

Assam Oil Company and the Labour Strike in Digboi, 1939

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In 1939, a labour strike shook up the management of the Assam Oil Company in the eastern most corner of Assam. It was one of the well organised labour movements of Assam. After the election of 1937, the workers expected that the provincial government would support the long standing demands of workers concerning their choice of leaders, better wage and remuneration, increase participation in the management and security against arbitrary dismissals. However, in the wake of the Second World War and the failure of the provincial Congress government the strike failed, yet it had a profound influence on the labourers working on surrounding tea gardens of Assam.

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In the labour history of Assam, the year 1939 has a significant relevance, as the workers of the Assam Oil Company (AOC hereafter)¹ raised their voice against the managerial authority. It was one of the well organised non-plantation labour movements of Assam. The period between the two world wars in Assam witnessed a number of organised labour movements outside the tea plantation.

The paper is an attempt to trace the history of the popular AOC labour strike against the management. The strike took place in an atmosphere of growing politics of nationalism and retreating imperialism. The workers' expectations rose high with Indians taking control of the provincial governments after the election of 1937. The workers expected that the provincial governments would support the long standing demands of workers concerning their choice of leaders, better wage and remuneration, increase participation in the management and security against arbitrary dismissals. There were quite a number of labour strikes and unrest in India during this period. However, in the wake of the world war and the failure of the provincial congress government the AOC labour strike failed, yet it had a profound influence on the labourers working on surrounding tea gardens.

Social Background of the Workforce

In the oilfields of Digboi about 22 per cent of the labour force was obtained from Assam.² The rest of the workforce was recruited mainly from eastern Bengal (mostly from Chittagong) and the United Provinces (mostly from Gorakhpur) and to a lesser degree from Punjab.³ The Royal

Commission on Labour of 1930 reported that 2,450 workers came from Bengal and 1200 from United Provinces.⁴ The imported labour usually worked for short periods and then returned home. They returned again later or used to send their friends. The nature of the labour force was migratory, the average number of labourers that used to leave work and then again engaged in a month ranged from 400-500 in a total force of about 6,000.⁵ Absenteeism was then a common feature, reflecting the rural tie of the workers. The Company considered six weeks without pay absence as recognised leave and those who were absent for more than six weeks were scored off the books and they needed to re apply for employment.⁶ The industry, by 1930, had established such strong connection with the recruiting areas that it did not require any recruiting agencies or *sardars* to recruit labours.⁷ A labour bureau was established in 1924 where applications for work were registered and in rotation were offered work when vacancies occurred. Of the Assamese workers, the largest number came from the districts of Goalpara and followed by Sibsagar. At the managerial level, the superior managing staff consisted of the British, recruited directly from England.⁸ Like the coal mines, the subordinate supervising staffs at the AOC were partly European and partly Indian. Unlike the tea estates where the labourers had no scope of rising above the rank of foreman, in the Digboi oil fields the unskilled labourer could be trained and promoted to the post of drillers on a scale of pay rising from Rs. 45 to Rs. 90 a month.⁹ In 1930, there were 60 drillers in the AOC, of whom 60 per cent were promoted men.¹⁰ Besides the regular skilled workers, the Company used to lease out contracts to the local contractors for works like clearing jungles, digging earth, construction of buildings under the Company engineers.¹¹ The labour for clearing jungles were mostly recruited from indigenous communities like Nagas and Noctes who were already trained in felling trees and creating the environment for habitation.¹²

We have few references to the involvements and contributions of the Indians of different parts of India and their upward mobility in the industry. Bhaman Singh Thapa, a Nepali from Aijal joined the Company as tractor supervisor, in the transport department in 1934 and worked for more than thirty years. While working as a driver in a tea estate in Silchar, Thapa came to know about a *tel* (oil) company and went to the Badarpur oil field. When it was abandoned he was transferred to Digboi to work at the AOC.¹³ Uddham Singh, a 20 year old Sikh, a petty businessman in Calcutta, originally from Hoisarpur, Punjab responded to an advertisement 'Drivers wanted in Digboi for Heavy Vehicles' in 1929.¹⁴ D.N. Dutta joined the Company in 1919 initially as a surveyor at the geological department and later in 1931 became the draughtsman of the department. He was involved in the surveying the remote places of Naga, Mismi and Tikok Hills. Dimbeswar Baruah, from Sibsagar, former president of the AOC Labour Union, joined in 1921 as allocation clerk in general workshops and became Assam Oil transport supervisor. Ram Naresh from Gorakhpur joined in 1929 in the production department as an ordinary worker and promoted to Headman of a production gang.¹⁵ Hazara Singh joined the company in 1928 as a derrick erector at the insistence of his cousin who was already working at the AOC as a headman in rig building.¹⁶ This is an example of how a network of kinship ties played a role in the recruitment process. Besides, the formal advertisement brought people to the AOC. To be a part of the oil industry was also about mobility in the social status and it gave a sense of stability. Dwijesh Sharma left the

post of Middle English teacher in Sarupeta near his village to join the primary school ran by the AOC as assistant teacher. By his own admission, the monthly salary of Rs 32 offered by AOC proved irresistible when compared with Rs 14 he was presently drawing.¹⁷ Jamu Thapa of Tusha village in Nepal started working at a young age of 16. After eight years of back breaking work as a mail- runner, Thapa found himself a more ‘settled job’ with the oil company in 1928.¹⁸ Similarly, Raghu Sukul from Bihar, after completing Middle English examination, started assisting his parents in the paddy field before joining the AOC at the wax rundown sheds in 1930 at the age of 23.¹⁹

Year	Number of Indian Workers
1929	7284
1930	7002
1931	5551
1932	5050
1933	5296
1934	5275
1935	5641
1936	5808
1937	5975
1938	6300
1939	5757
1940	5962

Source: Rev/ Mines, File No: RM 24/54, Assam State Archives, Guwahati

Though at the workplace, the labourers were not organised on the basis of religion or caste or region, but the segregation of the labourers was followed in the neighbourhood on the basis of castes and communities. The celebration of various festivals, the observation of rituals kept the labourers connected with their communities at the everyday level. The living space outside the company was spatially segregated with different communities inhabiting different areas. On the one hand, the segregation was between the Hindus and Muslims, and on the other hand, it was between the upper and lower castes Hindus. We also have example of regional clustering that reshaped the primordial ties. Thus, the township of Digboi came to be divided into separate barracks called Lines named after respective communities, for example, Gorakhpuria Line, Agreement Line (where the Nepalese dwelt), Assamese Line etc. Interestingly, these residences were also segregated on occupational lines. The Goalparias who worked primarily as labourers lived in Goalparia line, which was separate from the Assamese line which housed the ‘natives’ that worked in the capacity of *Babus* in different clerical positions. Even in the canteen there were separate entrances and spaces for Hindus and Muslims.

The Company used to organise under its supervision various festivals and before each festival leading representatives of different communities were consulted, thereby providing the scope for strengthening community ties. The first Durga puja was celebrated in the refinery ground in 1929. The Company used to supply wax cakes for lighting *diyas* during Diwali. Besides, the Company

employees had their own *naamghars*, temples, mosques, and churches to keep their community bonding intact. The labour force was heterogeneous and the heterogeneity was maintained in the neighbourhood which influenced the workforce inside the industry. The fragmented nature and the multiple identities of workforce even when the Company at the workplace provided a single identity were demonstrated in the communal riots of 1930.²⁰ The riot took place between Hindu and Muslim labour force over a bullock for *kurbani* at Bakr eid which resulted in around hundred casualties including three deaths.²¹ But it was the same labour force that came together to strike against the management in 1939. Chakrabarty points out that the identities of workers were defined by the primordial ties of religion, caste and community.²² However, to accept the primordial ties as static is problematic and the workers did redefine such ties in a new working environment. Chandavarkar argues that the culture was actively constituted by the everyday experiences in the neighbourhood of the factories.²³

At the work place the Company provided the scope for the construction of a single identity (employee of the Company) as it maintained muster rolls that allotted each worker with a registration number. The muster rolls recorded the registration number of the employee, the dates on which the photo pass was issued and the date on which finger print was taken down.²⁴ The muster rolls also documented the address of the employee: the name of the village, the police station, the district etc. of the worker. Though the muster rolls loosely documented workers' caste, the main focus was on the documentation of their physical attributes. The master roll actually documented the native place of the worker and his religion.

The power and authority of the management was maintained through various means.²⁵ To create a committed industrial workforce, representation of the managerial authority was considered to be a necessary part of the working culture of the industry. In a number of industries of India, the managerial authority was also mediated through the *sardars* or *mistris*.²⁶ Due to the lack of evidence, we cannot firmly argue to have such *sardari* system in the Digboi oilfield and refinery. However, Dwijesh Sharma has argued that there was a rumour among the employees of the refinery that the labour officer, Towler had a network of spies to keep himself aware of the workers under the supervision of Sardar Hari Singh.²⁷ The way the workforce was structured, perhaps reflect the existence of the *mistri* system in the refinery as well. The labourers were subdivided into 'gangs' of eight to ten under a gang leader for carrying out different operations. Thus, there were the drilling gangs for drilling operations, construction gangs for building rigs etc. The gang leader might have played the role of the *mistri*.

The history of the labour force can be reconstructed as pointed out by Chakrabarty through the silences and sounds embedded in the official documents.²⁸ In the Digboi refinery, as a measure of control the workers after the enrolment were issued photo identity card, which contained the registration number as well as the native address of the worker. It was mandatory for the worker to carry it personally while going for work in the refinery. The company strictly maintained time to ensure punctuality of the workforce. In the refinery and the workshops the workers had to carry metal tokens and keep them on a board while moving in and out of the work. Under strict supervision the clerks of different departments had to maintain time sheets. The wage of the workers was

calculated while taking the time sheet into consideration. At the work place, the worker had no legal protection vis-à-vis the management, and the Labour Superintendent and the General Manager could control and discipline the workforce by their power to fine its employees for 'inadequate' service and dismiss or discharge any worker on the grounds of 'disobedience', 'reduction of staff', and simply on the grounds of 'unfitness' and 'laziness'.²⁹ Ramani Mohan De, a fitter was discharged after 7 years of service on reduction of staff. On reapplying for employment, he was again rejected. Satya Narayan had worked as chowkider, fire gang, stoveman, etc. was also dismissed on account of reduction of staff and was reemployed as chowkider, cycle chaprasi, peon and was again discharged. When he applied for further employment he was declared as 'unfit' by the medical department. A production supervisor reported that he was dismissed for riding one of the Company's motor cycles with the result of injuring himself and causing damage to the cycle (Company's property). The system of punishment was fairly elaborate and the warnings and punishments were recorded on the registration cards of the employees. Abusive language was also a part of the disciplinary regime which injured the self esteem of the workers.

Against the managerial authority there were signs of resistance by the workers. Absenteeism was itself a form of rebel. Most of the workers used to leave work after six months. Some of them came back or sent their friends or relatives. Perhaps, the workers also tried to steal time. As reported in the *Royal Commission*, Abdullah, a gas-engine fitter was dismissed for disobedience and insubordination as he refused to work under Darshan Singh, who was a gang leader in charge of a different type of engine so that he could learn new work. However, Abdullah asserted that he was transferred so that he could be punished as he had allowed one of the men working under him to make some tea.³⁰ It is mentioned by Sharma that the workers from Goalpara did not bear the abusive language of the authority. Reacting violently against the managers was almost an everyday practise of the Goalpariya workers. Sharma argues that the Goalpariyas even had the audacity to keep the manager tied up at the derrick.³¹ So, whenever the authority got a chance the workers from Goalpara were dismissed from jobs.

The culture of the workplace was developed not only by the management but also by the way the workers perceived the authority and through forming new alliances within and without the industry. The identity formation of the workers depended on different variables like redefining primordial ties, everyday experiences at the workplace and at neighbourhood, the assertion of self, the resistance to the authority, etc. The management also had to negotiate and recognise pre capitalist institutions like the *sardari* system. Due to paucity of sources it has been difficult to have a deft socio cultural study of the labour force of the Digboi refinery.

Labourers' Strike against the Management:

As already discussed, the labour force working under the AOC was heterogeneous in nature, but we find signs of class solidarity as well. Even before the formation of a labour union, the workers in the Digboi oil field protested against the authority. The workers were in many cases subjected to work fourteen hours a day including Sundays without extra allowance for overtime work. About 800 workers of Digboi oil field in 1929 went on a strike demanding weekly holiday on

Sundays. They stopped working on Sunday and again resumed work from Monday with the intention of striking on every Sunday. The strike resumed with a promise from the authority of providing bonus for work on Sundays.

By the end of 1920, many national leaders were getting involved in mobilising labourers of the AOC to form union.³² In 1929 labour leader Chowkha Singh of Jamshedpur along with Sambhu Charan Ray reached Dibrugarh to meet the oil workers. Besides, addressing several meetings they distributed printed bills in both Assamese and Hindi exhorting the workers to organise themselves into a union.³³ Jawaharlal Nehru too visited Assam in 1937, and received a hearty welcome at Jubilee field where workers had gathered for a public meeting. Around 350 oil workers dressed in *khadi* and wearing Gandhi topis volunteered in the meeting. Nehru asked the audience of workers to organise themselves in the form of a Union and to fight for their just rights and for India's freedom.³⁴

The AOC Labour Union was formed in 1938. The office bearers again reflect the plural background of the workforce.³⁵ The union not only brought the workers belonging to the direct company rolls under its ambit but also those working on a temporary basis under contractors, known as *Nunias*.³⁶ The union also widened its base amongst the AOC's bottling plant in Tinsukia. Most significantly, the union could also take up the cause of around 500 bungalow servants working in the private quarters of mostly European officers. They did not enjoy any job security and they could even be dismissed if they failed to report for duty due to illness. The servants were imposed with fine if they failed to salute the officers to whose bungalows they were assigned to. The officers also exercised their power by abusing them, both physically and verbally.³⁷

The AOC Labour Union tried to represent itself as an inclusive entity. It tried to do away with the various differences existing among the labour force. Muhammad Abdulla, a member of the union, appealed to the bungalow servants stating that 'although your religion might be different you can all meet under the banner of the union'.³⁸ Workers had also negotiated their newly acquired identity with their primordial ties.³⁹ Dhanusdhari Mali, another member of the union asked the workers to look beyond their community by stating in a meeting of the bungalow servants that 'the Hindus should help the Muhammadans and the latter should help the former'.⁴⁰ Thus, the union provided the workers with an alternative space of association and identity formation. Yet, the politics of labour union could not completely rupture the ties of religion and workers had to negotiate with multiple identities. The Muslim workers were not ready to support the union and they even considered the union as a Congress-led organisation.⁴¹ In an effort to placate Muslim sentiment the union leaders reached out to the Muslim Trade Union leaders of all India stature like Abdul Bari, Jalaluddin Hashmi, and Maulvi Abaans Sobhan Arifi, Vice President of Jamiet ul Ulema, was also brought to Digboi to mobilise Muslim workers.⁴² Eventually, the Muslim workers did support the strike and the union reflecting a class consciousness. Such class consciousness among the workers did not mean paralysing other identities and as Joshi points out 'Workers had to negotiate these oppositions in different situations, repressing parts of their shelves while giving expression to other parts'.⁴³

The plural background of the labour force did not create any obstacle to come together in

1939 to fight against the managerial authority under the banner of the newly formed labour union. However, like authoritarian managerial regime then prevailing in other parts of the country, the AOC was determined not to recognise the union and refused to deal with their representatives. In the colonial context, the elected agents of the labourers were often dubbed as 'outsiders'. This had been one of the most frequent causes of labour strikes in India. Infact, in many cases a labour union gets recognition only after a strike. The AOC management also refused to recognise the AOC Labour Union by questioning the veracity of the formation of the union and as to whether it was truly representative of the workers. While formulating the draft of demands to be presented to the managerial authority, the unconditional recognition of the AOC Labour Union remained the first demand.⁴⁴ Apprehending a dispute between the authority and the union, the Assam Government appointed a Court of Enquiry to arbitrate the stalemate between AOC management and AOC Labour Union. The Court of Enquiry observed:

In the present case the Company cannot even claim that the Labour Union consists of a minority of its employees. It is on record...that the Union has a membership of 5,825 out of which 5,794 have paid their subscriptions...It is obvious, therefore, that the Union is fairly representative...⁴⁵

The AOC Labour Union also had to resort to strike to establish its right to represent itself as the representative of labourers. By taking the cause of bungalow servants who were not considered as Company employees, the AOC Labour Union was trying to assert its right in the recruitment policy of the Company.⁴⁶

The immediate context of the strike launched by AOC Labour Union on 3 April 1939 was the arbitrary and continuous dismissal of workers on the ground of reduction of staff without referring to the union. The strike was called in solidarity with the dismissed workers and demanded their reinstatement and challenged the right of the company to dismiss workers at its will. It is worth mentioning that the AOC Labour Union nominated Sudhindra Pramanik, a trade union leader of national repute and, earlier, an associate of MN Roy as the general secretary of Central Striking Committee.⁴⁷ Before moving towards the strike, the union leaders wrote to the general manager of the Company to consider such unwarranted and repeated dismissals and reinstatement of the workers. The president of the AOC Labour Union and a *mistri* from Fyzabad, Jagannath Upadhyaya, went to Burma to mobilise the support of the workers of the Burmah Oil Company (BOC) and he was jailed there for one month and then sent to Digboi.⁴⁸

The workers were aware of the connection between capitalist enterprise and colonial rule. One worker described the AOC as 'a British company reaping crores by sucking the blood of labourers'.⁴⁹ The strike took place in an atmosphere complicated by the politics of nationalism and retreating imperialism. After the election of 1937, the coming of the Congress in the provinces of India generated great excitement amongst the workers in India. The workers' expectations rose high with Indians taking control of the provincial governments. The workers expected that the provincial governments would support the long standing demands of workers concerning their choice of leaders, better wage and remuneration, increase participation in the management and security against arbitrary dismissals.

The union members resorted to peaceful means of protest. The workers posted themselves at short distances on the main road leading to the refinery and picketed peacefully. However, the management with the help of police tried to employ labourers from outside to keep the production running. From then picketing which was carried out during the day was also extended to night vigil. The Company along with the district administration took help from the Assam Rifles to suppress the strike. The situation turned worse when on 18 April 1939, the management and the accompanied armed personnel fired upon the striking workers who were trying to prevent fresh recruitment drive.⁵⁰ In the firing four workers were killed and several hundreds injured. A magisterial enquiry under Pabitrath Das was set up by the Congress led ministry and its proceedings took almost four months. The enquiry acquitted the alleged European officers of the Company and justified the violence on the ground of 'self-defense'. The AOC management too explained the violence as self-defense mechanism. It had to resort to such violence to bring fresh recruits into the AOC compound. With the growing public distrust and the wide coverage of the incident at the national press,⁵¹ the Assam Government prohibited the Company from any further recruitment drives and formed a Committee of Enquiry under M. Mukherjee, executive Chief Justice of Calcutta High Court to look into the Digboi affairs.

Pramanik met Rajendra Prasad, All India Congress President at Patna and reported about the strike but he regretted that Prasad did not take any decisive line of action.⁵² A pamphlet, reporting Pramanik's note on Digboi strike was distributed in Digboi, criticised the Congress in general and the Assam Government in particular for their lack of adequate support to the oppressed labourers.⁵³ The Government of Assam and the AOC Labour Union separately made appeal to the Central Congress leadership for intervention and Rajendra Prasad was given the mandate to fashion the Congress response. This was preceded by difference of opinion between members of the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee (APCC hereafter) and the Congress led provincial government that had widened in the aftermath of the firing episode.⁵⁴ Prominent Congress leaders like Hemchandra Barua and Bishnuram Medhi were critical of the government handling of the situation. They did not hesitate to express their differences openly in public.⁵⁵ At the initiative of Pramanik, the All India Congress Committee (AICC hereafter) in its Bombay session in June 1939 advised the government of Assam to appoint a conciliation board and to make the board's recommendations obligatory and in case of non acceptance of the board's decision the government of Assam might stop the renewal of the lease of the Company.⁵⁶

On the fourth month of the strike, the Assam Government, on the recommendation of the AICC, appointed a Conciliation Board, on 26 July, 1939.⁵⁷ The Union had demanded that all striking workers should be taken back by the AOC management. The Conciliation Board, in its report recommended that 'All the strikers should be called back on termination of the strike, by discharging the new recruits. The case of these new recruits may be considered by the Company in making appointments to future vacancies.'⁵⁸ However, the AOC management refused to follow the recommendation and the union's demand and stated its position that it would take back strikers only for available vacancies. Pramanik negotiated with Rajendra Prasad and other Congress leaders and with the provincial government. In the meanwhile the war ordinance was promulgated on 3

September 1939 and the Viceroy dispatched troops in addition to the Assam Rifles to take charge of the protected areas of Digboi and Tinsukia and all obstruction with the production and transportation of oil products was prohibited.⁵⁹ In such a situation Gopinath Bordoloi⁶⁰ pleaded his helplessness in the matter of reinstatement of the strikers and pressurising the Company to follow the recommendation of the conciliatory board.⁶¹ Taking advantage of the war ordinance the union office was closed down and locked by the Police.⁶² Pramanik was arrested under the war ordinance and was deported to Calcutta under police escorts.⁶³ Jagannath Upadhyaya was forced to leave Fayzabad along with his family leaving properties behind.⁶⁴ Many other union leaders were also evicted in the similar way under military and police escorts. Workers were compelled to take whatever was paid by the Company as their 'settlement money' and evicted from their quarters. Around 3,000 workers were compelled to leave Assam in 24 hours notice. The union was also banned from 1939 to 1946. The government of Assam termed the strike as 'lawless law'.

Taking advantage of the war situation the strike and the union was suppressed by the state. However, the spirit of the strike of the AOC Labour Union moved beyond the immediate surroundings. A series of strikes and lockouts occurred at regular intervals in certain tea gardens of Dibrugarh town.⁶⁵ In 1938–39, the workers of the Assam Railway and Trading Company Ltd. (ARTC) also launched a strike in the Company's establishment.⁶⁶ Indeed, the strike at Digboi had a considerable effect on the tea garden labourers in Assam. Under such circumstance, the Indian Tea Association had to set up definite procedures to deal with the wave of strikes in the tea plantations. The Bordoloi government also set up the Tea garden Labour Unrest Enquiry Committee on May 1939 to deal with the increasing unrest in the province and the government made it clear that it would not welcome strikes and lockouts and would not hesitate to 'enforce mutual forbearance' as measure of urgency.⁶⁷

Notes and References :

1. Assam Oil Company was established in 1899 with its headquarter in London. It was formed to develop the oil wells of Digboi and Makum in Eastern Assam.
2. Government of India: *Royal Commission on Labour in India*, Vol. 6, Part 1 (1930), p.4.
3. *Ibid.*
4. F. McAllister, General Manager to the Assam Oil Company Ltd, Digboi, reported to the Royal Commission on Labour, *Minutes of Evidence taken Before the Royal Commission on Labour in India*, 1930, Assam State Archives (ASA).
5. *Royal Commission on Labour in India*, p.4. It was estimated that 50 per cent of Assamese and per cent of Nepali workers returned to village every year in April and May. Absenteeism was much stronger in case of semi skilled labourers. Those labourers who did not come from distant places used to go for cultivation every year.
6. F. McAllister, General Manager to the Assam Oil Company Ltd, Digboi reported to the Royal Commission on Labour, *Minutes of Evidence taken Before the Royal Commission on Labour in India*, 1930, ASA.
7. *Ibid.*

8. *Royal Commission on Labour in India*, p.5.
9. *Ibid.*, p.6. The tea plantations of Assam employed one of the largest labour forces at the lowest level of wages. In the tea gardens of Assam the labourers were mainly brought from the ‘tribal’ areas of Chotanagpur, Central provinces and Madras presidency through the labour contractors, the *arkatis*. The labourers were ‘indentured’ to the employers as they had to sign a contract having harsh penal provisions. For details of the indenture system, see Nitin Verma: “Coolie Acts and the Acting coolies: Coolie, Planter and State in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Colonial Tea plantations of Assam,” in *Social Scientist*, 2005, Vol.33, No.5/6, pp.5–6; Rana P. Behal and Prabhu P. Mohapatra: “Tea and Money versus Human Life: the Rise and fall of the Indenture System in the Assam Tea Plantations 1840-1908,” in *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 1992, Vol.19, pp.3–4.
10. *Royal Commission on Labour in India*, p.6.
11. To build the refinery and for the housing, the Company required to clear the jungle and the contract was given to Chandra Gogoi.
12. The Nagas were also used by the colonial tea planters to clear jungle for tea cultivation at a low cost. Nagas were adept at clearing jungle with fire and axe as it was required in shifting cultivation.
13. *Digboi Batori*, April 1956.
14. *Digboi Batori*, August 1954.
15. *Digboi Batori*, December 1956.
16. *Digboi Batori*, April 1957.
17. Dwijesh Chandra Deb Sarma: *Saru Saru Manuhar Saru Saru Katha*. Tinsukia: Print & Book Centre, 2000, pp.49-50.
18. *Digboi Batori*, January 1957.
19. *Digboi Batori*, June 1957.
20. Police B, March 1931, Nos.250–365, ASA. The official record noted that the two agitators from outside Assam having connection with the Hindu Mahasabha and the Arya Samaj were active amongst the labourers. On the other hand, an organisation named the All Bengal Muslim Young Men’s Association tried to take advantage of the riot to mobilise Muslim sentiments.
21. The jute mills of Bengal had also witnessed a number of communal violence in the late nineteenth century.
22. Dipesh Chakrabarty: *Rethinking Working Class History*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1989.
23. Rajnarayan Chandavarkar: *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India: Business Strategies and Working Class in Bombay, 1900–1940*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994.
24. Muster Rolls of the Assam Oil Company Ltd, 1930, Corporate Office, Assam Oil Division of Indian Oil Corporation, Digboi, Assam.
25. The disciplinary regime of the tea gardens of Assam practiced both legal and extra legal form of control and surveillance. Flogging, whipping, forced isolation (by fencing off the tea gardens and residents of the labourers both from the urban and surrounding rural areas) were part of the regular disciplinary processes. Physical violence was added with the legal right of the authority to private arrest of the absconding labourers. For details, see Rana P Behal: “Power Structure, Discipline, and Labour in Assam: Tea Plantations under Colonial Rule,” in Rana P Behal and Marcel van der Linden (eds.): *Coolies, Capital and Colonialism: Studies in Indian Labour History*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp.143–172.
26. The *mistris* enforced discipline in various departments and they were subjected to the managers. However, they enjoyed wide range of power in matters like leave, fines and absences, recruitment etc.

which provided them with space to abuse power. The *mistri* system reduced the cost of supervision on the part of the management. It should also be mentioned that the source of power of the *mistri* was not necessarily managerial rather it was the influence that the *mistri* commanded over the workers forced the management to recognise the *mistri's* power. The influence and control of the *mistries* over the workers was also legitimised because of caste and kin relations between the two. For the details of the system see, Chitra Joshi: *Lost Worlds: Indian Labour and its Forgotten Histories*. Permanent Black, 2003; Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working Class History*; Omkar Goswami: "Multiple Images: Jute Mill Strikes of 1929 and 1937 Seen through Other's Eyes," in *Modern Asian Studies*, 1987, Vol. 21, No.3, pp.547–583.

27. Deba Sharma: *Saru Saru Manuhar Saru Saru Kotha*. p.108.
28. Dipesh Chakarabarty: "Conditions for Knowledge of Working-Class Conditions: Employers, Government and the Jute Workers of Calcutta, 1890-1940," in Ranjit Guha (ed.): *Subaltern Studies*, Vol II. Delhi, OUP, 1983, p.259.
29. J.C. Higgins: *Report of the Digboi Court of Enquiry* .Shillong, Assam Government Press, 1938, pp. 12–15.
30. Abdullah was a witness to the Court of Enquiry appointed by the Assam Government in 1938. The Court considered Abdullah's allegation of punishment as his own improbable invention and agreed with the labour superintendent that it was a case of disobedience. Jafar Khan another employee reported that the Company instead of granting leave dismissed him as he was having stone in his kidney.
31. Deba Sharma: *Saru Saru Manuhar Saru Saru Kotha*, p. 111.
32. Dipankar Banerjee: *Labour Movement in Assam*. New Delhi, Anamika, 2005, p.78. Labour leaders and socialists like Subhas Bose, M.N.Roy, Sudhindra Pramanik, Dinkar Mehta, Jalaluddin Hashmi visited Assam during 1936-38.
33. The police records describe him as a prominent labour agitator who was sometime inciting trouble among the labour force in the AOC oil fields at Digboi and Tinsukia. Abstract of Intelligence, Assam Police, Record Branch, Vol. XVIII, June 1929, ASA.
34. Deba Sharma: *Saru Saru Manohar Saru Saru Katha*, p.306; also see *Political History of Assam*, Record, File no. 171, 1939,ASA.
35. Jagannath Upadhyaya, a *mistri* from Faizabad was the president of the union; Muhammad Aminulla, a petition write from Noakhali became the vice president; Jadunath Bhuyan, a clerk from Sibsagar was the secretary and Harnam Singh a fitter from Amritsar was the joint secretary.
36. The workers supplied by the contractors affiliated to the AOC demanded equal treatment at par with Company employees. This meant access to certain amenities such as higher wage rates, periodic promotion, accident compensation including guarantee of security of service. They numbered around 2,500 to 3,000 working under the different contractors. See 'Labour Unrest among Employees at Digboi', A – (5) (a) 38, ii, 1938, Special Branch, Police Record Office, Kahilipara, Dispur, Assam.
37. Report of the Proceedings of a Meeting of Bungalow Servants at Charali, Digboi, 29 August, 1938, Police Report, File No. A5 (5) 38, Police Record Office, Special Branch, Kahilipara, Assam. There were around 300-350 servants working for 16 to 18 hours at a low rate without any holiday. Booters used to get Re.1, cooks 7 annas, the *mali* 10 anna, and the *paniwala* 10 anna per day.
38. *Ibid*.
39. According to Chitra Joshi such a new identity was away from primordial ties of caste and religion but one that was defined by new context of work place. Joshi: *Lost Worlds*.

40. Report of the proceedings of a Meeting of the Bungalow Servants at Charali, Digboi, 29 August, 1938, Police Report, File No. A5 (5) 38, Police Record Office, Special Branch, Kahilipara, Assam.
41. Many Congress leaders like Bishnuram Medhi, Omeo Kumar Das were members of the relief committee which was formed during the strike. Banerjee argues that it was a 'divide and rule' policy of the Company management. Community ties did provide a basis on which strike breakers could mobilise support and fragment any strike. However, it cannot be denied that the workers had multiple identities and that the workers had to negotiate so that the differences could coexist. See Banerjee: *Labour Movement in Assam*.
42. Banerjee: *Labour Movement in Assam*, p.83.
43. Joshi: *Lost Worlds*, p.276
44. The management was not ready to recognise the union and stated, '... unconditional recognition means accepting something we know nothing about and just as a man does not buy something with his eyes shut so the Company must see what the facts are about the Union.'
45. The court was critical of the Company for its lack of enthusiasm to recognise the union and suggested that the Company '... should not insist too rigidly on the representative character of the Union or on the observation of strict formalities in connection with its institution and management, but should accord it early recognition and negotiate on the rules and formalities later'. See Higgins: *Report of the Digboi Court of Enquiry*, p.3.
46. The labour union demanded that a board consisting of equal number of representatives of the union and the management should take up the cases of suspensions or dismissals. It also demanded that in place of the existing system of registering candidates and appointing them, there should be a competitive examination system and a board consisting of equal number of representatives of the union and management should be set up for the purpose.
47. This committee was in addition to the Central Committee of the AOC Labour Union. Sudhindra Pramanik was a trade union leader from Bengal and played a crucial role at the steel workers' strike in Tatanagar in the 1920s. He was one of the delegates who represented All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) at World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) held in 1945 in London.
48. Letter from Jagannath Upadhyaya to Jawaharlal Nehru, Prime Minister, Government of India, 1954, *Labour Movement in Assam, 1939, Political History of Assam, ASA*.
49. Report of the Proceedings of a Meeting of the AOC Labour Union held at Chariali, Digboi, 29 August, 1938, Police Report, File No. A5 (5) 38, Police Record Office, Special Branch, Kahilipara, Assam.
50. Banerjee: *Labour Movement in Assam*, p.102.
51. The incident was reported in several Indian newspapers like *The National Herald*, *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, *Hindustan Standard*, *Amrita Bazaar Patrika* which helped mobilising public opinion.
52. Abstract of a meeting of the Congress held at Thana Maidan, Lumding, June 1939, Abstract of Intelligence, Assam Police, *Political History of Assam*, Record, 1939, ASA.
53. Report from Lakhimpur, July 1940, Abstract of Intelligence, Assam Police, *Political History of Assam*, Record, 1940, ASA. The labour union demanded active intervention by the government, which the government had failed due to the lack of defined policy. The government failed to take necessary action against the company after the firing incident and it could not pressurise the company from recruiting new workers.
54. The provincial Congress committee demanded the withdrawal of the military from Digboi after the firing, whereas Gopinath Bordoloi was reluctant to withdraw the arm forces calling it impracticable. As such, a section of the Congress leaders had also demanded the resignation of Bordoloi.

55. Banerjee: *Labour Movement in Assam*, p.176.
56. AICC papers, Bombay Session, 24-27 June, Proceedings of 27 June, 1939, NMML.
57. The Conciliation Board was appointed to promote a settlement of the dispute between the AOC and the labour union with the following terms of reference:
 - i)The time and method of reemployment of strikers under the AOC
 - ii)to explore the possibilities of settlement regarding any outstanding matters still in dispute between the Company and the union
58. Letter from Jagannath Upadhyay, President AOC Labour Union to Gopinath Bordoloi, Premier and Minister in Charge of the Home Department and to the Government of Assam, 31 March 1949, Digboi, Labour Movement in Assam, *Political History of Assam*, 1939,ASA.
59. *Ibid.*
60. After the resignation of Md. Sadulla's ministry in 1938, Gopinath Bordoloi formed the provincial government in Assam. However, the new government did not last long as World War II began in 1939. Gopinath Bordoloi's Cabinet resigned in 1940. After the independence Gopinath Bordoloi became the first chief minister of Assam.
61. *Ibid.* Bordoloi asked Pramanik to meet the Governor. Accordingly, Pramanik met the Governor but without any effect.
62. *Ibid.*
63. *Ibid.* Also see Banerjee: *Labour Movement in Assam*; Amalendu Guha: *Planter Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle to Electoral Politics in Assam 1826-1947*. Calcutta, People's Publishing House, 1977, p.241.
64. After leaving Digboi, he worked at a dock factory in Bombay and left Bombay in 1947. Upadhyaya wrote to Congress leaders in 1946 regarding his deplorable plight. He came back to Digboi and again in 1949 wrote to Congress leaders of the Assam government, central government, and the Uttar Pradesh government and to Rajendra Prasad without much effect. Finally, in 1953, he appealed to Nehru to instruct the APCC and the District Congress Committee to consider him as 'political sufferer' and asked for the employment of his sons as he and his family had no source of income.
65. Banerjee: *Labour Movement in Assam*, pp.195-196; *Report on the Administration of Assam*, 1938-39, ASA.
66. Guha: *Palnters Raj to Swaraj*, p. 241.
67. *Ibid*, p.244.