
Impact of Rail Labour Movement in Bengal (1906-1975)

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Abstract: *The railway workers of Bengal emerged as a new force in the socio-political scene that greatly affected the destiny of the wage-earners of our country. For consolidating such gains, they were subjected to severe hardships and punishment. Their wages were very low but their working hours were too long. They operated in an alien enterprise under the conditions of colonial submission, discipline and race domination. There were generally two types of Indian labour classes. One was the illiterate non-Bengali labour class and the other, though few, local Bengali rail labour. These workers mostly migrated from their villages and took up railway jobs as a temporary support. As soon as the opportunity offered itself they went back to their villages. There was no proper class consciousness among the workers. The migratory nature and village nexus prevented them from realising the need of trade unionism in the beginning. Once their local grievances were redressed or partly redressed, the unity of the labour association ceased to exist or became non-existent.*

Keywords: *Labours, Migrated Workers, Modernisation, Nationalism, Wokers, Struggle*

Date of Submission: 17-05-2022

Date of Acceptance: 26-05-2022

Introduction

Rail labourers composed of men, few women and children who formed a kind of travelling community of their own under a species of government peculiar to themselves with laws and customs which they follow and observe wherever they go. These itinerant, coveted groups of rail labourers circulated from one worksite to another. Circulating labour, migration of labourers, and the impact on their family, marital life statuses, society, language, culture, political impact, rail labour movement versus nationalism, economic

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impact all are considered within the limelight of impact of rail labour movements on the society, economy and politics of Bengal during 1906-1974.

The creation of an industrial zone based on railway attracted a huge amount of labourers to Bengal from Bihar, Orissa and U.P. These labourers were migrant labourers who came to Bengal in search of a job which promised them more income than immediate other labour jobs available. Among the impact or effect of rail labour movement in Bengal the most significant was labour migration.

These migratory labourers brought with them their language, food habits, their lifestyle, their dress patterns, and their cooking styles which led to acculturation. Bengali labour culture mixed with the cultures of U.P., Bihar and Orissa and a new ethnic set of lifestyle grew up. State-centrism in which migration was seen to be that which occurred across state borders triggered largely by state action and encouraged by state policies. This led to voluntary labour migration within or across state borders. The concept of modernization-centrism also can be focused on migratory labour during the process of modernization. 1906-1947 was the period of intensified state building in Bengal. State-centrism was intensified and the connection of migration with more recent and disruptive socio-economic change was reinforced. Thus, earlier manifestation of migration was proto-industrial, predominantly agrarian societies with pre-industrial forms of capitalism and different political structures receive less attention.

The migratory streams are studied from economic and cultural factors. State-centrism was a pronounced predisposition as was modernization-centrism. The focus is on rural migration to the industrialising cities – modernization – centrism – emphasises novelty and discontinuity. The increased presence of migrant labour was attributed to unpleasant changes, uprooting unleashed in the colonial period that forced people out of their hitherto harmonious, stable, economically supportive agrarian existences located in the sedentary worlds of thousands of peasant villages.

Indeed a pervasive myth tied to a powerful ideology works to deny the change and mobility of people that characterised pre-colonial India. Modernization-centrism and state-centrism reinforced that myth. The ideal of a harmonious, stable, communitarian Hindu India living in a state of contentment until disrupted by Muslim invasions and British colonialism was a component of Hindutva ideology. The pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial reality was very different from the sedentary myth. Marriage arrangements and hence kin networks—normally extended beyond the borders of a single village, pilgrimages and periodical fairs (secular, religious and both) drew people out of their villages. Itinerant traders and artisans came to the village to sell goods and services, poor peasants and landless labourers found seasonal employment outside their residential village or migrated permanently to nearby or distant places.

Others moved from urban place to urban place. Circulation, not immobility, needs to be a fairly general framework within which to look at Indian society and the transformation it underwent in the modern period needs to be focused. Circulating labour moved to varied temporal rhythms and across different expanses of space. Some were daily commuters (daily migrants). There were permanent departures from a single male to a specific permanent place in distant part of Bengal and also frequent

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movement from one worksite to another within an Indian region of a family or groups of similar workers belonging to the same caste or tribe. Boundaries were often blurred. Itinerants often travelled in family groups.

Ten million or so workers were needed to build India's railways between 1850 and 1900 and large numbers continued to be needed. Railway construction at any given spot often required many migrant labourers among whom many were *Wudders* and similar groups. The *Wudders* were prized by railway engineers and contractors for their formidable earth and stone-working capacities. *Wudders* were among those present at the construction of the East Coast state Railway's Kistna Bridge at Bezwada. The railway building was a labour-intensive activity that continued until 1947 and beyond. India had about 23,627 route miles of railway in 1900 and 40,524 in 1947. India alone has 40,000 route miles in 2001 and construction of 6,500 new miles of track was needed. Moreover the closing decades of the twentieth century saw Indian railways convert many miles of meter-gauge into the more prevalent broad gauge which needed a good deal of construction-type itinerant labour. Railways, hydraulic projects and irrigation dams, underground railways in Calcutta and Delhi, ensured the continued demand for construction workers in post-colonial India. The construction of Bengal railways needed massive waves of expansion and also construction since 1947, a development spurred by the 1947-1948 influxes of refugees and subsequent massive population growth of Bengal.

The most constructive work in the pre-colonial colonial or post-colonial periods were labour market involving circulating labour. Migrant labour often stabilized yet wage rates and flattened labour supply curves. A railroad engineer wrote in the late 1990s that 30 years earlier, in the 1960s, contractors and agents used to bring gangs from Orissa, Bihar and U.P. to Bengal, after paying an advance to the workers' families and village headmen. Able-bodied people from entire villages were brought in to work almost 16 hours daily, breaking up only for meals. Mobile and accustomed to waged work, the itinerant rail workers initially adapted easily to the changing conditions of the colonial period. They became enmeshed in the relationship of capitalism. Ecological, social, legal and economic pressures in twentieth century led to the sedentariness of railway workers.

In addition to the importance of circulating labour within construction labour markets, these groups traversed over jagged terrain that threw within the transitions of capitalism and the emergence, maintenance, demise of formal colonialism. The more pronounced fluidity captured in the term of circulating labour gave way to patterns of mobility perhaps better understood as varieties of migrant labour wherein longer term residence becomes interspaced with periods of movement.¹

The term working-class is generally used in the Indian context simply with a sense of industrial wage-earners as a distinct social group and not in the classical Marxian sense of a class. It was primarily with the intrusion of metropolitan capital and launching of enterprises—mostly colonial—like plantation,

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collieries, jute textiles, engineering concerns, cloth textiles and steel foundries. In the second half of the nineteenth century, this new social class—the industrial working-class emerged in India. The census report of as late as 1931 only roughly estimated that probably 50 lakhs may be fairly taken as the figure of organised labour in India in 1931. The demographic base was totally shaken due to these circulating labour or labour migration. Areas from where the workers came were the catchment areas. From the available statistics found in the Census Report, it can be clearly inferred that there was no scarcity of labour in India except for some sharp period or in some specific regions. Rather the problem was one of labour abundance, particularly of unskilled or semi-skilled labour.

As for Eastern India where most of the industries were set up in Metropolis around Calcutta the shift from local Bengali labour to non-local labour coming from Bihar, U.P. and Orissa had become conspicuous by the turn of the twentieth century. As a result, the industrial labour class of Bengal was formed of isolated social groups without any form of identification or contact with the rest of the population. The social alienation of the industrial workers was a greater problem in Bengal than even in Bombay where despite tensions between the Konkani and Deccan regions the majority of the workers were recruited from the same province but in Bengal railways the bulk of the workers belonged to the Hindi and Urdu linguistic groups mostly migrants from U.P. and Bihar constituted exotic groups. As regards the caste composition of the labour force, the Census provides some data on the incorporation of skilled to unskilled labour among different castes in various industries. A great proportion of this labour force came from the untouchables, the so-called low-caste groups. The tribals or aboriginals were usually looked upon as *jungle* (uncivilized) set apart from the society. Bulk of unskilled/semi-skilled jobs in the factories were done by the untouchables or low-caste persons and tribals.²

Hardly any studies have so far been made to show how and when certain caste/groups became the principal if not the only source of different types of labour in different industries. Only certain broad hypothesis can be suggested regarding the clustering of some social, occupational and linguistic groups that took place not only in individual industries but also in certain departments. The domination of the workers by the *Sirdars*, the roots of their control, and the ‘primordial loyalties’ of the workers based on loyalties of the workers to the *Sirdars* all are to be explained by the clustering.

As for the structure of the labour market even within the limited capitalist industrial sector, a single undifferentiated national market for labour supply did not emerge in fragmentation and multiplicity of market structure did not necessarily and inevitably lead to the development of separate and autonomous markets. There were several and different migrations of labour towards Bengal of which some were complementary to each other, some others were competitive while others were unrelated to each other. The labour catchment area or the migrant areas in Western districts of Bihar were Gaya, Patna, Shahabad, Sarang, Muzaffarpur to Bengal and adjoining Eastern districts of U.P. like Azamgarh, Ballia, Ghazipur,

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Banaras and Jaunpur. Both the Duars tea gardens and coalmines of Raniganj depended on tribal and semi-tribal elements from Chota Nagpur and surrounding areas. Wage differentials were not only between different regions and sub-regions but between industries.

Two aspects determined the nature of the labour market structure. On the supply side, due to the existence of an essentially labour surplus agrarian economy, the excess labour faced a choice between survival at any cost or starvation (death).

It weakened the bargaining power of the labour. On the demand side, the employers enjoying almost monopolistic position where employers formed close groups, they succeeded in eliminating competition in the buyer's market backed by the government. The major component of Bengal rail labour was recruitment of labour from distant places. Another component was that labour was subjected to non-market mechanism of exploitation.

The last but not the least important aspect was the dual nature of the industrial working-class. The Indian Factory Labour Commission of 1907-08 noted in its report that the habits of the Indian factory operative are determined by the fact that he is only primarily an agriculturist or a labour on the land; in almost all the cases his home is in the village from which he comes and not in a city in which he labours. His wife and family ordinarily continue to live in that village. He regularly remits a portion of his wages there, he returns there periodically to look after his affairs and obtain rest after hazards of factory life. Also the Royal Commission of Labour, 1929 had found that the Indian worker remained only partially committed to industrial life. Half of his mind was in the village from where he had come. High labour turnover and absenteeism was cited as evidence of this. Thus, even after more than 50 years of its existence, the industrial labour force appears to have only partially accepted a discipline of an industrial society. This rural-urban dichotomy continued even at the end of the colonial period. This trend was particularly evident in times of any protected strikes or struggle when a large number of workers flocked to their native places. The growth of mill towns around Calcutta with a huge concentration of labour in a circumscribed area did not lead towards the emergence of a settled labour force. Curious feature of the industrial workforce in Calcutta was its migrant character manifested in the constant to and from flow of workers from the villages to the towns.³

From his careful, in-depth study, and comprehensive understanding, Karl Marx came to the conclusion that the modern proletariat was a historical category which came into being along with the emergence of the capitalist mode of production. Engels developed the same idea when he stated that it was only at the dawn of modern times when the expropriation of peasantry on a large scale laid the foundation to force the modern class of wage workers to possess nothing but only labour power and they can live only by selling labour power to others. Marx and Engels sharply challenged those who tended to forget class distinction

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and scope about producers, the people or working people in general. Engels said the proletarian class was the working-class of the nineteenth century different from slaves, serfs, handicraftsmen, manufacturing workers, etc. Marx and Engels never treated the working-class mechanically as something which appeared and assumed its full shape overnight, immediately after the Industrial Revolution. Their perception of working-class consciousness was not something operative. The modern working-class, which first appeared on the scene after the Industrial Revolution, developed through different stages. Formation of a class conscious working-class is a long-drawn process which had variations in countries depending on the pace of industrialisation, society structure, etc.

Generally there are 3 stages in the development of the working class—firstly, passive resistance mass ill flogged, ill coherent, scattered over the whole country and broken up by mutual competition. Secondly, working class as a growing factor in economic and social study, when they begin to feel as a class against bourgeoisie and become aware of the oppression, they begin to form combination and resist.

Thirdly, the working-class as the vanguard of the working people. According to E.P. Thompson, a comparison can be drawn between the working-class of England and working-class in India. In India, as E.P. Thompson argues, the industrial working-class constituted a minority and where there was an enormous preponderance of peasant population. Even in India countries like this where class does emerge as a distinct historical category plays a formidable role. The British model of working-class, the Russian working-class or in China and Cuba had totally different models.

There has also been a conflict between capital and labour where capital always won.⁴

According to Morris De Morris, the focus of analysis shifted from social protest to social administration, from horrors of industrialisation to an analysis of tackling new problems with many dimensions like the problem of mobilizing the labour force, their adjustment to new technology, questions of discipline and so on. The nationalist historians had visualised the workers as passive supporters of the national movement. In their analysis, the independent role of working-class was one of the motif forces of history was totally missing. It was the Marxists who made the first attempt to organise the working-class on radical lines. Their main purpose was to inject in the working-class a new consciousness about the historical role it was destined to play. Thus, the working-class born was bound to develop a class for itself. Trying to correct this imbalance, the exponents of the Subaltern school go to the argument that at the consciousness of the work, a working-class proper emerges. The relationship between the bourgeois and the workers build up a new stereotype. The Subaltern scholars stress more on the criminal activities of the working-class, their righteous behaviour, casteist communal outlook, collective action as working-class.

This feudal pre-capitalist cultural setting in this organisation based on principles remained confined to the *Babu-Coolie* relationship. Notwithstanding the peculiarities of the development of the working-class

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reveals that the core of an industrial proletariat had formed. The fact cannot be denied that the working-class has proceeded by stages from their initial form based on purely economic study to political consciousness. By 1911, the working-class demanded recognition as a distinctly new class, a new social force in Indian history.⁵

The phrase working-class movement is used to designate all of the organised activity of wage-earners to better their conditions either immediately or in the more or less distant future. By its very nature the word 'movement' signifies a dynamic process having its own origin, growth, development, progress and recessions propelled by changes in the structure of relations. Modern trade unionism was essentially a product of the factory system of production, the capitalistic order of society. Modern factories or industries employ a large number of persons. The employees have some common problems like low wages, conditions of employment, security of service, housing, social security and democratic control of industry. They have an opportunity to discuss these problems to find a common solution and take a common stand. The impersonal employer-employees relationship, the increasing profits of the employers, low wages and poor standard of living of the workers, created a class consciousness amongst them and prompted the workers to organise and resort to collective action.⁶ This collective action of workers employed in the profit earning industries was known as the working class movement.

The effort at defining "working-class movement" would always be fraught with difficulties because there cannot be any unanimity as regards the goals and methods and even the origin of the movement. Working-class movement has been defined as an organised and continuous effort on the part of the wage-earners to improve their standards of living over a national area. The outward and visible signs of this movement are trade unions, national federations, strikes, boycotts, lockouts, labour leaders, labour conferences and programmes, injunctions, legal battles, prosecutions, cooperative societies, labour and socialist parties, a labour press and labour propaganda, the participation of labour in partisan politics, labour lobbies in legislature and labour colleges and educational experiments. Labour movement is marked by growing sympathy among all crafts, trades and classes of workers.

In this discussion the workers employed for various works and exploited by the British-owned Bengal-Nagpur Railway authorities have been designated as the railway working-class.⁷

The railwaymen of Kharagpur were a peculiar category of wage slaves. They operated in an imperial enterprise under conditions of colonial submission, discipline and race domination. They were recruited from a cross-section of the population. In their social affiliations they integrated into the urban middle-classes and petty bourgeoisies, the industrial and rural labour force, the migrant peasant and the tribal. One

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of the most important features was the fact that most of the workers recruited for railway works at or adjacent to Kharagpur were the outsiders.

The BNR authorities expected that the local unskilled workers would be available soon and the labour question at Kharagpur would doubtless become easier every year as Kharagpur expanded and became known. To attract the local people at the very beginning in the railway works, lines were erected to suit the different classes, so as to house the whole of the staff. It was noticeable that the only lines not fully occupied were those that were rent-free and mainly built for unskilled poor labourers. The poor unskilled workers and the coolies for whom mainly the free lines were provided were said to prefer to live in the villages nearby. Local people were not generally recruited. Most of the workers of Kharagpur employed for the construction of the newly established junction station and workshops were recruited by the contractors under the sanctions of the Bengal-Nagpur Railway authority mostly from the poorer districts of the-then Madras Presidency, Bihar, and U. P. and some other parts of India.⁸

In the early twentieth century, India witnessed a famine and plague which devastated large areas of Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, Bihar, which were found to be the most suitable fields for recruitment where more than one lakh had people perished. The contractors of the Bengal-Nagpur Railway at Kharagpur were mostly from South India. They brought the labourers for the railway work at Kharagpur at a very low wage from these famine-stricken areas. Even A.C. Carr, the Works Manager of Kharagpur was thinking of using Chinamen since there was no local population to draw on, unlike Jamalpur where guns used to be manufactured. Besides, that, the white people of the railway establishment had been terrorised by the unrest of the local people. They witnessed the land as a land of revolt and unrest. There was a persistent trend of a formidable rebellious spirit, particularly in the Paik and Chuar tracts founded on all sides. This was the tract inhabited largely by the lowest of the low—the most oppressed and dispossessed people who would rapidly turn formidable at short notice.⁹

The British people thought it unwise to recruit the rebellious local people in the railway works though they took steps near the beginning to recruit the local people. Moreover, the European Zamindars of Midnapore in the north to a great extent objected to join the local people as labour in the BNR as they needed the Santal labour for jungle clearing and cultivation. Naturally, at the very beginning of the twentieth century the emigrated people of the Kharagpur area totally outnumbered the indigenous population. However, the natives of the district were not interested to be employed in the railways as they were primarily concerned with their agrarian works. Moreover, the construction of the railways had swallowed up their arable lands and destroyed the forests which were the chief sources for their livelihood.

They also thought it more prestigious to work on their own arable lands than to work in the newly established railway controlled and directed by the alien people. They hated the workshop or factory, not only because it was hateful place in which they had to work terribly long hours under terribly evil

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conditions and subject to a rigid and uncongenial discipline but also because it was new-fangled and had been the principal means of destroying the accustomed ways and means of life. Bengal railway centre was characterised by the concentration of a heterogeneous labour force belonging to a variety of racial and language groups.¹⁰ The British-owned Bengal Railway authorities thought that the railway workers of Bengal with their various racial, ethnic, linguistic background were to be separated from each other and thus to be alienated from the socio-political current of Bengal.

The report of the Indian Factory Labour Commission of 1908 correctly stated that the Indian factory operatives were primarily farmers. The rail worker remits a portion of his wages to his family in the village and returns there periodically to look after his affairs and obtains rest after the strain of factory life. A few of them brought their females with them. But most of them formed alliance (a kind of temporary marriage) with women working in the construction work of the neighbouring villages. The result of these alliances had been an increase in population of composite nature. This population too dependent entirely on the railways for its support as they were entirely landless. These people were of strong character and determination in realising their demands in the railways as they began to realise that they had nothing to lose except their jobs or lives. It is a fact that majority of the workers of Bengal railways came from outside Bengal. Few local people also joined as railway labourers who were mostly illiterate and came from the lowest sections of the society. They ranked low in the social hierarchy of the village community. The condition of the work for them in the villages where they enjoyed fixed positions in the community was far better than the irksome job of the factory towns. They were forced under acute economic circumstances to leave their ancestral home and hearth and seek employment in an unknown industrial centre where custom was replaced by contract, cooperation by competition, the intimate village neighbourhood by impersonal relations and anonymity, and the security provided by the family by insecurity and unemployment. The railway industry in Bengal with its multi-regional proletarian composition created some problems of racial and linguistic complexities. It created a gulf of difference between the two sections of Bengali and non-Bengali workers. It created differences in caste, language, creed, culminating in mutual distrust and dishonour. Some Bengali workers refused to cooperate with the people of other provinces; in some cases they refused to bathe in the same well or drink water from the same well. Yet, in spite of such differences, at times of sporadic strike movements, they became united and fought for their own needs with strong hands and joint voices.¹¹

The Royal Commission surveyors were perplexed by the tendency of the average labourer to include all relations as members of his family. The Commission preferred to include only co-resident kin as part of the family excluding family members who lived in the village, despite the evidence of remittances to the

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villages, the inflow of food supplements into the city, and the seasonal visits of workers to their village homes. A family of the workers defined in these terms thus excludes members closely tied through emotional and material interests but residentially separated. There is a likelihood of under representation of joint families in official representations that implicitly accept such a definition.

The Royal Commission evidence shows a variation in the relative distribution of joint and nuclear families according to income groups. In the higher income groups, those earning Rs. 40-50 per month, 71% of the families were joint, while in the lower income groups, those earning Rs. 30 and below, the percentage fell to 50%. Higher income groups, according to the Royal Commission, could afford to maintain larger households.

Workers in the lower income groups, the Commission reported, 'keep a larger number of family members away at home'. Economic conditions thus had an obvious bearing on household strategies, poorer working class families finding it prudent to keep most family members in the village. Income categories in family surveys done by the households, they did not take into account the earnings of other income level of males. For many families, the earnings of women were crucial to survival strategies in the city.¹²

Dipesh Chakraborty portrayed labourers with their perceptions defined by ties of religion and region—they are Muslims, Hindus, Bengalis, and Oriyas. The rail worker was like a child vis-à-vis the *ma-baap*—the managers or as an ordinary coolie vis-à-vis the trade union *babu*. The question of identity seems unproblematic because certain given structures of ideas remain constant and unaffected by every day events, by location and cultural content, by changing relations between the self and the world. To the immigrants, the city meant trauma, hardship, a yearning to go back to their familial roots.

This reconfirms the stereotype of the peasant rooted to the village, the conventional notions of the reluctant peasant worker being pushed to the city. Romanticised representations of rural life tend to gloss over hardships of the past. Besides, nostalgia for the village coexisted with an attraction towards the city.¹³

Conclusion

The railway workers of Bengal emerged as a new force in the socio-political scene that greatly affected the destiny of the wage-earners of our country. For consolidating such gains, they were subjected to severe hardships and punishment. Their wages were very low but their working hours were too long. They operated in an alien enterprise under the conditions of colonial submission, discipline and race domination. They were recruited from a cross-section of the empire. In their social affiliations they were integrated into

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the urban middle-classes and the petty bourgeoisie, the industrial and rural labour force, the migrant peasant and the tribal. The railway centres were characterised by the concentration of a heterogeneous labour force belonging to a variety of racial and language groups. But, this difference of race and religion did not matter much to them as they had common problems like provision of houses, transportation, food, water supply, medical relief, and recreation. As such, when these were denied to them they started to protest against oppression, injustice and atrocities of the British since the inception of the railway industry in Bengal. Bengal created a huge name and received national and international support for workers.

There were generally two types of Indian labour classes. One was the illiterate non-Bengali labour class and the other, though few, local Bengali rail labour. These workers mostly migrated from their villages and took up railway jobs as a temporary support. As soon as the opportunity offered itself they went back to their villages. There was no proper class consciousness among the workers. The migratory nature and village nexus prevented them from realising the need of trade unionism in the beginning. Once their local grievances were redressed or partly redressed, the unity of the labour association ceased to exist or became non-existent.

It was only from 1920 that organised trade union movement of the Bengal rail workers began. However, the working-class of Kharagpur, due primarily to its absolutely heterogeneous composition and virtual absence of its link with the new soil, felt utter differences in getting mixed up with the political effervescence of the district as well as of the province.

The form of the protest of the BNR workers ranged from petitioning to complete stoppage of work. It was not that all struggles of the workers were for enhancement of wages. They struck off as a protest against racial injustice, misbehaviour of the superior Anglo-Indian and British staff, retrenchment, arrest of the leaders, etc. The protest of the rail workers were always in the non-violent form. Only when they were shot at in 1927 that they were forced to adopt violent means; this reaction was quite spontaneous and unplanned. The working-class movements of Kharagpur, at least for the first two decades of the twentieth century, was either an imitation of the working-class struggles in other parts of India or the world nor was it taught to the working-class of Kharagpur by the outsiders. The powerful weapon of strike was employed and developed by the workers themselves and used by them most effectively, even before regular trade unions appeared in the BNR.

The railway workers of Bengal were not always united irrespective of their caste, creed and community. 'Divide and Rule' policy was applied by the BNR administration for several times to create communal dissensions and tensions among the workers of Kharagpur to break the unity of the workers and they were partly successful. Separate workers' associations of the Muslims, of the Punjabis, and of the Bengalis were formed with the blessings of the administration. Sometimes even the Hindu Mahasabha took a leading role in this direction. These associations almost openly opposed the working-class movements directed against the colonial exploitation and other injustices of the administration. Sometimes Hindu-Muslim tension, devised by the vested interests in Bengal, reached its highest peak. But finally the evil

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designs of the administration were rooted out by the general workers which marked growing class consciousness among the workers.

A feature distinguishing some of the strikes was their dimension and duration. Some lasted for weeks and even months. Almost invariably, the big strikes went beyond the economic struggle, inspired the workers with faith in their own strength, steeled them and reinforced their belief that further energetic struggles were necessary. Big strikes were of special significance. They drew the attention not only of the Indian workers of other trades and national leaders, but also of the international workers who gave both moral and financial support to the railway workers of Bengal. But, most of the struggles did not bring success for them. Because to combat the strikes the management and the authorities had recourse to provocations and conspiracies. Sometimes the management terrorised the workers also and called in troops and shot at the workers. The British Government supported such actions of the management indirectly and sometimes directly. It is seen that the strikes of the Bengal railway workers were sought to be both conciliated and suppressed. And yet, the working-class movements in Bengal grew and consolidated rapidly. Official intervention on the employees, sometimes in the most brutal manner, acted as an educator for the political organisation of the working-class of Kharagpur.

Though the role of the youth and the students of the district of Midnapore were almost insignificant, yet the mass participation of women in the workers' movement was few and far between. In 1927, women directly took part in the working-class movements and separately organised processions, meetings, etc., which encouraged the male workers to fight against the injustice of the administration whatever their financial hardships might be. In the 1940s, female workers took the leading part in the movements and became more popular among the workers in comparison to some of the male leaders. In fact, the female workers of Kharagpur played a significant role in the working-class movements and emerged as a separate entity in the strike struggle.

To direct the strike struggle, the role of finance was very vital. Finances play a decisive role in running trade unions also. In normal course of time, the membership fees and voluntary donations were the most important sources of income of the trade unions of BNR. But, during the time of a strike or lockout finances were provided by some international and national trade unions and even sometimes by businessmen of the locality. The financial contribution by political parties towards the movement was almost nil. Road collection was made during the strike time. One interesting feature was that the workers or the members of the Union did not like to pay any subscription unless some agitation started or when they happened to face a personal problem.

The struggles of the railway workers of Bengal were mainly led by English-educated Indians. Most of the front line leaders, at least up to 1940, were from fairly affluent backgrounds. Moreover, the railway unions were dominated by the clerks and outsiders called *babus* by the general workers. There were quite a few leaders who had risen from the ranks and had reached high positions in the Union. Glaring examples of it can be found in Naidu, Ahmed and Bragi who were almost always over shadowed

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by the outside leaders like V.V. Giri, N.M. Joshi and Mukunda Lal Sarkar. Few workers were educated. These workers had to look for outside agencies to lead them and manage their unions. The agencies readily available to them were of three types—the first were the brief-less barristers and self-seekers. The other type was a band of selfless social workers like N.M.Joshi and the third type of outside leaders was that of politically-inspired trade unionists like Saroj Roy, Deben Das and others who mostly came from the Workers' and Peasants' Party and were inspired by the Communist ideology. They believed that trade unions were most suited media to foment an organised discontent of the working-class against the capitalist system. Not that they did not use the trade unions to achieve economic demands of the workers but the emphasis was more on class struggle against employers that afforded opportunities of training to the proletariat for the final revolution against the capitalist system and the trade unions served as an ideal agency for the purpose. The Communists were in sympathy with the labour strikes in campaigning against the hardened anti-labour attitude of the railway workers from 1927.¹⁴

Unfortunately the spontaneous link between the freedom struggle and rail workers movement was not maintained uniformly in subsequent years owing to the emergence of a non-fighting reformist and moderate leadership of the movement sedulously nurtured by the BNR authorities. Day by day the link between the people's movement for freedom and the movement of the railway men began to diminish. Although the link was not strong or conscious at the start, it could have developed had there been a conscious militant leadership which properly understood the connection of the railway workers' struggle with the freedom struggle. The fault did not rest entirely with the reformist leaders either. The leaders of the national movement were by and large indifferent to the use of the militant weapon of strike for national advance. Besides, until very late they had no economic programme embracing the demands of the workers and other toilers. They did not accept strike and working-class action as a legitimate form of national protest and hardly gave a call for strike. In fact, it was only the new Communist leadership in the working-class movement that understood the link between the daily struggle and anti-imperialist struggle for freedom and called on the trade unions to unite with the people. Only under the Communist leadership there were attempts to combine the two struggles. Nevertheless, by attacking the Communists, the reformists and the national leaders were deprived of getting the help of the railway working-class of the Bengal Railway. It is doubtless that if the leader of the National Congress had even given a call, the mass of railway workers of Bengal would have responded to it.¹⁵

However, it is to be admitted that the railway working-class of Bengal, during pre-independence era, had some shortcomings and failures but on the whole it was self-made, nonviolent, dynamic and an effective movement which paved the way for the consolidation of the Trade Union Movements in India. In

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this direction, the railway workers of Bengal were the pioneers, who sowed the seeds for other workers who were able to wrest considerable gains from the unwilling hands of the foreign capitalists.¹⁶

During post-Independence India railway labour movement was of a different type. This time it was not against exploitative Bruisers but it was against the Indian Central government, Delhi. The demands, needs, process of demand, nature of strike, and reason for strike all changed in the post-1947 period. The rail labour unions, their leadership all underwent massive changes. Yet, rail labour strikes did take place post-1947 period as during 1956, 1962, and 1974. But with the railway strike of 1974 and the Emergency period of 1975, fulfilment of maximum demands of the rail workers like free passes, free medical facilities, payment of dearness allowance, provident fund, pension, pay commission of salary, staff quarter facility the railway strike probably came to an end and till date there haven't being any. The last rail strike being in 1974, the biggest and most successful of all the rail strikes in Indian history.

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