/42, Poll. I: Daily Telegraphic Report from the Governor of Bengal to the Viceroy dated 19.08.1942.

37. Fortnightly Report, Bengal, August 2nd Half, 1942.

38. Fortnightly Report, Bengal, October 2nd Half, 1942.

with the arrest of almost all its prominent leaders and workers. After Gandhi's release (May, 1944), the Congressmen, who by that time were set free, turned to constructive work, which was possible for them to undertake in the prevailing circumstances. The organization of the industrial workers proved to be an ideal object in this respect. Gandhi held down a three-tier plan of action.<sup>39</sup> At one end, the Congress Committees would form their Labour Sub-Committees to promote political consciousness among industrial workers and to enroll them as primary members of the Congress. But direct participation in labour organization was not desirable for these committees. At the other end, there would be individual Congressmen taking part in the formation and conduct of unions which should be autonomous bodies without direct subordination to any political organization. In between there would be the Hindusthan Mazdoor Sevak Sangha, with its provincial and local branches, to coordinate the activities of the Congressmen engaged in labour work and to strengthen the link between the Congress and the labour. The Sangha would exercise influence in the labour movement through its members working in various unions but would not directly handle trade union work.

In short, the scheme presupposed that direct participation of the Congress as an organization in the labour movement would create tension between different interests within the Congress. It would also encourage other parties and groups to form rival unions fragmenting the working class and thus rendering it impotent in its struggle. But the degree and extent of risk would be much smaller if individual Congressmen would operate in the labour field. This arrangement would provide full scope for the representation of the official Congress view in the counsels of the trade union work, but involve no direct responsibility. The members of the Sangha were permitted also to maintain connection with the AITUC and it was hoped that the increasing number of Congressmen within the AITUC would reduce the Communist influence over it. This HMSS started functioning from March, 1945. As for the membership, admission was restricted by the process of cooption, beginning at the top, extending by successive stages, to the Local Branch. It was a clever device to keep the unwanted 'Congress' elements out who might enter and corrupt the 'body'.

The HMSS, regarded as serious Gandhian venture in the field of industrial labour, initially made very little progress in Bengal. In June, 1945,

39. AICC, File No. P-I (Pt. 2) of 1946: Hindusthan Mazdoor Sevak Sangha, An explanatory note by G.L. Nanda, Special Bulletin No. I (NMML).

a provincial Committee was formed consisting of Dr. P.C. Ghosh, Kiran Shankar Roy, Abalakanta Gupta, Dr. Provat Kumar Roy, and Dr. Maitreyi Bose (Convenor). It was resolved that the Sangh would fight vigorously against the Communists, the Imperialists, and the capitalist mill-owners. At the end of June, the Sangha was said to have opened 9 branches and to have enlisted 65 pledged workers. But in December, 1945, it was reported that Dr. Maitreyi Bose resigned as a result of a quarrel with Dr. Suresh Chandra Banerjee who by this time had come out of jail.<sup>40</sup>

The Bengal HMSS, in addition to being rent by internal dissensions between the orthodox Gandhites versus the rest, had very limited support and could claim only one group of any importance, i.e. the BLA group of Dr. Suresh Chandra Banerjee. The labour organizers of the Jugantar and the CSP groups of the Congress were unwilling to collaborate with the HMSS because they considered it was far too much under the influence of the Khadi group.<sup>41</sup>

With the termination of the World War II (August, 1945), the old group of Gandhian labour leaders (BLA) came out after long periods of imprisonment and tried to recapture the labour field lost to the Communists during their absence. At the same time, a wave of strikes and labour unrest swept Bengal, most of which sponsored by the Communists. Then came the general election of March, 1946. The Congress won 5 out of 8 labour seats in Bengal Assembly, including all the factory-labour and colliery constituencies. Despite the fact that there was not much Congress activity among the labour and that the labour was so far apathetic to the Congress-organized movements, the landslide victory of the Congress in the labour-seats is rather surprising. This may be partly explained in terms of victory of mass appeal of the Congress in the prevailing atmosphere of the anti-Imperialist struggle over the "organization-oriented" tactics of the Communists who at that time were labeled as anti-nationalists.

The Provincial elections (March, 1946) resulted in the formation of Congress ministries in 8 out of the 11 provinces. But as in 1937, again in Bengal the Congress had to sit on the opposition. The increasing labour militancy almost all over India put the provincial ministries in great difficulty. Under these circumstances, the Congress Working Committee at its meeting at Wardha in August, 1946, passed two significant resolutions.<sup>42</sup> In

40. IB, Review of the Revolutionary Matters by the DIG, dated 20.12.1946.

41. IB, Review of the Revolutionary Matters by the DIG, dated 14.11.1946.

42. AICC, File No. P-1 (Pt. 2) of 1946 (NMML) Wardha Resolutions, 13.8.1946.

one resolution, in the context of intensifying labour militancy the Working Committee called upon the Congressmen to develop further contacts with the labour and “to discriminate between occasions on which labour action deserves their support and those which called for restraints and discussions”. By the other resolution, the Working Committee also proposed the formation of a Central Agency in order to encourage and coordinate the efforts of the Congressmen in the field of labour organization and recommended to the Congressmen to make the fullest use of the facilities provided by the Hindusthan Mazdoor Sevak Sangha in this respect.

The HMSS initially worked on an assumption that it could perform its role as labour organization by remaining within the AITUC. Its Central Board passed a resolution in November, 1946, advising all Unions under its influence to affiliate in the AITUC.<sup>43</sup> They also tried to effect such changes in its constitution as would bring the AITUC, to conform to the ideology and policy of the HMSS. But it was soon felt that such attempts were bound to be futile as the AITUC was practically dominated by the Communists. So, finally, the Congress willy-nilly had to come to the decision of setting up a distinctly separate trade union organization of its own.

As early as in May, 1946, Dr. Suresh Chandra Banerjee had proposed that the HMSS in Bengal should sever its ties with the BPTUC. But that was rejected by other Congress groups on the ground that if the Congress Unions withdrew from the TUC, they would be dubbed as anti-Communist and pro-capitalist. They should, therefore, remain affiliated to the TUC until a labour organization was formed by the Congress. In the same month, Dr. Banerjee, at a meeting of his supporters, advised that as essentially Congress supporters they should forthwith substitute for their former policy of class struggle, a policy of class collaboration in conformity with the ideas of the Congress.<sup>44</sup> In February, 1947, the BPCC set up a Labour Sub-Committee to co-ordinate the labour work of the Congress and to preach Congress ideals among labourers.<sup>45</sup> In a press statement in the 1st week of March, 1947, Deven Sen, Secretary of the then BPCC Labour Sub-Committee, suggested that another TUC “democratically created and purged of all undesirable influence be formed to counter the Communist-packed TUC”.<sup>46</sup> At a meeting of the BPCC Labour Sub-Committee held on March 15, it was decided to support the move for the formation of a

43. AICC, Papers.

44. SB, File No. 548/36, Report dated 24.05.1946.

45. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 06.02.1947.

46. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 08.03.1947.

parallel TUC. But at a representative workers' meeting held on March 23, it was decided that as the National Congress had not yet taken any definite decision with regard to the formation of a separate TUC, there was still no bar to any Congressman working in the BPTUC. But a decision to snap all ties with the TUC might be taken at any moment and all the Congress workers should be ready for that eventually.<sup>47</sup>

The move by the Bengal Gandhians to have a separate trade union can be explained in the light of overall political development. With the impending independence and the partition of Bengal, the Congress was sure to come to power for the first time in the new province of West Bengal. So, they could no longer afford to support agitational trade union politics which they had done so long and must follow the examples already set by their counterparts in other Congress-ruled provinces and the ideals which Gandhi himself had preached so long.

Finally, the INTUC, under the direct patronage of the Congress High Command, came into being (May, 1947). The INTUC set its program apparently on the Gandhian line. Dr. Suresh Chandra Banerjee from Bengal became its first all-India President, Ahmedabad Textile Labour Association, founded by Gandhi, which so long kept aloof from the central trade union organizations now joined and functioned as the main plank of the INTUC.

The Bengal branch of the INTUC consisting of 150 unions with a claimed total membership of over 100,000 workers was formed at a convention of representatives of various trade unions on June 1st, 1947. A provincial Executive Committee was formed.<sup>48</sup> Yet the BPNTUC also could not be regarded as a complete, homogenous body working on Gandhian principles. Different factions within it vied with one another like the former BLA Group (known as orthodox "Khadi" group), the Jugantar Group, the group led by Maitreyi Bose and Kali Mukherjee, group of Niharendu Dutt Majumdar of the erstwhile Bengal Labour Party and a group owing allegiance to the new set of leadership of the WBPCC (commonly called as "Hooghly group"). In the public eyes, in spite of all its apparent numerical strength, the BPNTUC remained an "official trade union" backed by capitalists. Within a couple of years, orthodox Gandhian like Suresh Chandra Banerjee and Deben Sen had to secede both from the Congress Party and the INTUC.

47. IB, Review of the Revolutionary Matters by the DIG, April, 1947.

48. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 02.06.1947.

## IV

Certain basic points clearly emerge from the above chronological narration. Gandhism never appealed to the majority of the Congressmen in Bengal who came mostly from the Hindu upper caste educated Bhadrakol community and had bias in favour of revolutionary terrorism. As a result, orthodox Gandhians remained a small minority within the Bengal Congress.

During the 1921, Non Co-operation Movement, the myth of Gandhism, had a special attraction for the aboriginal teagarden and colliery workers of Bengal. Using the name of Gandhi, but not necessarily following his instructions or guidelines, local leaders led these workers into strikes. But after the failure of the Non Co-operation Movement, the name of Gandhi had lost its magic appeal.

The Bengal Congress under the leadership of C.R. Das and dominated by the Radical Nationalists, opposed to Gandhi, had a grandiose plan of labour mobilization in the early 1920s. But eventually nothing could materialize and the leftists, particularly the Communists, came to fill the void.

Since 1934, some of the orthodox Gandhians founded the Bengal Labour Association, but their activities remained un-Gandhian. They paid only lip-service to Gandhi, did not follow Gandhi's constructive programme of labour organization and remained just as one of the many groups of labour organizations in Bengal.

With the end of the World War II, Gandhi and his followers on the all-India plane made some shifts in their labour policy as evident from the formation of the HMSS (1945) and the subsequent development leading to the formation of another central trade union — the INTUC. Only at the post-World War II period, the Bengal Gandhians for the first time merged with their all-India counterparts. But still the Gandhians remained an insignificant faction in the complex situation of the Province. Devoid of any constructive programme, they were dubbed as a group fostered by the indigenous capitalists. Gandhians in Bengal failed to produce anything comparable to labour organizations of Ahmedabad or Jamshedpur.

Gandhi postulated the workers' own organization with multifarious activities under their own leadership but completely of non-political character. Gandhi wrote in 1921: "It is dangerous to make political use of factory labourers or of peasantry — not that we are not entitled to do so, but we are not ready for it."<sup>49</sup> In 1927, he wrote: "Labour must not become

49. *Young India*, 09.02.1921.

a pawn in the hands of politicians on the political chessboard.”<sup>50</sup> This was exactly what the labour became in Bengal as in most other parts of India in the subsequent decades and the Gandhians along with others had no small share in making them so.

#### ABBREVIATIONS

AICC	All India Congress Committee
AITUC	All India Trade Union Congress
BLA	Bengal Labour Association
BPCC	Bengal Provincial Congress Committee
BPNTUC	Bengal Provincial National Trade Union Congress
BPTUC	Bengal Provincial Trade Union Congress
CPI	Communist Party of India
CSP	Congress Socialist Party
DIG	Deputy Inspector General of Police
FB	Forward Bloc
GOB	Government of Bengal
HMSS	Hindusthan Mazdoor Sevak Sangha
IB	Intelligence Branch (Bengal Police)
ICSSR	Indian Council of Social Science Research
INTUC	Indian National Trade Union Congress
NMML	Nehru Memorial and Museum Library
RSP	Revolutionary Socialist Party
SB	Special Branch (Calcutta Police)
TUC	Trades Union Congress
WBPC	West Bengal Provincial Congress Committee

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