

**The Unsettling Decades:
Mapping the Changing Trends in the Trade Union Movements of
Late Colonial Calcutta (1930-1947)**

A Thesis Submitted to the University of Hyderabad in Partial Fulfilment for the

Award of

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IN

HISTORY

BY

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DECLARATION

I, Manaswini Sen (18SHPH04), hereby declare that this thesis titled, *“The Unsettling Decades: Mapping the Changing Trends in the Trade Union Movements of Late Colonial Calcutta (1930-1947)”* submitted to the University of Hyderabad, under the guidance and supervision of **Dr. Vijaya Ramadas M., Department of History**, University of Hyderabad, Hyderabad, India, is a bonafide research work for the award of **Doctor of Philosophy in History** from the **University of Hyderabad**. This work is free from plagiarism. I also hereby declare that it has not been submitted in full or in part to this university or any other university or institute for the award of any degree or diploma, in India or any place in the world. I hereby agree that my thesis can be deposited in Shodhganga/INFLIBNET. **A report on plagiarism statistics from the University Librarian is enclosed.**

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*Dedicated to my Ammi, who patiently and most avidly awaited the completion
of this Degree, but unfortunately, is not here today.*

I owe my education to you.

The celebration awaits on the other side.

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Abbreviations

A.I.C.C- All India Congress Committee
A.I.M.L- All India Muslim League
A.I.S.F- All India Student Federation
A.I.T.U.C- All India Trade Union Congress
B.L- British Library
B.L.A- Bengal Labour Association
B.L.C.- Bengal Legislative Council
B.L.P- Bengal Labour Party
B.P.T.U.C- Bengal Provincial Trade Union Congress
B.S.T.O. -The Bengal Suppression of Terrorist Outrages Act
BCLA- Bengal Criminal Law Amendment Act
BSTO- Bengal Suppression of Terrorist Outrages Act
C.A.L.C.O.M.- Calcutta Committee
C.I.D- Criminal Investigation Department
C.L. - Communist League
C.P.G.B- Communist Party of Great Britain
C.P.I- Communist Party of India
C.S.P- Congress Socialist Party
C.T.C- Calcutta Tramway Company
C.T.W.U- Calcutta Tramway Workers' Union
D.I.A- Defence of India Act (1915)
D.I.B- Director of Intelligence Bureau
G.C.N. -General Communist Notification
G.O.B- Government of Bengal
G.O.I- Government of India
I.B.- Intelligence Bureau
I.J.M.A- Indian Jute Merchants' Association

I.N.C.- Indian National Congress
I.O.R.- India Office Records
K.P.M.- Kolkata Police Museum
M.L.A.- Member of Legislative Assembly
M.L.C- Member of Legislative Council
N.A.I- National Archives of India
N.B.A- National Book Agency
N.M.M.L- Nehru Memorial Library and Museum
R.C.P.I- Revolutionary Communist Party of India
R.S.P- Revolutionary Socialist Party
S.B.- Special Branch
S.C.A-The Sea Customs Act
W.B.S.A- West Bengal State Archives
W.P.P- Workers' and Peasants' Party

Introduction: The Unsettling Decades, the Myriad Facets of Labour Politics and Transcendence to Trade Unionism

*Shiuchondrika is a man of logic; he is highly intolerant of irrationality. However, his notion of reason is unilinear. Everything around him be it an individual, an institution, or an object are means to forward the ideology of his party. Barring it, they do not or should not hold any notable significance in his life. In his reasoning, the interests of his party and the welfare of the labouring mass are synonymous. According to him, the sole right of engaging in public welfare politics rests with his party and its affiliated unions. This is the singular, most tangible truth in his life and the people who are in disagreement are nothing short of 'janatar shotru' or 'the enemy of the public.'*¹

In this short abstract taken from the Bengali novel, *Chitraguptar File* (The Files of Chitragupta), the author Satinath Bhaduri, took a plunge into the depths of the psyche of the general secretary of the newly formed trade union of the Balirampur Jute Mill in the Purnia District of Bihar, Shiuchandrika. Being newly acquainted with the 'language of class,' he was vexed by persistent dichotomy while reconciling his vested social identity of a mill worker from Bihar with the newly acquired consciousness of belonging to a universal collective of the oppressed, the proletariats. The membership of the Congress Socialist Party, introduction to the egalitarian ethos of socialism, and prominence in the party hierarchy signified the transcendence of the socio-economic constraints of his class background.² However, in the vein of Thompson's rejection of any abruptness with the process of imbibition of class consciousness and its genesis and propagation, Shiuchandrika's attainment of consciousness should be treated as a layered, nuanced 'process,' an odyssey.³ His activism was marred by an

¹ Bhaduri, Satinath. "Chitraguptar File (The Files of Chitragupta)." In *Satinath Bhaduri Rochonaboli* (Anthology of the Writings of Satinath Bhaduri). Edited by Sankha Ghosh and Nirmalya Acharya. Kolkata: Mitra & Ghosh Publisher, 2018, p. 165.

² Ibid.

³ Thompson, E. P. "Peculiarities of the English." In *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*. pp. 245-301. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1978.

ideological quagmire. His main motto of life was the emancipation of the workers of the mills, whom he considered as his comrades. He dedicated his entire being to safeguarding the rights of the mill workers against the paraphernalia of colonial oppression, but in the process, this staunch acquiescence to the organisation invariably led to ideological myopia. Shiuchandrika transformed into the very demon that he crusaded against, an intolerant party hardliner, a fundamentalist for whom there was a single truth: what his organisation propagates; there was no space for criticism or dissent. Ironically, the platform that was his avenue to subvert the endemic socio-economic inequality augmented by systematic repression of colonialism and capitalism became a space that rejected diverse notions of emancipation and social justice in both anti-colonial epistemology and praxis.

A great deal of fiction produced in the final days of colonial rule and right in the aftermath of independence inclined toward exploring this ideological quandary in indigenous labour or leftist activists.⁴ The burgeoning of the socialist and communist parties from the 1930s led to the democratisation of the public sphere, politics was no longer circumscribed to elite circles. The change in the social composition and infiltration of lower-middle classes and working class in itself in the domain of trade unionism invariably ushered in a disparate genre of decolonial politics. However, a changed social composition in vanguardism does not habitually translate to a transformed ‘mode of activism.’ This upward mobility in politics also led to compulsory adaptation to the elitist mode of registering dissent. The manifestation of the bane of colonial modernity was never more glaring. Siuchandrika learned English, and his rigor to blend in is depicted arduously by Bhaduri. However, the ingrained stigma and sense of English racial superiority failed to recognise his capabilities.⁵ Many youths were confronted with similar dilemmas whereby their newly gained class consciousness often came in conflict with their communal consciousness emanating from religion, caste, and traditional allegiances. Consequently, it also led to congruent introspections as far as decolonial political praxis is concerned.

⁴ Some similar novels or autobiographical fictions: Basu, Samaresh. *B.T. Roader Dhare (By the Side of B.T. Road)*. Calcutta: Dey’s Publishing, 2013. *Srimati Café*, 1st ed. Calcutta: Moushumi Prakashani, 1953. Halder. Gopal. *Ekoda (Once Upon a Time)*. 1st ed. Calcutta: Ranjan Publishing House, 1939)

⁵ Bhaduri, *Chitraguptar File*, pp. 165-167.

Class, owing to its origin is a universalised concept; hence, derivatively Eurocentric too. Sudipta Kaviraj forwards the theory of a *Euronormality*: the propensity of reorienting social sciences globally towards Europe-centric conceptualisations, negating the richness and variety of historical traditions across the globe.⁶ Hence, can class alone or a very European iteration of it make provision for a potent tool of meta-analysis for engaging in critical labour history? The genesis of class has a divergent trajectory in Europe than the Global South which is further complicated by the implications of colonialism. The occlusion of these germane factors truncates the possibilities of a holistic, radical approach to writing working-class history. The postcolonial turn in academia partly addressed this lacuna. Strategies were devised to 'provincialise' Europe, and 'mimicry' countered the epistemic violence of Enlightenment with success. Postcolonial theorists like Chakraborty, Spivak, and Bhaba contemplated maneuvering concepts within the purview of European epistemology against the imposition of a unilinear trajectory of a postcolonial future.⁷ But then how can one combat that predilection towards Eurocentrism within the folds of postcolonial theory? Dilip Menon opines that postcolonialism was marked by a 'distinct amnesia' towards 'indigenous systems of intellection.'⁸ What are the possible heuristic methods that can be implemented to approach the disparate intellectual traditions of decolonisation? Is it feasible or desirable to divorce it from the overreaching ramifications of colonialism? Ann Laura Stoler comments, 'we live in a temporal and affective space in which colonial inequalities endure' and hence (post) colonial imaginations imperative mirrors the 'imperial durabilities in our times.'⁹ How to affirm and address the particularism of the Global South within the universalised structures and epistemological traditions like that of colonialism or class? These are a few of the deliberations this thesis concerns itself with.

⁶ Kaviraj, Sudipta. "Marxism in Translation: Critical Reflections on Indian Political Thought." In *Political Judgement: Essays for John Dunn*. Edited by Raymond Geuss and Richard Bourke. Cambridge: CUP, 2017.

⁷ Chakraborty, Dipesh. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000. Spivak, Gayatri. "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography." In *Selected Subaltern Studies*. Edited by Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 3-32. Oxford, OUP, 1988. Bhaba, Homi. K. *The Location of Culture*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2004.

⁸ Menon, Dilip M. Decolonizing Theory: Thing From the Global South. India-Seminar.com. (DOI: <https://www.india-seminar.com/2021/747/747-dilip%20m.%20menon.htm>, accessed on: 30 July 2023).

⁹ Stoler, Anna Lan. *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Our Times*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016.

With the newly emergent methodological framework in the history of ideas, the term ‘global’ has an overtly transtemporal, transnational, and transcultural connotation now.¹⁰ But what needs to be accounted for is how far ideas can be influenced by the geographical placement of an individual or a community. Why did political philosophies like socialism and eventually communism have such an unprecedented impact on the colonies in the twentieth century and its differential reception in the Global South and the West calls for further deliberation?¹¹ The insinuation of geopolitics, the imperality of power, and the already asymmetric relation between the North and the South have for long informed our notions of spatiality. An engagement with non-western intellectual traditions or non-Anglophone streams of intellectual thought hence aids in re-interrogation and broadening of these categories and tools of meta-analysis while successfully combating Eurocentrism in the field.¹² As de Sousa Santos rightly comments, it is an ‘epistemological rather than a geographical south’ and it is only from this perspective ‘an alternative thinking of alternatives’ can materialise.¹³ The primary aim of this thesis is to counter the embedded notions and binaries of global and local when approaching any aspects of the history of decolonisation. While amplifying the particularities of trade unionism in Bengal, the dissemination of leftist thought, and the nuances of its interactions with indigenous decolonial intellectual traditions, it is pertinent to remember that ‘all political locutions arise from a sense of place; existing, constructed, and imagined,’ and this ‘space’ which comprises Asia, Latin America or Africa, sharing a colonial past cannot be comprehended without taking into account the international relations of power and capital.¹⁴ Hence, this thesis

¹⁰ Sen, Manaswini. “Mapping the Changing Notions of Inequality Among the Trade Union Leaders of Colonial Bengal (1920–1947)”, *Global Intellectual History*. 2022. (DOI: [10.1080/23801883.2022.2062416](https://doi.org/10.1080/23801883.2022.2062416))

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Boaventura de Sousa Santos and Maria Paula Meneses, “Epistemologies of the South – Giving Voice to the Diversity of the South.” In *Knowledges Born in the Struggle: Constructing the Epistemologies of the Global South*. Edited by Boaventura de Sousa Santos and Maria Paula Meneses. London: Routledge, 2020.

¹⁴ Menon. “Thinking About the Global South: Affinity and Knowledge.” In *The Global South and Literature*. Edited by Russell West-Pavlov. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018.

embarks on charting a global history of labour without losing the essence of particularism in the long genealogy of struggle against power and oppression in the Global South.

II. Situating the Working Class in Late Colonial Bengal: Composition and Demographic Locales

Bengal was one of the first provinces to manifest the nascent signs of working-class radicalisation in the British colony of India. Hence, any research on trade unionism centering itself around Calcutta and in extension, Bengal calls for a deliberation on the origin of the working class in the province, and its demographical constituents which automatically helps in unpacking the socio-economic triggers that precipitated this militarisation. The memorandum of the government of Bengal to the Royal Commission on Labour stated on 18 October 1929: '...The great majority of workers in Bengal in organised manufacturing industries and plantations are recruited from other provinces and such is regulated by the industries concerned without official intervention. Bengal is a labour receiving and not a labour supplying province.'¹⁵ The census reports highlight the heavy emigration of labourers from the Indo-Gangetic plane into the Bengal Delta.¹⁶ According to the 1901 census, there was a presence of more than half a million of Biharis in Bengal proper.¹⁷ As Chandravarkar demonstrated for the cotton textile workers in Bombay, similarly in Calcutta the migrant workers in different industrial sectors of the city retained close ties with their village homes.¹⁸

An average incoming labourer was generally unskilled, his search for job or '*kaam*' preferably entailed working in close proximity to his kins or village men. The mechanism of

¹⁵ WBSA, Proceedings of Commerce Department, April 1930, File 3C-1, No. 9.

¹⁶ Saha, Panchanan. *Emigration of Indian Labour, 1834- 1900*. New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1970, pp. 69-70.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Chandravarkar. R.S. *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India: Business Strategies and the Working Classes in Bombay, 1900-1940*. Cambridge: CUP, 1994. Also, the *Report of the Indian Factory Labour Commission*, 1908. It states, 'The habits of Indian operatives are determined by the fact that he is primarily an agriculturalist or a labour on the land...he regularly remits a portion of wages back in his home at the village, and he returns there periodically to look after his affairs and obtained rest after the strain of factory life.'

exploitation of the '*sirdari*' system of recruitment banked on the kinship ties and vulnerabilities of the labourers. ¹⁹ A *sirdar* would recruit men from his village in the jute mills in an arrangement where the labourers were forever dependent on him. Over two million people enumerated in the Bengal census of 1921 were from the Indo-Gangetic plain (Bihari and Oriyas: 66.1, Uttar Pradesh: 17.8), and 'practically the entire labour of Bengal outside tea gardens and specialised employment like the inland steamer services are recruited by means of *sirdari* system.'²⁰

According to official reports in the opening years of the 1900s, 'There is as yet practically no factory population, such as exists in European countries, consisting of a large number of operatives trained from their youth to one particular class of work, and depending upon employment at that work for their livelihood.'²¹ But by the 1920s, there was a genesis in the industrial areas of Bengal of a population of 'local foreign labourers.'²² Many jute workers recruited primarily from up-country or Madras or Orissa formed some strategic alliances (temporary marriages) with female workers within geographical proximity, and as fruits of these alliances there arose a local population of Bengal-born Madrasis, Oriyas, and Hindustanis, who had no roots in their paternal villages. They entirely depended on the mills for their support.²³ It is this particular population that, influenced by the multifarious strands of ideologies in a cosmopolitan space like Calcutta was getting drawn into the vortex of revolutionary working-class politics from the 1930s. This was coupled with the vigorous unionisation of the petty-bourgeois clerical mass in the tertiary sector. The rate of literacy considerably increased contrary to the colonial discourse which ascribed to the conventional image of a hapless, facile, infantile innocent worker. The nuances of an emergent cosmopolitan public sphere from below, the multilingualism, and eccentricity in this

¹⁹ Saha. *History of the Working-Class Movement in Bengal*. New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1978, pp. 13.

²⁰ WBSA, Proceedings of Commerce Department, April 1930, No.9.

²¹ *Report of the Indian Factory Labour Commission*, 1908.

²² Porter, A.E. *Report on Census of India 1931, Vol 5, Bengal and Sikkim*. Calcutta: Central Publication Branch, 1933, pp. 199-225.

²³ Saha. *History of the Working-Class Movement in Bengal*, p. 15.

emergent political praxis facilitate in addressing the social origins of class. Recalling Gramsci hence is a prerequisite to situate and engage in any discussion of the composition of the labouring class in late colonial Calcutta. Gramsci's formulation of the working class was not merely that of abstract sellers of labour to capital.²⁴ For him, classes were the outcome of proletarian communal experiences, cultural practices, and traditions of preexisting social groups which were moulded by the annihilating experiences of capitalist exploitation.

The demographic precarity and peculiarity of its composition and geographic positioning help elucidate and engage in certain crucial theorisations about working-class activism in colonial Bengal. There is often a grave charge against labour historians and scholars of Bengal for harbouring an endemic indifference towards caste inequalities and deprivations in working-class politics. In apprehension of being faced with similar charges, defending one's theoretical grounding and methodology seems indispensable. In Bengal unlike in several instances as apparent in colonial South India, caste-based radical movements were majorly agrarian in character.²⁵ Rarely did caste become the axis of accentuating working-class protests which were mostly very urban in their essence. Also, for a province with a vulnerable communal demographic, it is not unusual that communal impediments in organisation, mobilisation, and propaganda would overshadow ancillary factors in accounts of trade union movements. The contemporary political commentaries and discourses from the 1920s in Bengal were overwhelmed by the theme of virulent communal dissensions and riots in labour ghettos across Calcutta. Electoral politics too had a direct bearing on shaping contemporary discourses and leftist approaches in this regard. For a significant period, depressed class politics was assumed to be under the aegis of Muslim separatist politics as Jogendra Nath Mandal was in alliance with the Muslim League from the 1937 provincial elections onwards.²⁶ This peculiar approach of caste being an offshoot of communal politics reigned supreme in most contemporary political and communist

²⁴ Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith. New York: International Publishers, 1971.

²⁵ Menon. *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in South India*. Malabar, 1900-1948. Cambridge: CUP, 1994.

²⁶ Sen, Dwaipayan. *The Decline of the Caste Question: Jogendranath Mandal and the Defeat of Dalit Politics in Bengal*. Cambridge: CUP, 2018.

discourses concerning class- struggle which also prevented explicit cognizance of caste as a separate category in the itineraries of imperial and capitalist exploitation.

III. The Turbulent Decades: The Global, National, and Provincial Shift in Politics and Historical Contextualisation

It is pertinent to comprehend that an enterprise that embarks on establishing a specific period as a watershed in the development of working-class activism cannot be initiated in a vacuum. Hence, a biography of the labouring class grafted in primordial relations will be inherently flawed in its conception.²⁷ So, the implications of colonialism and its authoritative structure concerning the Working Class movement lie at the heart of the thesis. The workers, their lives, and their consciousness will be pitted against the nature of the late colonial state which will provide it with the necessary context. Class, as Thompson remarks, is not a structure formed outside the purview of history, it is inherently a historical phenomenon.²⁸ Hence, it is a prerequisite to state why the aforementioned period is recalled as 'unsettling,' addressing the contemporary socio-political predicaments; aiding in historical contextualisation of the thesis. Hence, it is pertinent to ground the research in the various political, economic, social, and cultural triggers at provincial, national, and international levels that created the fecund ground for the emergence of transformed labour activism. The events and factors that spurred these changes both over a period and immediately demand an insightful analysis.

The War, an Egalitarian Revolution, and Ushering of New Age of Working-Class Politics:

The horror and the pillage of the First World War (1914-1919) resulted in a veritable crisis of liberal imperialism and capitalism precipitating a desire for an alternative ideology and economic system. The Bolshevik Revolution in Russia shattered the infallibility and

²⁷ Bagchi, Amiya Kumar. "Workers and the Historian's Burden." In *The Making of History: Essays Presented to Irfan Habib*. Edited by K.N. Pannikar, T.J. Byres, and Utsa Patnaik, 276- 321. New Delhi: Tulika, 2011.

²⁸ Thompson, E.P. *The Making of the English Working Class*. London: Vintage, 1966

superiority of the Western Bloc, especially Britain.²⁹ The message of global proletarian upliftment, the vision of an egalitarian society, and emancipation from the shackles of imperialism made it an indubitable decolonial force to reckon with. Throughout the 1920s it led to the emergence of new political actors in the field of labour radicalisation moulding the trajectory of working-class politics in the province. The messianic aura of Lenin sent a ripple across Bengal, from a tormented peasant reeling under the tyranny of landlordism to scores of disillusioned, imprisoned youths in the colonial jails, who dreamt of a socialist revolution.³⁰ The relentless colonial anti-Bolshevik propaganda and systematic vigilance against dissenters of colonial rule opened up a new chapter in constructive criticism of the Empire.³¹ The contemporary press, literature, and opinions, mostly in the vernaculars, were more eloquent than ever in their criticisms of the colonial government.³² The revolution presented with an alternative perspective to materialistically criticise the Governmental policies and counter the drain of wealth and oppression of the colonial labour and peasant mass. The outcome was a more robust discourse on labour struggle which was a marked departure from the mainstream, lukewarm Gandhian politics of labour welfare and the creed of individual violence, the signature of the revolutionary terrorists in Bengal.

²⁹ Joshi, Sashi, and Bhagwan, Josh, eds. *Struggle for Hegemony in India*, Vol.1. New Delhi: Sage Publication, 2011.

³⁰ The influence of Bolshevism was quite overreaching. Rathindranath Tagore, the son of Rabindranath in his memoir of his father mentions an intriguing event in North Bengal where he was presiding over a heated debate among villagers on the bank of River Padma. An old peasant commented, 'Sir, to talk a lot on rural problems means to talk rubbish. The *Swadeshi* youngsters talk tall about improving the country. But when it comes to real work, no trace of them can be found. Oh! If a man like Lenin had been born here, he would have put everything straight. '(Tagore, Rathinranath. *Pitrismriti* (Memories of my Father). Calcutta: 1966, p. 217, as translated by Chattopadhyay, *Communism and Bengal's Freedom Movement*, p. 37.)

³¹ For more on anti-Bolshevik propaganda in India refer, Datta Gupta, Sobhanlal. *Comintern and the Destiny of Communism in India 1919-1943*. Calcutta, Seribaan Publication, 2016.

³² For details on vernacular polemics of the Empire in the immediate aftermath of the war in 1919 consult: Roy, Anuradha. *Bengal Marxism: Early Discourses and Debates*, Kolkata Samya, 2014.

The Great Depression, the Slump in Global Economy, and the Backlash on the Colonial Economy

The Wall Street Crash had an unprecedented global impact, especially in the colonies which bore the brunt of the economic slump of the metropole. The Wall Street crash and the immediate crisis of global capitalism had spearheaded newer and more potent forms of exploitation of the working class, as post the First World War India ceased to be a mere exporter of raw materials. The development of the secondary sector further tied it intimately with the global economy making it vulnerable to economic instabilities.³³ The distinct paranoia of the colonial state was evident in its offensive against the anti-colonial movement in general, and the working class in particular. Unemployment rose with plummeting real wages during 1929-30.³⁴ The depression provided a premise for a strong intellectual and polemical criticism of not just the immediate economic policies of the Raj but the basis of its very foundation in itself. Moreover, the public enquiries initiated post-First World War covering taxation, currency exchange rate, labour policies, agriculture, and banking, literally, all aspects of the economy provided ample arsenal at the disposal of the nationalists to question the inept governmental measures in the management of the crisis.³⁵ These platforms were conducive for debates and petitions in the legislative councils where the nationalists could plead their cases. Despite official records claiming a rise in real wages in the aftermath of the depression, the heavy casualisation of labour triggered waves of strikes in several industrial ghettos of Bengal. It precipitated a new discourse on working-class radicalisation, capitalist persecution, and ways to counter it.

³³ Simmons, Collin. "The Great Depression and Indian Industry: Changing Interpretations and Changing Perceptions," *Modern Asian Studies*. Vol 21, No. 3, 1987, pp. 585-623.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Industrial Disputes in India 1929-36, *Bulletins of Indian Industries & Labour*. No. 62, 1937, pp. 11-24.

Initial Forays into Labour Radicalisation: The First General Jute Strike (1929) and Announcement of the Royal Commission on Labour

The first united struggle by various jute mill workers across Bengal culminated in a massive strike wave during July and August of 1929 against the mass layoffs of workers and increasing working hours in the mill. It was organised by the Bengal Jute Workers Association, one of the foremost jute unions in the city.³⁶ By 1928 it was affiliated to the All India Trade Union Congress (A.I.T.U.C) and was initiating international connections.³⁷ Being a coalition of socialists, nationalists, and humanitarian labour activists, it paved the way for a full-fledged trade union movement in the coming two decades in the province. The British Government responded with a crackdown on leftist trade union leaders across the colony which initiated the infamous Meerut conspiracy trials in 1929.³⁸ While discussing the Association the official report commented, ‘This union took a prominent part in strikes some years ago, and it was run mainly by persons known to have extremist connections. Some of them indeed, are at present under trial in the Meerut Conspiracy Case.’³⁹ In March 1929, the general secretary of the union, Dharani Goswami, and one of the vice presidents, Gopendranath Chakravarti were arrested in connection with the Meerut.⁴⁰ The unexpected offensive did create some immediate setbacks but soon the executive committee was reinstated with veteran labour activist Miss Prabhabati Dasgupta as its president along with Bankim Mukherjee.⁴¹ The strike took the suburbs by storm in late July of 1929, but despite its scale, it was surprisingly orderly.⁴² The strike garnered enough press attention to alert the government and by 8 August, a notice of an adjournment motion was served in the legislative council by Congress member, Dr. Bidhan Chandra Bose to discuss the strike situation.⁴³ The

³⁶ WBSA, Commerce Department, File 30, 1 April, 1930, Nos. 13-18.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ IB File: 320/1928. (First General Jute Strike).

⁴¹ WBSA, Commerce Dept., File 3C-1, April 1930, No. 19.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 10 August, 1929.

mill owners were so intimidated by the collective action of the workers, that in an unprecedented move, they approached the government first, abandoning their long-standing aversion towards state intervention.⁴⁴ The strike though ended due to a botched negotiation between the I.J.M.A.(Indian Jute Mills' Association) and the strike committee headed by Dasgupta, it transformed the very essence and praxis of working-class activism in Bengal.

Much to the colonial state's consternation, despite their vigorous anti-communist propaganda and vigilance, the much-publicised Meerut trials resulted in immense publicity of the socialists and communists who had been detained, insinuating public interest in the egalitarian ethos of communism. However, the mass upsurge of 1929 holds pertinence as it initiated an official discourse and a renewed interest in labour governance. The British Government set up the Whitney Commission in 1929 for a thorough (re)assessment of the materialistic conditions of the labouring mass in the colony.⁴⁵ The Royal Commission submitted its report in July 1931. This was followed by a reinvigorated effort on the part of the government to win over the moderate sections of the working-class activists through legislative and administrative efforts.⁴⁶ Notwithstanding, the labour acts that were passed during the period, like the Trade Dispute Amendment Act (1932) or the Factories Act (1934) were at best a tepid response to the exigency.⁴⁷ The official narrative that there was a resultant decreased labour militarisation from 1936 needs to be confronted by citing the instances of myriad sporadic strikes and new trade unions that emerged throughout the first half of the 1930s. The Meerut trials proved catastrophic for the nascent trade union organisation in the province, yet the working class in various sectors consolidated.⁴⁸ The Second General Jute Strike in 1937 stands as testimony to it.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ File 3C-1.

⁴⁵ Industrial Disputes in India 1929-36, *Bulletins of Indian Industries & Labour*. No. 62, 1937, pp. 9-11, For further information, *Report of The Royal Commission on Labour in India*. Calcutta:GOB, 1931.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ghose, Pramita. *Meerut Conspiracy Case and the Left-Wing in India*. Calcutta: Papyrus, 1978.

⁴⁹ Gordon, Leonard A. *Bengal: The Nationalist Movement 1876-1940*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1974.

The Second World War (1939-45), the Great Bengal Famine (1943), and the Final Days of the Empire

The years leading to the war witnessed augmenting privation of the already hard-pressed labouring mass in the colony. From 1939 onwards major agitations revolved around the payment of war bonuses, protection against the rumoured bombing of the city, and the escalating food and cloth shortages. Several sectors including the electrical works and the tramways were declared compulsory under the 'Essential Services Act.' The bombing of Rangoon in December 1941 led to mass hysteria and an exodus of the urban labour force to the countryside.⁵⁰ The adoption of the *People's War* line by the Soviet Union post the breach of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact integrated a fairly localised movement into the globalised agitation against *fasibaad* (fascism), blurring spatial constraints. The strikes and protests did not merely address the immediate issues vexing the urban working class in the city but promoted the cause of the proletariat across the globe, transforming the ontology of the movement in itself. This was coupled with the horrific outcome of the Bengal Famine in 1943, which sharpened their dissent and simultaneously the oppressive nature of the capitalists in particular, and the colonial state in general, resulting in puissant working-class militancy and a heightened sense of class consciousness.⁵¹

An Active Landmine of Communal Politics:

It is imperative that a thesis based on late colonial Bengal will have to be grafted in the complex communal nexus given the peculiar demographical composition of the province. The susceptibility to communal dissensions was further aggravated by the sporadic migration of non-Bengali-speaking workers from the bordering areas of Bihar and Orissa.⁵² Calcutta

⁵⁰For a background on this, Gordon. *Brothers Against the Raj: A Biography of Indian Nationalists Sarat & Subhas Chandra Bose*. New Delhi: Rupa & Company, 1997.

⁵¹ Mukherjee, Janam. *Hungry Bengal: War, Famine and the End of Empire*. New Delhi: Harper Collins, India, 2015.

⁵² For more refer to, McPherson, Kenneth. *The Muslim Microcosm: Calcutta, 1918 to 1935*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1974.

witnessed violent eruptions of communal riots from the late nineteenth century onwards. The Government of India Act of 1935 and the resulting ornamental provincial autonomy stirred up this inimical trend and fresh currents of political tension in the Muslim-majority province of Bengal.⁵³ After the first Provincial election in 1937 despite Congress emerging as the single largest party, its decision to boycott the legislature led the *Krishak Praja Party* to form the government supported by the Bengal Provincial Muslim League under the leadership of A.K. Fazlul Haq.⁵⁴ What transpired was a decade-long communal divide and the passing of extremely regressive labour policies. The decade of the 1930s and 1940s witnessed innumerable communal riots spearheaded by both the government and the *Hindu Mahasabha* and other Hindu communal associations.⁵⁵ The pro-capitalist stand of the government and its proximity to the direct stakeholders in the various capitalist enterprises led to rampant yellow unionism and corporate policing of the movement. The final lap to independence and the unprecedented violence of the partition proved to be particularly challenging for the working population of the city. The ways they reconciled with their newly gained consciousness with their erstwhile community consciousness bore significant implications for the working class and the decolonial movement even in the post-colony.

IV. Trade Unionism, Working-Class Consciousness, and Transcontinental Anti-Colonialism: A Historiographical Assessment

The labour or trade union movement in Bengal is beyond doubt one of the most cultivated fields when it comes to ruminations on parallel histories of mainstream accounts of Indian anticolonialism. The initial impetus for penning down working-class history instinctively came from communist activists and trade unionists who worked in the field from the 1940s within the various leftist circles and from the late 1960s in the left regime of Bengal.

⁵³ For more on the communal politics of colonial Bengal consult, Chatterjee, Joya. *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932–1947*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

⁵⁴ Further reading on electoral politics of Bengal post-1937 and working class refer, Basu, Subho. *Does Class Matter? Colonial Capital and Workers' Resistance in Bengal (1890–1937)*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004, 225-273.

⁵⁵ Das, Suranjan. *Communal Riots in Bengal 1905-47*. New Delhi: OUP, India, 1991. Chatterjee, *Bengal Divided*.

Accounts of Chinmohan Snehanobis, Gautam Chattopadhyay, and later (most widely referred to) Sukomol Sen produced in the 1960s and 1970s provide a teleological description of the transcendence of the labour movement into a full-fledged trade union movement under the auspices of the Communist Party of India.⁵⁶ Despite their factual richness, these narratives are overtly eulogistic in depicting the actions of the party and the communists in organising the colonial working class. This resultant bias is an occupational hazard which to an extent is self-explanatory and albeit ineluctable. These accounts are testimonies of sincere research and are invaluable repositories of lived experiences of proletarian revolutionary action and serve as pertinent alternative sources to counter and complement official sources.

The topic was broached by trained historians from the late seventies and especially in the eighties. Saha or Basu declared themselves as historians of modern India specialising in the field of labour.⁵⁷ They raided the archives and produced volumes based on official statistics and reports essentially on the jute industries (which were most abundantly available). However, despite this spectacular rigor and monumental collation of primary materials, these accounts failed to raise the critical methodological and disciplinary questions that entail the history of class struggle and its origin.

An exception in this regard and the first path-breaking enterprise that literally 'rethought' working-class history was Dipesh Chakrabarty's seminal work on the jute industry in Bengal from 1890-1940.⁵⁸ In spite of subscribing to a Marxist approach and being an ardent admirer of E.P. Thompson, Chakrabarty opposed the reductionist view of 'class

⁵⁶ Sehanobish, Chinmohan. *Rush Biplob o Prabasi Bharatiya Biplobi* (The Russian Revolution and Émigré Indian Revolutionaries). Calcutta: Radical Impression, 1973.

Chattopadhyay, Gautam. *Communism and Bengal's Freedom Movement*, Vol I (1917–29). New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1970. Sen, Sukomol. *Working Class of India: History of Emergence and Movement 1830-1990*. Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi & Co., 1997.

⁵⁷ Saha, *History of the Working-Class Movement in Bengal*. Saha, *Pioneers of Indian Trade Union Movement*. Reprint, Kolkata: Parul, 2014. Basu, Nirban. *The working class movement: A study of jute mills of Bengal, 1937-47*. Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi & Co., 1994. Basu. *The Political Parties and the Labour Politics, 1937–47: With Special Reference to Bengal*. Calcutta: Minerva Associates (Publications), 1992.

⁵⁸ Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Rethinking Working –Class History, Bengal 1890-1940*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989.

consciousnesses' resorting his allegiance to Gramsci.⁵⁹ The cultural turn insinuated by the Subaltern collective attempted to connect Marxist historiography, post-structural criticism, and hermeneutical traditions, which he imbibed while addressing the emancipatory politics of the jute-mill workers within the universalised paradigms of 'capitalism,' 'class struggle', and 'consciousness.'⁶⁰ However, his position that the worker's affiliations to religion, caste, or language were vestiges of 'peasant consciousness' or a 'primordial loyalty' (the term preferred by Chakrabarty), and hence a manifestation of community consciousness but not class consciousness came to be challenged by economic historian and his colleague at Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, Ranajit Das Gupta.⁶¹ The outcome was an invigorating, posed debate on consciousness which captivated the labour academics globally in the eighties.⁶² Das Gupta based his polemics on the structural Marxist standpoint to counter Chakrabarty's analysis of the Tallah Riots of 1897.⁶³ According to Das Gupta, the workers were not necessarily driven to action by any primordial instinct but by an informed, conscious decision, which embodied and reflected their class positioning and not mere communal identities.

With the discourse on consciousness (taking the jute mill workers in Bengal at the epicentre of research) still garnering considerable scholarly attention; fuelling perceptive deliberations in the 1990s, Basu's incisive monograph, '*Does Class Matter?*' was released in the early 2000s.⁶⁴ It was reflective of the cultural turn in social history from the 1980s

⁵⁹ Thompson, E.P. *The Making of the English Working Class*. London: Vintage, 1966.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ The term 'primordial loyalty' has been popularised by Chakrabarty in *Rethinking Working-Class History*. The most significant of Das Gupta's work is Das Gupta, Ranajit. *Labour and Working Class in Eastern India Studies in Colonial History*. Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi & Company, 1994.

⁶² Refer to Chakraborty, Dipesh and Ranajit, Dasgupta. *Some Aspects of the Labour History of Bengal in the Nineteenth Century : Two Views*. New Delhi: Oxford, 2019. The volume highlights a series of lectures delivered by the two historians at the CSSC and the subsequent papers produced from them and the debate on consciousness that ensued.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Basu, Subho. *Does Class Matter? Colonial Capital and Workers' Resistance in Bengal (1890–1937)*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004.

precipitated by the neo-liberal turn in global politics and the subsequent collapse of orthodox Keynesian economic commentaries. The pertinence of 'class' as a tool of meta-analysis in the comprehension of historical processes was questioned.⁶⁵ Basu, in the vein of his supervisor Rajnarayan Chandravarkar, established the rural ties of the jute mill workers but simultaneously probed the revolutionary impulses by designating the site of militarisation at the factory floor, urban living quarters as well as the incipient union offices. His analysis explored the interactions of politics of capital, colonial administration, and the itineraries of trade unionism.⁶⁶ Basu's primary endeavour was answering the query of the hour, 'Does class Matter?' His response though pretty straightforward, 'Indeed, it matters, but not in a way many historians have imagined in the Indian context,' opened a floodgate to further speculation on 'class' and its analytical potentialities in the deliberation of labour movements in the Global South.⁶⁷ This thesis draws from his methodological and theoretical interventions that refuse to subscribe to the binaries of viewing class as a monolithic construct perpetuated and propagated through socialist parties or the other proposition that rushes to fill the void of class through other communal or cultural monolithic constructs. Resultant narratives lead to blatantly assigning predestined identities to them, denying them agency to 'make and unmake class as a political category.'⁶⁸ The thesis similarly aims at a nuanced account that acknowledges the complexities of multiple and overlapping identities at play to redefine class as a category of historical analysis in contemplating the working-class radicalisation of Calcutta.

With the advent of the New Left in the 1960s, the focus shifted from the interpretation of class struggle through the unilinear lens of dialectical materialism to a more holistic

⁶⁵ Schneider, Michael. "In Search of a "New" Historical Subject: The End of Working-Class Culture, the Labour Movement and the Proletariat," *International Labour and Working-Class History*. Vol.32, 1987, pp. 45-58. Hobsbawm, Eric. *Politics for a Rational Left: Political Writing 1977-1988*. London, Verso Books, 1989. Hall, Stuart. *The Hard Road to Renewal*. London: Verso, 1988.

⁶⁶ Chandravarkar by taking the cotton textile workers as his case study elucidated how rural ties affected employment conditions and revolution impulses in urban occupational spaces. (Chandravarkar. R.S. *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India*.)

⁶⁷ Basu, *Does Class Matter?*, pp. 283.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

outlook based on other categories of historical analysis of race, religion, gender, and sexuality.⁶⁹ However, it was not before the late 1990s that this lacuna was adequately addressed in the South Asian context. Samita Sen's ambitious project, *Women and Labour in Late Colonial India* was a novel venture in writing a gendered history of the jute mill workers in Bengal.⁷⁰ She harped on the point that despite the infiltration of socialist elements in the trade union movement in the twentieth century, there was no explicit cognisance of capitalist exploitation along the axis of gender. The 'women's question' among the working class was clubbed with the overreaching discourse of class struggle and emancipation of the labouring class.⁷¹ While accepting the towering pertinence of the work and the rigour of the scholarship, the thesis will put forward contradictory views on female agency and gendered praxis which focuses on augmenting the prominence of female participation in the movement.

Owing to the abundance of accessible and organised primary data on the jute industry in Bengal, initially, it monopolised the field of scholarship on colonial labour and trade unionism. A notable exception was Siddhartha Guha Ray's research on the tramway workers in Calcutta.⁷² He accentuated the impact of the working-class movement on contemporary political developments and predicaments. The lack of organisation never hindered the heightening radicalisation among these men. Charting a genealogy of the inception of trade unionism and its development among one of the foremost actors in the transportation sector, he simultaneously pens down an invigorating account of the urban history of colonial Calcutta. He highlights the methodological overlaps, establishing how labour history can be approached through multifarious facets of socio-economic and cultural history.

⁶⁹ Renaud, Terence. *New Lefts: The Making of a Radical Tradition*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021. Farred, Grant. "Endgame Identity? Mapping the New Left Roots of Identity Politics," *New Literary History*. Vol. 31, No. 4, Is There Life after Identity Politics?, 2000, pp. 627-648.

⁷⁰ Sen, Samita. *Women and Labour in Late Colonial India: The Bengal Jute Industry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ray, Siddhartha Guha. *Calcutta Tramwaymen: A Study of Working Class History*. Calcutta: Progressive Publishers, 2007. Ray. "Tramworkers of Calcutta: Some Reflections on Their Unionisation and Political Experience 1920 to 1930," *Social Scientist*. Vol. 14, No. 5, 1986, pp. 15-32.

Of late there has been a raging debate about the bifurcation of ‘class politics’ and ‘identity politics’ which have been naturalised by the influx of scholarship perpetuating this divide.⁷³ It is ironic since not only did ‘identity’ become cardinal and apparent with the advancement of capitalist society, but also emerged as a key tool in shaping, depiction, and interpreting narratives of selfhood in the period. Perna Agarwal's unpublished thesis (upcoming monograph) grapples with this crucial theme of how Muslim selfhood was reconciled within the contours of decolonial class struggle by focusing on the ‘murky world of labour politics in Calcutta's docklands.’⁷⁴ The theme of how the dissemination of communism in Bengal was intimately associated with pan-Islamic currents in the twentieth century is ventured erstwhile, but what gets relegated to the fringes of these deliberations are the complexities of everyday Muslim labour politics and its negotiations with various political actors (the colonial state, Muslim League, and the socialist and the communist parties). Her research promises to fill this particular void. However, despite being perceptive in her narration and an impressive stint with the primary sources, it fails to address adequately the internal tensions between several leftist factions involved in trade union politics of the dock workers which further complicated their relationship with the Muslim League and eventually the colonial government.

The latest addition to the scholarship on Bengal's jute industry was Anna Sailer's investigation into the shifting workplace relations among the jute mill workers in Bengal from the late nineteenth century up to the First General Jute Strikes of 1929.⁷⁵ Her account approached the labour politics in Bengal from a disparate perspective, successfully

⁷³ Kumar Ashok, Dalia Gebrial, Adam Elliott-Cooper, and Shruti Iyer. “Introduction, [Marxist Interventions into Contemporary Debates](#),” *Historical Materialism*. Vol 26, No. 2.

(DOI: <https://www.historicalmaterialism.org/special-issue/issue-262-identity-politics>, Accessed on 6 July 2023)

⁷⁴ Agarwal, Perna. *Planting the Red Flag: Early Communists and the Politics of Labour at the Port of Calcutta, 1920s-1940s*, King's College, London, 2018. Supervisor: Jaffrelot, C. O. (Supervisor) & Guyot-Rechard, B. (Supervisor) (Unpublished Thesis)

Agarwal. "In the name of constitutionalism and Islam: the murky world of labour politics in Calcutta's docklands." pp. 138-142. In *Corporate Policing, Yellow Unionism, and Strikebreaking, 1890-1930, In Defence of Freedom*, edited by Matteo Millan and Alessandro Saluppo. New York: Routledge, 2021.

⁷⁵ Sailer, Anna. *Workplace Relations in Colonial Bengal: The Jute Industry and Indian Labour, 1870s-1930s*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022.

navigating the drudgeries of the polarities of class and culture. The result was a ‘global history of work’ pervading the politics of capital and colonialism.

The thesis built its cardinal theoretical and methodological perceptions within the larger ambit of inception and progression of leftist politics in colonial South Asia in general and Bengal in particular. While a cult classic like Laushey’s account assists in finer grasping of the political and ideological shift in marginal expressions and imaginings of nationalism, (the progressive turn from ‘revolutionary terrorism’ to ‘communism’) it fails to account for the global channels of ideological circulation and its impact on the local trade union movement.⁷⁶ Suchetana Chattopadhyay’s two monographs and her broader research interests serve as an excellent pedagogical tool in this regard.⁷⁷ Her biography of Muzaffar Ahmad while tracing the divergent contours of his activist, ideologue, and political career, is also a parallel chronicle of early twentieth-century Calcutta’s cosmopolitan public sphere, the emergence of myriad streams of ideological consciousness, the consultation, conference, and compromise among them and the larger apparatuses of colonial drain and capitalist exploitation.⁷⁸ It provided this thesis with a better methodological foundation and a nuanced source treatment. Creating quite a stir in the field of decolonial communist internationalism recently was Ali Raza’s, *Revolutionary Pasts*.⁷⁹ The monograph claimed to redefine spatial categories in producing an overreaching narrative of the communist movement in the un-partitioned Indian subcontinent. Drawing from a reservoir of primary sources Raza made an honest effort to address the decisive moments of communist consolidation in the country but primarily limits himself to Punjab and North India. It is not unusual to stress historically neglected regions in historical iterations over the overtly addressed one (in this case Bengal) but Raza, unfortunately, falls prey to the age-old trope of misleading categorisation, and conceptions, especially while grappling with women and communism in colonial India.

⁷⁶ Laushey, David M. *Bengal Terrorism and Marxist Left: Aspects of Regional Nationalism in India, 1905-1942*. Calcutta: Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1975.

⁷⁷ Chattopadhyay, Suchetana. *An Early Communist: Muzaffar Ahmad in Calcutta 1917–1929*. 2nd ed. New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2012. Chattopadhyay. *Voices of Komagata Maru: Imperial Surveillance and Workers from Punjab in Bengal*. New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2018.

⁷⁸ Chattopadhyay, Suchetana. *An Early Communist*.

⁷⁹ Raza, Ali. *Revolutionary Pasts: Communist Internationalism in Colonial India*. Cambridge: CUP, 2020.

The genesis of communist thought in Bengal as a device to espouse the province and the country from the yoke of colonialism is a discourse that has been dealt with exhaustively. However, what has been neglected is how the ideology is envisioned and imbibed not in isolation as a strategy for national liberation, but as an anti-imperialist juggernaut for Southeast Asian decolonisation. Bengali labour activists and revolutionaries were no strangers to the revolutionary ethos of communism. This thesis attempts to tend to this lacuna by tracing the transcontinental anticolonial networks of the Bengali trade unionists through the lens of Intellectual History. Elucidating Indian revolutionary intellectual connections, Kris Manjapra pens down a transnational biography of M.N. Roy.⁸⁰ By tracing Roy's journey from being an ardent follower of Bengal 'revolutionary terrorism' to his association with Weimer German politics up to the tumultuous forties in world politics, he advocated against the conceptualisation of 'international communism' of the 1920s as an uncontested monolith. His following monograph further provided pertinent analytical and methodological tools to engage in the intellectual history of decolonial propensities of transcontinental communism by delving into Indian and German intellectual entanglements.⁸¹ In a similar vein, Laursen's critical biography of Indian anarchist M.P.T Acharya pushes the contours of left internationalism and throws new light on the nexus of overseas networking of Indian leftists pervading the structural impediments of colonialism, imperialism, fascism, and left factionalism.⁸² It broadens the definition of transnationalism or transcontinentalism in itself and its role in the emancipatory politics of the Global South. However, it was Tim Harper's *Underground Asia*, which has been particularly beneficial while tracing the emergence of collective consciousness of anti-colonialism across the Global South.⁸³ Harper's meticulous depiction of the interconnectedness of leftist revolutionaries and their praxis opens up further research possibilities revolving around the colonial history of communist persecution and surveillance.

⁸⁰ Manjapra, Kris. *M. N. Roy: Marxism and Colonial Cosmopolitanism*. New Delhi: Taylor & Francis, 2010.

⁸¹ Manjapra, Age of Entanglement: *German and Indian Intellectuals across the Empire*. Boston: Harvard University Press, 2015.

⁸² Laursen, Ole Birk. *Anarchy or Chaos: M.P.T. Acharya and the Indian Struggle for Freedom*. London: Hurst Publishers, 2023.

⁸³ Harper, Tim. *Underground Asia: Global Revolutionaries and the Assault on Empire*. Boston: Harvard, 2021.

As evident from the previous section, intellectual history and its research itineraries are central to this project. To an extent, one of the central aims of this thesis is to attempt an intellectual history of trade unionism in Bengal from a global frame. Since the global turn in intellectual history and the proclivity of countering the epistemological violence of the enlightenment augmented in the scholarly ruminations on anti-colonialism, it furnishes decisive analytical devices in doing 'intellectual history from below.'⁸⁴ While Sartori's work on 'vernacular liberalism' concerning the Muslim peasants and agrarian policymakers as thinkers, debunks the myth of designating the colonial state as the sole site of epistemological transformations, and the elite actors as the official intellectuals of the state, it was Milinda Banerjee's conceptualisations on popular sovereignty is what provides a veritable foray into intellectual history from the margins.⁸⁵ Banerjee formulates the conception of a 'messianic sovereignty' influenced by peasant imaginations, fuelled by Hindu cosmology, and Christian and Islamic theologies. It demonstrated the plurality embedded in local constructs and established how the evolution of sovereignty in the last two centuries was a layered process far from being an uncritical diffusion of Western formulations of state-making or a divorce from the Indian monarchical traditions.

V. 'Class Analysis' to 'Class Struggle Analysis': A Note on the Sources and Methodological Intervention

An account addressing the socio-political roots of incipient ideological and revolutionary awakening within a marginal class or community warrants amplification of these 'small voices of history.' While the reliance on official or archival records is inevitable when researching the colonial working class, one should be mindful of its limitations. The official records are a manifestation of the perpetuating lineage of exploitation and erasure that the colonial (mis)governance embodied, hence inadequate for the purpose at hand. The

⁸⁴ The idea of Global Intellectual History was popularised by one anthology, Moyn, Samuel, and Andrew Sartori, eds. *Global Intellectual History*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013.

⁸⁵ Sen, "Mapping the Changing Notions of Inequality Among the Trade Union Leaders of Colonial Bengal." Sartori. *Liberalism in Empire: An Alternative History*. Berkeley: California University Press, 2014. Banerjee, Milinda. *The Mortal God: Imagining the Sovereign in Colonial India*. Cambridge: CUP, 2018.

dissertation employs sources ranging from archival materials which encompass police and intelligence reports, trade dispute records, analyses of labour commissions, legislative assembly and council debates, census records, imperial gazettes, fortnightly records, et. al to vernacular and English newspapers, journals, manifestos and pamphlets of the political parties and unions of the era.

However, it is pertinent to comprehend that class relations permeate through several aspects of social life. Despite 'class' being veritably a by-product of the workplace, confining it strictly to one domain results in an imperceptive slant on class formation. A helpful conceptualisation is considering capitalist societies to be functional across the 'three primary spheres of activities: paid workplaces, households, and communities.'⁸⁶ Hence, the notion of class struggle is not necessarily restricted to organisational functionaries, union delegate meetings, or ancillary processes, but also extends to informal networking, friendships, and domestic power plays. Alternative sources facilitate in overcoming these drawbacks, filling the gaps and silences in the official sources, countering it at times, and help in drawing a complete picture. The use of memoirs, autobiographies written by several socialist and communist activists, private papers, diaries, personal correspondences, biographies, personal notes, or eulogistic essays written by the members of a party on the demise of prominent party members, provides a rich repertoire for the design. Transcripts of oral interviews of prominent socialists, nationalists, and communist trade unionists are particularly beneficial in this regard since it yields a personal insight into the act of mobilisation and the intimate experiences of the leaders, unveiling the nuances in the process or else drowned in the technicalities and jargon of the official sources.

There is an innate propensity of reducing and restricting any class-based movement to its formal organisation negating the cultural basis of it. Autonomist Marxists like Moulrier opine that class composition, recomposition, and decomposition transcend the limits of the workplace spanning across capitalist societies covering political, social, and cultural aspects

⁸⁶ Livingstone, D. W., and Meg Luxton. "Gender Consciousness at Work: Modification of the Male Breadwinner Norm." pp. 100-129 in *Recast Dreams: Class and Gender Consciousness in Steeltown*, edited by D. W. Livingstone and J. Marshall Mangan. Toronto, Canada: Garamond Press, 1996.

of everyday marginal living.⁸⁷ The thesis heavily draws upon the intellectual endeavours of contemporary leftists. From contemplations on communism to fierce polemics of the imperialist state, from renowned ideologues on Marxism-Leninism to trade union activists, the thesis is a collated expression of how class struggle was received and reciprocated at disparate social and intellectual strata. The work is also reliant on the creative expressions of socialist artists: novelists, painters, playwrights, and musicians. Communism over periods and across the globe acted as a provenance of cultural assertions of dissent. It was not an exception in the case of colonial Bengal where scores of writers and painters yielded their pens and brushes against colonial oppression. While autobiographical fiction like Nazrul's *Mrityukhusda* (Hunger for Death) mirrors the disillusionment and dissatisfaction of the emerging generation over the Laodicean attitude of the National Congress towards anti-colonialism, communist painters like Somenath Hore or Chittaprosad were diligent party members who graphically captured the plight and the infuriation of the working class; the zeitgeist of a volatile late-colonial Bengal.⁸⁸ Visual forms of protests have stood the test of time as a potent tool of propaganda and for evasion of state surveillance. The research builds upon this rich repository of sources encompassing various spheres of working-class interactions: 'the connective tissues of cultural lives.'

The thesis maintaining its allegiance to the discipline is primarily based on rigorous archival analysis. As it is evident from the sections above an account of working-class radicalisation demands an engagement with primary sources across genres, the dissertation straddles several archives from state to privately owned repositories. Simultaneously, it also dabbles in the emerging trends and methodologies predominating the field of global and decolonial history in particular, and social sciences in general.

One of the phenomenal revolutions in the cultivation of decolonial history, perspectives, art, and culture has been challenging the structural dominance of colonialism in the sphere of knowledge formation. If we are vested with the task of, 'giving equal voice to

⁸⁷ Camfield, David. "Re-Orienting Class Analysis: Working Classes as Historical Formations," *Science & Society*. Vol. 68, No. 4 (Winter, 2004/2005), pp. 421-446.

⁸⁸ Islam, Nazrul. *Mrityukshudha* (Hunger for Death). Dhaka: Adorn Publication, 2011. Hore, Somnath, translated by Somnath Zutshi. *The Tea –Garden Journal*. Calcutta: Seagull, 2017.

those groups who have been marginalised and silenced, how do we do so?' ⁸⁹ By 'decolonising the archives,' one gets to combat not only the epistemological, but also the linguistic violence embedded in the official records, files, and the overreaching colonial discourse. The research is a conscious endeavor to illustrate this inimical trend of manufacturing statist discourses and propaganda against the indigenous anti-colonial struggle. Certain words like 'agitators', 'violence', 'exploit', and 'provoke', were frequently used in connection to the communist trade unionists and their activism in the intelligence reports. It highlights not just the colonial perception of these revolutionaries but also helps in unpacking the impetus behind the counter-revolutionary measures. From the mid-1930s there was an increased incidence of these terms in the official surveillance reports which serves as an accurate indicator of the burgeoning militarisation of the working-class movement during the period. The main rationale was equating any form of opposition to imperialism as illegitimate, uncivilised, and inept for self-determination.

Another potent way to confront the deliberate silences and gaps in the official archives is through a thorough implementation and consultation of alternative sources, especially literary sources. A major corpus of contemporary literature on communism, and reimagining decolonisation through the lens of class struggle has been central to this project. Hence, literary analysis and Critical Theory are indispensable analytical tools to scrutinise the evolution of power structures and their implications. Spearheaded by the Frankfurt School and advocated by Fromm, Adorno, and other Marxists alike, it facilitates redefining and broadening the contours of decolonial Marxism. ⁹⁰ Reading 'against the grain' redefines the ways of treating and scrutinising official sources. It assists in the creation of an alternative narrative of decolonisation bolstering voices from the margins and aiding in the reclamation of their agencies. What emerges as a consequence is a global history of labour or work. The

⁸⁹ Jimerson, R.C. "Archives for All: Professional responsibility and social justice," *The American Archivist*. Vol: 70, No. 2, 252-281, 2007.

⁹⁰ Critical Theory practised by theoreticians of the Frankfurt School like Theodor Adorno, Erich Fromm, Walter Benjamin, and others was a crucial analytical tool for approaches governing feminism, post-colonialism, critical race theory, etc. For more consult, Tyson, Lois. *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*, 4th ed. Abingdon: Routledge, 2023.

main aim is to situate a localised phenomenon, like a condensation of class consciousness among the labouring mass of Calcutta in a global frame.

However, the one method which acts as the backbone of this thesis, and the methodological intervention it attempts to make is overtly utilising vernacular sources for the work, or 'vernacularisation of sources'. Predominantly employed in the emerging field of 'Global Intellectual History' the eccentricities and versatility of vernacular sources help in retrieving the intellectual history of groups, collectives, and communities where conventional sources are inordinately difficult to come by due to inherent socio-political predicaments. Gone are the days of doing history of political thought by strictly implementing Skinnerian methods. The gamut of the literary output of the trade unionists who were never approached as normative 'intellectuals', assumes cardinal pertinence in this enterprise. Taking a cue from Andrew Sartori's work on 'vernacular liberalism' concerning the Muslim peasants and agrarian policymakers as thinkers, this research aims at debunking the myth of designating the colonial state as the sole site of epistemological transformations.⁹¹ The chapter establishes how the elite actors were not the sole official intellectuals of the state. What emerges as a consequence is a 'counter narrative' to the hegemonic discourse dominant in the established canons of the historiography in the field of anticolonial political thought in South Asia, a discourse that is generally dominated by the rhetoric of bourgeois nationalism. Situating trade unionism and working-class history at the intersection of class, caste, community, religion, and gender democratises the field of labour history ensuring a holistic approach towards history writing.

The thesis heavily draws from Sheldon Pollock's conceptualisations of the 'vernacular cosmopolis' or the 'Sanskrit cosmopolis'. The word cosmopolitanism has an overtly trans-temporal, trans-spatial, and transcultural connotation in contemporary deliberations on the evolution of intellectual traditions. Pollock opines that 'global' cosmopolitan cultures predate the emergence of local literary traditions which is often a consequence of encounter(s) with international literary traditions or languages. Pollock expands on this phenomenon

⁹¹ (The concept was introduced by Sartori in his book on Bengal peasantry and landed gentry.) Sartori, *Liberalism in Empire*. Also see, Sartori. Bengal in Global Concept History: Culturism in Age of Capital. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.

concerning the development of Sanskrit. He comments, 'Vernacular literary cultures were initiated by the conscious decisions of the writers to reshape the boundaries of their cultural universe. New, local ways of making culture...new ways of ordering society and polity came into being replacing the older translocalism.'⁹² Similarly, I harp on how Bengali was becoming a linguistic conduit for assimilation of multiple often contrasting strains of ideologies as Calcutta as an urban space as well as the trade union movement in the city mirrored the collation of several transcontinental currents be it communism, discordant streams of socialism, pan-Islamism, *Gadharism*, and others. It complicated not just the very process of intellectual decolonial networking but insinuated a local, indigenous parallel of a global ideology like communism. The form of communism conjured up was built upon the vestiges of anti-imperial nationalism now anchored in a new vision of an egalitarian postcolony. Particularly riveting were the vernacular translations and iterations of key concepts of Marxist-Leninist principles. The vernacular equals of class struggle (*sreni juddho*), dialectical materialism (*dwandamulok bostubad*), or declassified (*srenigyan heen*) highlights the nuances of linguistic politics underlying translations and their flexible and convenient interpretations aiding in maneuvering the demands of activism. It was stripped of the rigidity and fundamentality of its original, western counterpart, adding to the ever-expanding edifice of Marxist political thought and praxis. It further shifts the focus from Europe countering Eurocentrism in the field of knowledge formation in the history of Empires.

VI. Chapter Scheme, Theoretical Conceptualisations, and Historiosisation:

The thesis is divided into five core chapters arranged thematically to map the specific transitions (both material and non-material) that essentially were set in force from the decade of the 1930s and fetched Calcutta a transformed working class along with a whole new colonial discourse on labour organisation, leadership, mobilisation, and, most decisively, class consciousness. The dissertation contemplates these changing currents in the labour politics of Bengal from three cardinal perspectives: leadership or vanguardism, the responses within the working population of the city, and lastly the capitalists, the colonial state, and its

⁹² Pollock, Sheldon I. "Cosmopolitan and Vernacular in History," *Public Culture*. Vol. 12, Number 3, 2000, pp. 591-625.

administrative apparatuses to chart a holistic biography of the urban working class and a genealogy of revolutionary anti-colonialism in the closing decades of independence.

The first chapter explores the shift in the nature of middle-class leadership that the Bengal Trade Union Movement saw and will try to account for the rise of a completely new brand of leadership in the 1930s, whose belief was rooted in materialistic critiques of the colonial government and the oppressive nature of global capital. The adherents of this revolutionary gospel of socialism entailed a distinct social class of urban intellectuals who often hailed from the lower-middle classes and at times from within the rank of the proletariat themselves. This organic character of the movement transformed the contours of the late colonial middle-class labour leadership, and the intellectual enterprise spearheaded by them constituted a noticeable and noteworthy departure from the traditional canonical imaginings of nationalism. The chapter seeks to ponder upon several queries: the contentious question of the dialectical relationship between political ideology and practice. Can political actions be taken as an extension of political thought? How far can their ideological moorings be labelled as an organic intervention in Gramscian terms, and to what extent does their engagement in communist praxis aid in radicalisation of the working class aiding in the condensation of class consciousness?

This is a brief chapter that focuses on literally dissecting a union as an organisation along the lines of producing an autopsy in an anatomy lesson. The union, as a structural institution serves as the loci of my investigation. The subparts deal exhaustively with the organisation of such institutions and associations and the disparate modalities of their formation. The two case studies (Motor Car Trade Union and Calcutta Corporation Union) probe the variations in unionisation across sectors. The hardships of unionising workers in government sectors and local bodies like municipalities illuminate the intricacies and nuances of trade unions as an institution. A union, contrary to popular perception, can be lethal ammunition at the disposal of the capitalists and the colonial state, as it can be manoeuvred to suit their own interests. It further dwells on the various socio-political aspects in late colonial Calcutta which posed impediments in the path of union-making in a few sectors of the city.

The third chapter is dedicated to tracing the heightening of class consciousness and working-class radicalisation through the act of striking. It traces how striking, from being

spontaneous and isolated in the 1930s, emerged as the most potent form of protest in the manifestation of the dissent of the working class in the 1940s. The chapter is a succinct instance of how dynamic the source usage can get in recording a biography of the colonial working class. There is employment of diverse genres and varieties of source materials ranging from official police records to vernacular newspapers that mirror contemporary public opinions, and contemporary leftist journals to pamphlets, leaflets, and manifestos. The chapter is divided into two major sections. The first concerns itself with how strikes were becoming part of the working-class protest lexicon since the 1930s in colonial Calcutta and its evolution from the thirties to the forties. It illustrates how the very act of striking in itself is radicalised by focusing on the war years, the surging inflation, the 1943 famine, the bombing of Burma, and ultimately Calcutta. Whereas, the second part will cater to the broader issue of the acquaintance of the working class and the urban masses with the language of the class. Analysing protest meetings, rallies, and strikes in solidarity with May Day, The Spanish Civil War, the fall of Berlin, and other global contemporary predicaments, it attempts to demonstrate how dissent by the proletariat transcended the spatial constraints of the provincial and the national and became a global phenomenon—an agitation literally 'uniting the workers of the world!'

The penultimate chapter concerns itself with what can be put as 'the unholy trinity' of the capitalists, the colonial state, and the police. It illustrates the convoluted and entwined nature of the interests of the capitalists and the imperial state. The overlap in mutual interests at instances was so conspicuous, that it is pertinent to analyse this systematic oppression towards labour radicalisation in relation to these three factors in collation, but not in isolation. The chapter is divided into subparts evaluating the counter-revolutionary actions of all these three actors. From the legal chicanery that the state resorted to contain working-class radicalisation to the tactics adopted by the capitalists to break strikes and deny the workers their legitimate claims, it scrutinises the structural repression embedded in these three institutions. However, what is most riveting is how these forces in conjugation insinuated the creation of white or pro-state unions that weaponised communalism to prematurely break strikes and crush the movements.

The police did the bidding on the part of the capitalists and the state to contain working-class militarisation. They were fundamentally driven by a larger motive, an ideological propaganda war against Bolshevism. The last chapter probes how the Empire's hysteria against the revolutionary ethos of communism and its anti-colonial essence was at the root of the proliferation of the surveillance apparatus of the colonial state. It is an in-depth analysis of the itineraries of colonial state surveillance in Bengal to weed out the 'contagion' which steadily 'infected the minds of the subject population'. Each of these factors was dwelt upon incisively to trace the transformation in functioning of the surveillance apparatuses citing examples chronologically from the 1930s to the 1940s. So, that there is clarity in the process of transition and reinforcement of a better comprehension of the influence of imperial surveillance on colonial governance in the closing years of the British *Raj* in India.

Hence, to convey the rationale behind this research or any research on the colonial working class for the fact, one has to probe the implications of the organised and structured violence of the colonial capital on the future of trade unionism in the post-colony. Even a spontaneous, unscrupulous recollection of West Bengal's history in the immediate aftermath of partition prompts the realisation that similar constraints plagued it even two years down the line. The structural flaws of colonialism as a system are so endemic that it persists, perpetuates, and even manifests disquietingly on occasions of extreme vulnerability. It is now more susceptible to instabilities being directly integrated into the global market economy as the buffer of colonialism ceases to exist. Similarly, the statist strategy of countering any form of dissent in the face of a political crisis has remained unchanged (both legal and extra-legal) and inconsequential to the actors in power. The anti-colonial dreams were realised but decolonisation is a long perilous road ahead. The process is far from complete and here lies the significance of this research. It exhibits how the questions around consciousness or dialectics are not a chimera of the past but ever relevant and consistently pertinent, and now, perhaps, more so than ever.

Chapter One:

The Remoulded Vanguard: Transformed Leadership and Trade Unionism in Colonial Calcutta

“Oi Dekho Sagarer Pare,

Sramajibi Sata

Kemon Sangram Roto

Ei broto Robe na Andhare

Aye Tora Dekhi Je Sobare”

(Awake, Arise, O Workingmen and follow the examples of the awakened workers of the West Beyond Seas)¹

The couplet mentioned above is taken from the poem ‘*Sramajibi*’ literally translating to ‘Labourer’ or ‘one who earns his living through menial work’ composed by prominent Brahmo activist Shibnath Shastri in 1874 for the first issue of *Bharat Sramajibi*, the pioneering journal in India dedicated to the issues pertaining to the working class in the country. Perhaps written as an homage to the revolutionary toilers of the Paris Commune (1871), the word ‘*Sramajibi*’ was sporadically emerging in the public sphere of colonial Bengal and was garnering a particular cognizance from the upper-middle-class gentry in the late nineteenth-century. Sasipada Banerjee, the founder of the *Sramajibi Sabha* or Workingmen’s Association at Baranagar, a suburb in North of Calcutta in 1873, was the chief editor of this mouthpiece. He was a philanthropist who was inspired by the Temperance

¹ Translation by Dr. Panchanan Saha as cited in Saha, Panchanan. *Pioneers of Indian Trade Union Movement*. Kolkata, Parul, 2014, p 21.

Movement during his stay in England.² This *Sabha* in a very similar vein catered to the labourers in the jute mills of northern Calcutta as it was instrumental in opening night schools, widow homes, and district banks for them. The stint with welfarist endeavours among the working class became a regular phenomenon among the western-educated *Bhოდ্রলোক* (genteel folks) class returning from England. The contemporary press stands as testimony to this phenomenon. A plethora of dailies and journals like *Samadarshee* (The Fair-Minded), *Sulabh Samachar* (Easily Available News), and *Sanjivani* (The Elixir) were spearheading a rudimentary discourse on the deplorable condition of the workers and especially coolie labourers in the factories and plantations of the colony. The working-class movement in Bengal drew its inspiration from the Chartists in England and how the working class interests were being represented by them around the 1840s, as labour journals like *The Union* called for the upliftment of workers on humanitarian lines.³ Despite the efforts of these Anglicised Bengali humanitarian labour activists remaining overtly restricted to journalism, it did coerce the colonial government to pass regulatory laws like The Factory Acts of 1881, 1891, and 1911. Thought barely touched the tip of the iceberg and fetched nothing tangible.⁴

The period of the First World War (1914-1919) exposed the structural and moral poverty of liberal imperialism, which also witnessed the outbreak of the Russian Revolution in 1917 as a veritable alternative to the socio-economic order. The currents of the Bolshevik revolution and its revolutionary message successfully diffused from the metropole to the colonies through a handful of émigré Indian revolutionaries. They toured Europe and the Americas and steadily pulled into the various radical circles which inspired them to develop an alternative vision of an egalitarian world order based on the nascent ethos of Socialism. This

² Banerji, Sir Albion Rajkumar. *An Indian Pathfinder: Being the Memoirs of Sevabrata Sasipada Banerji, 1840-1924*. Oxford: Kemp Hall Press, 1934. The Temperance Movement was a social movement which began in the early nineteenth century against the rampant consumption and abuse of alcohol in the United Kingdom. Also refer to, Chakrabarty, Dipesh. "Sasipada Banerjee: A Study in the Nature of the First Contact of the Bengali Bhadrakol with the Working Classes of Bengal," *Indian Historical Review*. Vol. 2, 1976.

³ Saha, *Pioneers of Indian Trade Union Movement*, Kolkata, Parul, 2014, pp. 41-43. Chartism or the Chartist Movement was the first working-class movement in the United Kingdom. It started following the failure of the 1832 Reform Act to extend the vote beyond the property-owning class. Refer, Thompson, Dorothy. *The Dignity of Chartism*. Edited by Stephen Roberts. London: Verso Books, 2015.

⁴ Industrial Disputes in India 1929-36, *Bulletins of Indian Industries & Labour*. No. 62, 1937, pp. 11-24.

led to a noticeable transformation in the trajectory of how trade union leadership came to the fore and the subsequent discourses and dialogues it initiated in late colonial Bengal. It changed the nature of middle-class leadership in coordinating the anti-colonial movement in general and working-class politics in particular. Besides, the trade union leadership inevitably led to a plebianisation and countering the tides of the predominance of upper-caste *Bhoddoloks* in the field. The Indian National Congress (INC), which was essentially the bastion of upper-middle-class, landed gentry, indigenous capitalists, and, white-collar conglomerates, failed to accommodate the disparate and marginal political aspirations of this emerging leadership class in early twentieth-century colonial Bengal. Shaped by the multifarious ideological and political currents that became the archetype of the city of Calcutta and the resultant urban cosmopolitanism provided them with the fluidity and space for a genre of activism that did not quite fall in line with the established political etiquette of the period.⁵ The networks of the Gandhian mass movement, revolutionary terrorism, and the nascent wave of socialism assembled to furnish a fertile ground that nurtured this budding leadership class from the 1920s onwards. However, this process of remoulding reached its zenith in the 1930s, the resultant outcome was a brand of declassed intellectuals with perceptible leftist and communist orientations.

This chapter intends to explore significant political and socio-economic factors at the international, national, and provincial levels that triggered some fresh transformations in the political milieu of the working-class politics of Bengal. It was the Russian Revolution of 1917 that inspired the creation of networks and exchanges among some Indians by forging a political solidarity to counter the scourges of British imperialism. These interactions led to the formation of a rudimentary socialist coalition within the INC which finally culminated in the formation of a separate functional Communist Party and other factional non-conformist left parties by the late 1930s.

⁵ Ray, Rajat. *Urban Roots of Indian Nationalism: Pressure Groups and Conflict of Interests in Calcutta City Politics 1875–1939*. New Delhi: Vikas, 1979 .

One of the fundamental focuses of this chapter is to map out the critical developments taking their space and place in late colonial Bengal, especially in the urban vicinities of Calcutta which configured the composition of trade union vanguardism. The chapter also aims to bring forth an alternative discourse on the colonial state and its impact by exploring the intellectual undertakings of the trade union leaders in late colonial Bengal. The study will attempt to outline the dialectic relationship between class and community consciousness and their opinions on inequalities of religion, caste, and gender, as well as a staunch polemic of the deleterious consequences of imperialism and capitalism.

The existing gamut of literature on trade unionism in twentieth-century Bengal deals with the performative aspects of the political activism of the leadership class. It however glosses over their auxiliary faculties that aided the formation of trade union leadership in Bengal.⁶ Besides, the intellectual lens of trade union leadership was overlooked by the extant scholarship. It is pertinent to explore the plethora of literature encompassing political essays, organisational manifestos, public speeches, personal memoirs, and correspondences of these leaders. At the outset, this research contends that these leaders developed distinctive characteristics, which originated from their endeavour to bridge the gap between political practice and ideological prisms. These men articulated their ideas in writing, which was in vernacular Bengali, and their discourse was aimed at the people coming from the margins of society.

These discourses can be seen as an intervention in mapping out local responses and adaptations to socialist ideas and agendas. The autobiographies and memories of these leaders provide a potent tool to assess the nuances of their process of declassing as it mirrors the habitual dilemmas that entail the dialectical interplay between individual radicalisation and the then-established social norms, which often posed impediments to the ground-level mobilisation. Therefore this chapter aims to outline this evolution within working-class leadership in colonial Calcutta, thereby trying to highlight an alternative genealogy or narrative of anti-colonialism rooted in class struggle and internationalism, rather than

⁶ Refer to section, IV. *Trade Unionism, Working-Class Consciousness, and Transcontinental Anti-Colonialism: A Historiographical Assessment* in the Introduction of this thesis.

nationalism. As nationalism as a form of critiquing colonialism remains omnipresent in all mainstream historical debates on decolonisation.

1.2 A Historiographical Reassessment

The discourse on middle-class leadership in popular movements in colonial India has been one of the most extensively worked on fields of history. From the Cambridge School hypothesis on the competition – collaboration to the Nationalist-Marxist school of Bipan Chandra stressing the Gandhian mass movement.⁷ In the 1980s, Sumit Sarkar elucidated the myth-making surrounding the popular leadership in the anti-colonial struggle. His writings offer a breakthrough approach to debunking the myth of Gandhi's aura as a mass leader solely attributed to his charismatic persona. Instead, Sarkar argued that it was the socio-political dynamics of the early twentieth-century Indian freedom struggle, which mobilised all classes of Indian people was behind Gandhi's appeal.⁸ The turn to 'History from Below' was spearheaded by the Marxists to contemplate different facets of 'elitism' that were at the heart of middle-class leadership.

While the aforementioned scholarship is decisive in critiquing the agency of the Indian nationalist struggle and praising the birth of proletariat consciousness and trade union movements, some of the historical questions remain unanswered. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya's extensive work on trade union leadership in colonial Bombay and Bengal provides crucial insights. But the hypothesis revolving around "surrogate leadership" of non-working class intelligentsia's role in articulating the class aspirations of the labour and working-class people in colonial Bengal fails to explain the historical trajectory of the rise of organic leaders in the

⁷ For more information on the competition-collaboration theory in history of Nationalism refer, Seal, Anil. *The Emergence of Indian Nationalism: Competition and Collaboration in the Later Nineteenth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971. For the Nationalist-Marxist school and their ruminations on middle-class leadership, refer, Chandra, Bipan, Mridula Mukherjee, Aditya Mukherjee, Sucheta Mahajan, and K.N. Panikkar. *India's Struggle For Independence (1857-1947)*. New Delhi: Penguin India, 2000.

⁸ Sumit Sarkar, *Popular Movements & Middle Class Leadership in Late Colonial India: Perspectives and problems of a 'history from Below'*, New Delhi, Aakar Books, 2015.

movement from the 1930s onwards.⁹ Therefore, this chapter offers a probe into to what extent the trade union vanguardism in late colonial Calcutta was ‘organic’ in truly Gramscian terms.

The discourse on leadership in the trade union movement in late colonial Bengal has often come to the fore while discussing the mobilisation patterns of the working class and the different levels of functioning in the Indian National Congress and the Left parties in generating militant working-class activism. Subho Basu how by the late 1920s, the workers were dissatisfied with the Gandhian trade unionists and the rhetoric of *ahimsa* (i.e., non-violence) and *satyagraha* or self-sacrifice, which was detrimental to their political progression.¹⁰ Basu’s extensive work has shown how various political organisations’ labour activism from the 1930s was greatly interrupted by the state’s changing policies from time to time. This process also brought controversy to the ideological orientation and factionalism in the movement.¹¹ However, these accounts remotely address the process of declassing the new brand of trade union vanguards in the city. Struggles, which mitigated the contentious terrain between political ideology and practise, were another ignored aspect in the extant scholarship that warrants historical attention. A noteworthy exception is Suchetana Chattopadhyay’s diligent biography of Muzaffar Ahmad who was a notable Communist labour organiser of this period. This study significantly elucidates how the interaction between individual radicalisation and the wider established social stigmas often posed several impediments concerning the ground-level labour movement undertaking.¹²

Against this backdrop, this chapter seeks to address how some variations took place in the demographics of the city of Calcutta. It will exhibit how the burgeoning urban cosmopolitanism provided trade union leaders with a flexible space to explore their articulation

⁹ Bhattacharya, Sabyasachi. “The Indian Working Class and The Nationalist Movement”, *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*. 10:1, 53-67, DOI: 10.1080/00856408723093.

¹⁰ Basu, Subho. *Does Class Matter? Colonial Capital and Workers’ Resistance in Bengal (1890-1937)*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004.

¹¹ Basu, Nirban. *The Political Parties and the Labour Politics, 1937-47: With Special Reference to Bengal*, Calcutta: Minerva Associates (Publications), 1992.

¹² Chattopadhyay, Suchetana. *An Early Communist: Muzaffar Ahmad in Calcutta 1917- 1929*, New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2012.

of the emergent global philosophy on decolonisation and their subsequent efforts to build localised support for the same. The chapter will attempt to carve out the intellectual and political trajectory of the city's trade union leaders. Many of them were prolific writers or editors of several weeklies and journals. This print culture aimed to educate the working class in the rhetoric of the class struggle. The methodology of intellectual history is specifically beneficial here. The trade union leaders' acquaintance with global intellectual thought is one area of analysis, which paved the way for new lines of decolonial ruminations from the 1920s onwards. Andrew Sartori's work on 'vernacular liberalism'¹³ which took the Muslim peasants and agrarian policymakers as 'thinkers' provides a veritable entry point for my current study. Hence, it intends to debunk the myth of designating the colonial state as the sole site of epistemological transformation and the elite actors, the sole official intellectuals of the state. Colonial Bengal in the early twentieth century, specifically after the 1920s would exemplify a historical trajectory of indigenous reception to the egalitarian ideology of socialism. The Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 inspired a certain set of intellectuals in Bengal with a discernible left orientation. While a considerable number of historiographical researches focus on these conventional left intellectuals, the trade unionists or their literary ventures never fell into the ambit of the generic Marxist intellectual history. This chapter aims at addressing this void by concentrating on theoretical conceptions of Marxist-Leninism which often get relegated to the fringes of mainstream historiography.

The chapter is divided into two parts, followed by important subsections. The first part of the chapter will deal with some noteworthy socio-political transformations at the international, national, and provincial levels which prompted the advent of a new brand of leadership in the late 1920s and 1930s. The second part of my chapter will examine how these leaders were going through the process of moving away from the class hierarchies of the then-colonial Bengali society. The autobiographies and memoirs of trade union leaders reveal the habitual dilemma that they were put through in the process of attaining certain class consciousness while trying to organise the workers on similar lines. For instance, Ahmad who belonged to a family of humble legal clerks initially wanted to train himself in

¹³ The concept was introduced by him in Sartori, Andrew. *Liberalism in Empire: An Alternative History*. California, California University Press, 2014.

English, so that he could study in-depth the development of the Islamic civilisation.¹⁴ From being a devout Muslim to getting disillusioned with religion as a whole, disenchanted by religious rhetoric and its misuse in popular movements, Ahmad's growth as a communist and a trade unionist demonstrates the interplay between personal and political ideology and beliefs and how they moulded his consciousness.

Their essays, speeches, and interviews are beneficial to assess their outlook on structural inequalities prevalent in the contemporary society of Bengal. This chapter also intends to illustrate the ideological shifts in comprehension of the anti-colonial movement in general and the working-class movement in particular, which in turn, aided in their rise to political prominence.

1.3 The Russian Revolution, Transcontinental Exchanges, and Calcutta as the Hub of Rising Cosmopolitanism¹⁵

Bengalis have for long been traversing the Indian Ocean for trade, and technical training, most pertinently for education. As the struggle for national liberation garnered momentum, several Bengalis fared the sea to seek international assistance to espouse the nation from the yoke of British colonialism. The transcontinental and transnational ties of the trade union vanguards in the late colonial Bengal aid in the comprehension of how Communism (re)molded visions of decolonisation in the Global South. How a global ideology like Socialism was conceived, and how it triggered a fairly organic local response both in the spheres of intellectual discourses as well as political practice. These trade unionists transcended the spatial constraint of provincial, national, and continental while conceiving decolonisation.

¹⁴ Ahmad, Muzaffar. *Somokaler Kotha* (Tales from Contemporary Times). Kolkata: National Book Agency Private Limited, 1963.

¹⁵ The use of Socialism and Communism in this thesis has been distinct. While I use Socialism more as an umbrella term to connote all the activists or the worldviews which resembled any adherence to the Left ideology, the use of Communism have been more particular and in relation to either members of C.P.I. or who clearly declared allegiance to the Soviet line of Socialism.

Roughly, the two centers that emerged as the hub of revolutionary activities before the First World War (1914-1919) were Berlin and Moscow.¹⁶ On the eve of the War, an alleged conspiracy was cooked up between the German nationalists and Indian radical revolutionaries whereby the Indians wanted to exploit the British vulnerability and launch a full-blown revolution in the colony.¹⁷ It is germane to our inquiry to understand that these revolutionaries were strictly nationalists and their sole purpose was the procurement of arms and foreign aid. Their ideological landscape was hardly pervaded by any inkling of socialism. The egalitarian ethos hardly had any space within the ambit of their political aspirations which was monopolised by nationalism. Their social composition to an extent holds the answers to this nonchalance. Most of these revolutionaries belonged to upper-caste Hindu families who composed either the landed gentry or the white-collar class in the province. The daily plight and the struggle of the working class did not constitute their immediate concern.¹⁸ However, this trend started undergoing a change by the late 1910s.

Virendranath Chattopadhyay, alias Chatto like most of his contemporaries went to London to prepare for the ICS (Indian Civil Service) examination in 1909. Failing to crack it, he enrolled himself to become a barrister, but in the process was steadily being drawn into the vortex of the revolutionary currents abroad.¹⁹ Though a typical Nationalist bourgeoisie, he was exposed to a myriad of ideological currents through his interactions with Irish, Russian, Polish, and even Western Asian revolutionaries in Berlin. It was under his leadership that the Indian Independence Committee (IIC) or Berlin Committee was formed in 1914.²⁰ He headed

¹⁶ Sehanobish, Chinmohan. *Rush Biplob o Prabasi Bharatiya Biplobi*, pp. 26-81.

¹⁷ Bandyopadhyay, Premansu Kumar. "German Military Aid to the Indian Revolutionary Parties for anti-British Armed Uprising in India, 1914-15", *Journal of Asiatic Society*, LXIII, no-1-2 (2021): 73-112.

¹⁸ For more on these revolutionary groups refer, to Ghosh, Durba. *Gentlemanly Terrorists. Political Violence and the Colonial State in India, 1919-1947*. [Critical Perspectives on Empire.] Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017.

¹⁹ West Bengal State Archive: Intelligence Bureau, henceforth, will be referred as IB. IB File: 34/1926 (Indian Communist Abroad).

²⁰ Ibid. Dutta, Bhupendranath. *Aprakashito Rajnoitik Itihas* (Unpublished Political History), Calcutta: Nababharat Publication, 1953.

the committee till the 1915 post which Dr. Bhupendranath Dutta took charge.²¹ Germany was becoming the hotbed of revolutionaries at that time. The Berlin Committee tried to establish cross-continental solidarities of Indian revolutionaries hailing from disparate ideological currents.²² From The Ghadar Party members which had its hold in the United States, Canada, and even parts of Latin America to sending missions in Far Eastern countries like Japan, China, Singapore, and Java, it left no stones unturned.²³ However, by the beginning of 1919 Axis defeat became evident and the Bolshevik Revolution became a veritable decolonial force to reckon with. Post the Revolution in Germany, the Berlin Committee was also dissolved by the end of 1918.²⁴ The split was inevitable since it was a coalition of revolutionaries harboring disparate political opinions. It became impossible to negotiate ultra-nationalist visions of a post-colonial India as Socialist ideas were gaining further momentum in Europe.

In the aftermath of the First World War, the invincibility and charm of liberal democracy began to diminish, and the rise of communism in the context of the Russian Revolution of 1917 as an alternative economic order was gaining a positive reception in Europe and the Americas. These ideas found a novel inspiration in the colonies too despite the colonial state's staunch anti-Bolshevik propaganda. Émigré Bengali leaders like Chatto, Abani Mukherjee, and M.N. Roy travelled across Europe and the Americas during this period.²⁵ These men were trying to gather support from various socialist organisations like the League Against Imperialism and the Communist International to free India from the

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Snehanobish, *Rush Biplob o Prabasi Bharatiya Biplobi*, p.29.

²⁵ Roy, M.N. *Memoirs*, Ajanta Publications: New Delhi, 1964. Also, IB file:316/26. For more on it refer, to Chatterjee, Suniti Kumar. "Some Reminiscences of An Indian Patriot and Freedom-Fighter", in the Appendix of Snehanobish, *Rush Biplob o Prabasi Bharatiya Biplobi*. National archives of India (NIA) File No: Home Political PR 000003004084.

bondage of colonialism.²⁶ Their main aim was the formation of underground mass organisations of workers and peasants by bringing a radical anti-colonial struggle in alliance with international communist organisations.²⁷

Roy had been decisive in this endeavour. Starting as a revolutionary terrorist with the *Jugantar* Party, Roy was deep in deep waters in the Hindu-German Conspiracy during the war.²⁸ After an impressive globetrotting, he ended up in the South Americas where his stint with Socialist anti-colonialism was nurtured, and he was germane in the foundation of the Communist Party in Mexico.²⁹ In 1920, Roy finally turned his attention towards the Comintern or the Communist International.³⁰ He soon assumed the position of an authority on communism and the colonial question. With the funds received from the Comintern, he in collusion with Indians back in the colony, like Ahmad was hatching a plan to form a communist party in India.³¹

The Bengali youths took an active interest in Bolshevism in the 1920s and early 1930s. A Bengali vernacular weekly named *Chatra*, (The Student) in its issue commencing in the Bengali month *Ashwin* of 1930, published a series of articles from many contributors on Bolshevism. This weekly magazine praised its pro-working class and welfarist policies over the British colonial ones,

Almost the whole revenue of the country is spent on the maintenance of police and army as if the country is always in revolt! Look at Bolshevik Russia, she does not lack armies both

²⁶ Lenin-Roy debate in the Second World Congress of the Communist International (19 July– 7 August 1920) paved the way for the formation of the émigré Communist Party of India (CPI) at Tashkent (1920). Further, refer to Haithcox, John P. “The Roy-Lenin Debate on Colony Policy: a New Interpretation,” *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol.23, no.1, 1963, pp. 93-101.

²⁷ British Library , India Office Record, Public and Judicial Records, henceforth will be referred to as BLIOR, BLIOR/L/P&J/12/395. Revolutionary Activities in India/ Revire of Revolutionary Matters in Bengal.

²⁸ Bandyopadhyay, “German Military Aid to the Indian Revolutionary Parties for anti-British Armed Uprising in India.

²⁹ Roy, *Memoirs* ,pp. 58-73.

³⁰ Manjapra, Kris. *M. N. Roy: Marxism and Colonial Cosmopolitanism*. New Delhi: Taylor& Francis, 2010.

³¹ BLIOR/P&J/12/54. Report on Activities of Roy’s Agents in India.

*at home or abroad still does not spend all revenue in maintaining the army to neglect education, sanitation, industry, and commerce.*³²

Here, we can see how everyday issues of education, health, hygiene, and economy were pertinent issues emphasised by the Bengali vernacular news magazines while effectively criticising the colonial agency and its wastage of money on policing and wars.

They facilitated a steady inflow of both ideas and materials in print which spearheaded a nascent tryst with the new doctrine of socialism and indigenous reactions to it. Despite the heavy censorship of the influx of communist literature in Bengal through the implementation of The Sea Customs Act(1878) and the application of the provisions of General Communist Notification (GCN) for effective interceptions and seizure of any anti-imperialist publications, the new brand of working-class leaders found innovative ways to access them.³³ Muzaffar Ahmad, a veteran trade union leader, in his memoir, recounted how apprehensive and cautious the booksellers of the period were to avoid colonial surveillance mechanisms. However, Ahmad's first encounter with the Marxist-Leninist genre of literature was through one of the dealers, named 'Chakraborty, Chatterjee and Company', and he clandestinely used to access this book seller's secret godown. Books like Lenin's *Leftwing Communism* or essays like, 'Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?' or Gabriel Deville's *The People's Marx* (1883) formed their curriculum.³⁴

The British institutional framework on education in colonial India was aimed at supporting the British colonial agendas and benevolence in governance while belittling socialism as a utopian concept. The lectures on economics across Indian universities imparted to Indian students that socialism was a flawed economic system. Saumyendranath Tagore's recollection of his days at the Presidency College of Calcutta tells about how his professors were framing poor academic arguments against an economic order based on egalitarianism.³⁵ On this backdrop, anti-Bolshevik propaganda proved to be a double-edged

³² West Bengal State Archives, WBSA, IB. *Report on Native Newspapers, 1930. Chatra*, 1930.

³³ Petrie, Sir David. *Communism in India 1924-27*. Calcutta: Editions India, 1972.

³⁴ Ahmad, *Somokaler Kotha*, Calcutta: National Book Agency, p.26.

³⁵ Tagore, Saumyendranath. *Jatri (Voyager)*. Calcutta: Abhiyan Publishing House Ltd, 1975, p.113-14.

sword, which instead of deterring the subjects drew them close to the budding ideas of socialism. Indeed, books like *Socialism Fallacies* boosted their curiosities, thus making them desperate to procure literature on the class struggle and familiarise themselves with socialist ideas of an egalitarian society.³⁶

The city of Calcutta which was the epicentre of working-class activism in Bengal witnessed the opening up of a whole new arena of urban radical action. In the decades following the 1920s, the trade union movements were getting assimilated into the larger canvas of India's anti-colonial struggle. These movements facilitated a cosmopolitanism of ideas through contrasting but often complementary imaginings of nationalisms espoused by the Gadharites and the Pan-Islamicists and various streams of socialist and communist networks, which became fertile in the province.³⁷ Gandhi's call for the non-cooperation movement (1920) set a new wave of political mobilisation across the province, which was organised on an unprecedented scale during this period. Youths, irrespective of their age or gender, took to the streets to disobey the laws. Schools and colleges were boycotted. Police repression and intimidation became the order of the day. The prisons overflowed with a series of arrests and imprisonment of freedom struggle agitators. This movement was driven by fervent uncritical patriotism, but there was no clear political insight or in-depth strategy. These leaders with a barrage of spontaneity truly went by the line of this adage, *Age ke ba pran koribe k daan* which can be translated as 'Who will sacrifice one's life for the cause of self-determination?'³⁸ By the mid-1920s however, there was a discernible change in the movement's outlook. The untimely withdrawal of the non-cooperation movement in the context of post-*Chauri-Chaura* in 1924 and the rising impact of communism in the labour circles began to shape their ideological visions about self-rule for India and decolonisation.

³⁶ Ibid.111-113

³⁷ For an insight into how early Socialists in Calcutta and Bengal emerged from the early 1920s and their linkages and engagements with several other international currents for self-determination in colonial India and South East Asia refer to Chattopadhyay, Suchetana. *Voices of Komagata Maru: Imperial Surveillance and Workers from Punjab in Bengal*. New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2018.

³⁸ Tagore, *Jatri (Voyager)*, p.79.

1.4 The Tripartite Impact of Gandhian Mass Movement, Revolutionary Terrorism, and Marxist Leninism.

The birth of trade union leaders' ideology and its dynamics of functioning at the grassroots level in Calcutta during the 1920s and 1930s sprung from three distinctive streams of ideologies of this period, i.e., the Gandhian, the Marxist-Leninist, and the revolutionary terrorism. If the blending of these ideologies shaped the political sensibilities of the trade union leaders, it is crucial to examine how these leaders integrated their course of action based on the collation of these three ideological stratum.

Some trade union leaders were veterans and were already imprisoned erstwhile under communist conspiracy cases like the Kanpur Conspiracy Trials by the mid-1920s, Muzaffar Ahmad (discussed before) was one of the prime examples. Many others were primarily drawn into the vortex of trade unionism through the well-entrenched student movement in the province. Their minds were malleable like fragile clay pots and they were still in the quest for their true calling in the movement. Saroj Mukherjee, a prominent communist labour organiser in the 1930s and the 1940s in his memoir, 'Everything felt splendid then, adorning Khadder felt great, Congress was good, so as an individual act of violence and gunning down the Britishers. Then again, a new social order has to be adopted where no one will remain economically backward.'³⁹ The city of Calcutta was steadily becoming a hub for multifarious groups and factions of diverse ideological orientations. They used to hold regular study sessions and discussion circles as part of mobilisation drive to propagate their ideas and attract younger volunteers.⁴⁰

There were roughly three categories: the first category comprised the adherents of the Indian National Congress and their meetings were mainly held at residences of prominent *Swadeshi* leaders like Sarat Bose or C.R. Das. Various pro-independence terrorist groups operated their circles differently. There were considerable overlaps here not only between

³⁹ Mukherjee, Saroj. *Bharter Communist Party o Amra*. Calcutta: National Book Agency, 1985, p 10.

⁴⁰ *Note on the Policies and Activities of the Terrorist Parties in Bengal from 1937 to August 1939*, Compiled from the Records of I.B., C.I.D., Bengal, GOB, 1940.

the various factions of *Jugantar* and *Anushilan* but also within the Congress circles in this second category. These second category groups held their meetings at various messes, which were communal living places for bachelors inhabited by young collegegoers or petty clerks. These messes or mess houses were gaining prominence as the nucleus of rudimentary trade union activism. The revolutionary terrorist leaders from different parts of Bengal used to deliver their speeches in these gatherings which were followed by debates and discussions. Apart from these, the bookshops and small news-press houses used to be the den of these leaders, for example, the office of the news daily called *Sanhati* (Solidarity) which ran for quite a good part of the 1920s at Harrison Road.⁴¹

The third category is pivotal in understanding what transformed vanguardism in the labour movement. Physical culture or notion of masculinity in Bengal came to be associated with revolutionary terrorism since the partition of Bengal in 1905, which not only flamed radical nationalist sentiments but also aimed at countering the British colonial discourse of the effeminate Bengali men. Akharas or wrestling clubs providing similar services were common in the 1920s particularly the *Shimla Bayam Samiti* was organised by Amar Basu and a prominent trade unionist Bankim Mukherjee.⁴² It was also a lecture podium of Dr. Bhupendranath Dutta, a stalwart labour organiser in the late 1920s. Dutta was also an authority on communism given his erstwhile association with the *Ghadar Party* and his sojourn in Germany around the First World War.⁴³ His illustrious lectures on socialism familiarised the third category of the younger generation of leaders in the rhetoric of class struggle who played a proactive role in associating their movement towards communism by the early 1930s. Indeed, with the veritable lack of leftist literature and the bickering overseas communication with Comintern via Roy due to strict surveillance from the colonial state in India, these émigré revolutionaries played a crucial role in imparting lessons on Marxism-Leninism by engaging their followers in intense debates and passionate discussions. One of the would-be trade union leaders in Calcutta, Saumyendranath recounted how Russia returned Shibnath Banerjee imparted him lessons in Russian, which proved beneficial as the

⁴¹Mukherjee, *Barter Communist Party o Amra*. pp 11-12.

⁴² *ibid*

⁴³ Sehanobish, Chinmohan. *Rush Biplob o Prabasi Bharatiya Biplobi*. Calcutta: Radical Impression, 1973.

English translations of the works of Marx and Lenin were difficult to procure during this period.⁴⁴

This newer brand of leaders were individuals who were caught up in the ebb and flow of mainstream anti-colonial struggle characterised by the Indian National Congress which was essentially a bastion of upper-caste Hindu *bhoddrolks* (genteel folks). Their ideas expressed through writing articles and in print point out their general disillusionment with appeasement politics laced with heavy overtures of Hindu revivalism, and instead, they advocated a new egalitarian world order for the betterment of society. In his seminal novel *Mrityukshuda* (1929) or *Hunger for Death*, Kazi Nazrul Islam portrays the ideological transformation of the protagonist, Ansar, an erstwhile Gandhian turned into a communist. Ansar denounced *charkha* (spinning wheel) for a more militant course of action to achieve the goal of independence for India.⁴⁵ Their transformed political aspirations and visions in the 1920s-1930s barely found any in an organisation by the upper-class bureaucrats, barristers, and white-collar clerical conglomerates. The autobiographies and memoirs of trade unionists like Muzaffar Ahmad echo similar sentiments.⁴⁶ Once, greatly moved by the fiery writings of Gandhi in *Young India*, later his move to combine the Khilafat movement with the Non-cooperation movement, and his advocacy of the four *varna* system received severe criticism from these trade union leaders newly imbibed doctrine of Marxism.⁴⁷ There is a complex set of class backgrounds entrenched in the transformation of their ideas and ideologies. Not only they were adherents of a new gospel of socialism, but also their identity entailed a distinct social class of urban intellectuals who hailed, often from the lower middle classes and at times from the rank of proletariat themselves. Defined by a clear departure from the traditional canonical view of nationalism, the late colonial middle-class labour leadership spearheaded a movement that was essentially organic in character from the 1920s onwards.

⁴⁴ Tagore, Saumyendranath. *Jatri (Voyager)*. Calcutta: Abhiyan Publishing House Ltd, 1975, p.118-119.

⁴⁵ Islam, *Mrityukshuda*.

⁴⁶ Ahmad, *Amar Jibon O Bharater Communist Party* (My Life and The Communist Party of India). Calcutta: National Book Agency, 1969.

⁴⁷ Tagore, *Jatri (Voyager)*, Calcutta, Abhiyan Publishing House Ltd, 1975, p.109.

This section has illustrated how a group of young communists, who began their activism career as nationalists in their initial years and were later drawn to the vortex of revolutionary terrorism around 1928 and 1929, eventually found a different genre of opinions and ideology. By the mid-1930s, with a deeper stride into Marxian literature, these men either joined the Communist Party of India (CPI) or any other factional left parties that were blooming at this time. Nonetheless, this was a phase of transition, characterised by veritable ideological tensions and inevitable overlaps. The process of conversion from the jingoistic nationalism of ‘revolutionary terrorism’ to communism was in flux throughout the thirties. This can be best illustrated by a statement from Promode Sengupta, a transcontinental communist, in an interview from 1971,

Many old terrorist revolutionaries were looking towards Communism. They probably started calling themselves communists since that time. But at that time in Bengal, there was no sharp demarcation between our old revolutionaries and communists. As a matter of fact, at that time, we did not clearly understand what Communism was really supposed to be, we still were getting acquainted with Marxism. ⁴⁸

1.5 The Workers’ and Peasants’ Party (WPP): A Stride towards Communism and Left Factionalism.

Indians started making their presence felt in the Communist International in the 1920s itself. The Colonial Thesis of Lenin sparked off a new discourse among the Indian intellectuals regarding the course of action to attain freedom from British imperialism. M.N. Roy, on the invitation of Lenin, wrote an alternative thesis as a criticism which culminated in the famous Lenin-Roy debate at the Second World Congress of the Communist International (19 July – 7 August, 1920).⁴⁹ This paved the way for the formation of the émigré Communist Party of India or Indian Communist Party at Tashkent in 1920. Roy, with the cooperation of his other

⁴⁸ NMML Oral Interview Transcripts. Interview of Promode Sengupta by Dr. A.K. Gupta. Calcutta, 4 February, 1971.

⁴⁹ Haithcox, John P. “The Roy-Lenin Debate on Colony Policy: a New Interpretation,” *The Journal of Asian Studies*. Vol.23, No.1, 1963, pp. 93-101.

companions, stimulated the organisation by recruiting them back in the colony. Neither satisfied with the appeasement politics of the INC nor being contented with the individual acts of terrorism of the revolutionaries, these new brand of leaders set their quest for an alternative path, and Roy proved to be an instrumental force behind this

From 1925 onwards, Bengal had witnessed a small coalition of individuals headed by Kazi Nazrul Islam, Hemanta Sarkar, Qutubuddin Ahmad, and others known as the *Labour-Swaraj Party*. The mouthpiece of the collective *Langal*, edited by Nazrul was decisive in the crystallisation of rudimentary socialist ideas, even though Saumyendranath described it as ‘coated with a brush of Communism but mainly packed with overtures of extreme nationalism.’⁵⁰ Ahmad and his comrades joined the *Labour-Swaraj Party* in 1926, and M.N. Roy thought this would be the perfect legal cover of a mass front for the formation of an underground Communist Party because he knew that creating the rubric of the *Labour-Swaraj Party* was the only way to avoid imperial surveillance. In an intercepted letter dated February 1926, written to Ahmad under the alias of ‘J’, Roy comments thus:

*We do have the illusion that C.P. can be organised in India legally... fight for legal existence but build the party illegally. Remain a legal body as long as possible but build up a powerful underground organisation. Preserve your legality as long as you can but do not have it at the expense of activities essential for the growth of the party...Every little act of a real Communist is a blow to Imperialism and the Imperialist knows it; therefore, if a Communist does not act illegally, he must pass his life in prison...There is no fair play no gentlemanliness in revolutionary struggle*⁵¹

Based on these strategic difficulties in mind, in 1926 at an annual conference at Krishnagar, the *Labour Swaraj Party* was turned into a formal provincial branch of the Peasants’ and Workers’ Party (WPP) or rather merged with it. It had Atul Gupta as President and Saumyendranath as General Secretary. ⁵² The official reports of this period point out

⁵⁰ Gautam Chattopadhyay, *Communism and Bengal's Freedom Movement, Volume 1 (1917-1929)*, New Delhi, People's Publishing House, 1970, pp 96. And Saumyendranath Tagore, *Jatri (Voyager)*, Calcutta, Abhiyan Publishing House Ltd, 1975, p.127.

⁵¹ Intelligence Bureau Files (henceforth will be referred as IB) file no: 320/26, (Workers’ and Peasants’ Party)

⁵² IB File No: 320/26.

that, from its inception, the WPP tried to lure various factions within Congress into its fold. The WPP became an umbrella organisation, where different shades of socialists, leftists, or lone labour organisers joined the party.

But post-1926 Kanpur conference of CPI, (formally a branch of CPI was formed in 1926) party's manifesto resounded the general disillusionment which was shaping among the newer brand of leaders about the INC, "The existing Nationalist parties in India are demanding Dominion status which is no struggle for freedom...it is a downright betrayal of the nation. The people must have freedom complete and unconditional."⁵³ This can be attested from the memoirs of Saumyendranath, when the WPP's annual conference in 1926 coincided with a conference of the Bengal provincial branch of Congress (BPCC) at Krishnanagar. While the WPP conference was held at the Town Hall of Calcutta, the Congress conference's venue was Krishnanagar *Rajbari*.⁵⁴ Saumyendranath criticised the Congress party's organisational politics as 'historical irony.' This aspect reveals the true nature of Congress as a party driven by class bias and the reason why a bourgeois party could never uphold the interests of the working class.

In the period between 1926 and 1927, the WPP failed to attract much attention among both the public and the intelligence officers given the endemic issue of scarcity of funds which hampered the spread of the party's political activities.⁵⁵ But by 1927 the scenario was transforming with the W.P.P party making steady inroads into labour circles, unionising several jute mills in Calcutta and the adjacent suburbs. The 1928 Bhatpara Conference of the party came under the scrutiny of the Intelligence Department.⁵⁶ This was because of the rapidly growing popularity and acceptance within the labour circles, which brought the WPP leaders under the brassbound surveillance of the colonial state.⁵⁷

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Saumyendranath Tagore, *Jatri (Voyager)*. (Calcutta: Abhiyan Publishing House Ltd, 1975, p.127.)

⁵⁵ IB file no: IB 320/26. (Bengal's Peasants Workers Party)

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ For more refer to, Mukhopadhyay, Ashoke Kumar ed., *India and Communism: Secret British Documents*, Calcutta: National Book Agency, 1997.

The report on the conference disclosed the State's anxiety as it highlighted a significant change in the linguistic pattern and approach in their resolutions that were approved in 1926-27.⁵⁸ Envisaging a plan of action to attain freedom, the 1926-27 manifesto proclaimed that, 'Non-violent mass action will be the principal means for the attainment and realisation of the *Swarajya*, complete independence for India.'⁵⁹ On the other hand, in 1928, the manifesto was changed thus, 'The rallying of people to mass action will be the principal means for the realisation of complete independence.'⁶⁰ An apprehension arose in the colonial intelligence report when it observed: 'The omission of the word 'non-violent' as regards to mass action is a significant advance on its creed.'⁶¹ Such kind of draconian colonial surveillance system only resulted in round the clock scrutiny of these leaders and the party's office at the Harrison Road in Calcutta.⁶²

The colonial government's inclination to tag the labour movement along with the revolutionary terrorist movement, despite the apparent differences between these two can be seen as a tactical move to implement the existing anti-terror laws like the Bengal Suppression of Terrorist Outrages Act (BSTO) or the Bengal Criminal Law Amendment Act (BCLA) to suppress the 'red contagion'.⁶³ The Meerut conspiracy trials in 1929 in which thirty-one trade unionists and communists were detained show the colonial state's interventionist regime on the ground.⁶⁴ The arrest of Ahmad was a major blow to the party as he was one of the chief labour organisers and office-bearers.⁶⁵ As a result, the budding

⁵⁸ IB 320/26, Report of WPP Conference in Bhatpara, 1928.

⁵⁹ Ibid. Manifesto of the Workers' and Peasants' Party, Bengal, 1926.

⁶⁰ Ibid., Manifesto of the Workers' and Peasants' Party, Bengal, 1926.

Ibid., Manifesto of the Workers' and Peasants' Party, Bengal, 1926.

Ibid.

⁶¹ IB file no: 320/26.

⁶² Chattopadhyay, *An Early Communist*, pp. 217-232.

⁶³ Chattopadhyay, "The Bolshevik Menace: Colonial Surveillance and the Origins of Socialist Politics in Calcutta," *South Asia Research*. Vol. 26, Issue. 2.

⁶⁴ Ghose, Pramita. *Meerut Conspiracy Case and the Left-Wing in India*. Calcutta: Papyrus, 1978.

⁶⁵ Chattopadhyay, *An Early Communist*, p.226-232.

communist circles and their coalition in India, including in colonial Bengal, reeled under pressure and grappled with a lack of funds, and irregularities in the supply of literature and propaganda materials.⁶⁶ With Ahmad's absence, international correspondences had also dwindled putting a severe blow to the labour organisation.

Followed by the 1928 Communist International and the adoption of the sectarian path, there occurred general disagreements among the WPP members. The marked communist faction primarily comprised a newer brand of trade unionists who opened the provincial office of the CPI in Calcutta in 1931.⁶⁷ This was just the beginning of a chain of factionalism that the left-wing unionists went through during the 1930s. Several non-conformist left parties began emerging from the early half of the decade like the Congress Socialist Party (1934), The Royists (1931), the Bengal Labour Party (1933), and Communist League (1934), Forward Bloc (1939), and others. This kind of discord created some obstacles in the path of a united labour movement in Bengal. To break the working-class agitation, the colonial state orchestrated different kinds of treatment between the Congress-led trade union coalition and the Red Trade Union Congress affiliated with the CPI. At the same time, there were considerable overlaps between these various factions. In 1937, the release of several erstwhile revolutionary terrorists who joined these factions further accelerated the process of conversion from 'terrorism' to Marxism. According to official records,

*"It seems too early to make a well-defined division of the various socialist and communist groups operating in Calcutta and in whole Bengal as they have not yet taken to any proper shape. Fundamentally there is very little or practically no difference in the ideologies of the Communist groups. The difference that has been created was mainly due to petty squabbles for personal disagreements between the leaders."*⁶⁸

While there is some truth in the above observation, left factionalism in Bengal should not be just attributed to mere personal disputes, instead, my study suggests that there were

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Chattopadhyay, *An Early Communist: Muzaffar Ahmad in Calcutta*, p. 226-230.

⁶⁸ IB file 632/37, (Division of Communist & Socialist Groups).

few indigenous responses to the communist counter-currents, which developed in response to the ideological debates going within the Communist International itself. While in Moscow around the late 1920s, Saumyendranath had developed his difference of opinion with the Stalinist lobby. His admiration for Trotsky and subsequent ideological differences with the CPI in Calcutta forced him to establish his political faction, the 'Communist League', known as the *Ganabani* group, in 1934.⁶⁹

The above section has elucidated through discussion concerning what are the socio-political circumstances that transpired in Bengal, which facilitated the emergence of a new brand of trade unionists in the working-class movement of Bengal. What began in the 1920s, the so-called nascent trade unionists discovering their ideological footings, later spiralled into distinct socialist and communist groups by the 1930s, which helped in the evolution of the trade union movement in late colonial Calcutta. However, this was a process and a clear demarcation between these disparate ideological triggers is impossible as often there was a collation of multiple influences that influenced these new vanguards and their praxis. In the following pages, the chapter will outline the intellectual pursuits of these leaders, and how they approached critical ideological and political issues in their contemporary times. It would be particularly in analysing their intent and what elicited their transformative political praxis in the history of the trade union movement in particular and the anti-colonial movement in general in colonial Bengal.

1.6 Vision of an Egalitarian World Order: A Critique of Imperialism, Fascism and Bourgeoisie Capitalism

The decades following the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 witnessed the production of constructive criticisms among the trade unionist leaders on structural inequalities, which were entrenched in the very ideologies justifying the dominance of one country over another. The discourse of the trade union leaders was inspired by the ideas and socialist norms of communism and Marxist-Leninism, which pointed toward the oppressive state machinery of the colonial state. The result was a robust criticism of the socio-political and economic drain

⁶⁹ Ibid., file : 166/26.

of the colony (i.e., the Indian subcontinent) based on robust empirical data and by employing perceptible logic rather than the of patriotism. Socialist mouthpieces like *Langal (The Plough)* and *Ganabani (Message from the Masses)*⁷⁰ were their boulevards to voice their opinions and build a strong public awareness through growing readership.

Throughout the 1920s these unionists produced essays that were a scathing onslaught on the colonial state and its imperial designs. Steeped in the principles of Marxist-Leninism these essays were significantly divergent in their approach from the Nationalist critique of British Imperialism. In a landmark essay of 1926 titled, *Amra Keno Swadhin Noi* (Why are We not Free?), Ahmad was decoding the stumbling block that impeded an organised anti-colonial movement from below.⁷¹ He was stressing how capitalism as a system was the main driving force behind the oppressive structure of colonialism and how it even plagues liberal democratic nations like France and the United States of America. The English bourgeoisie class which was the driving force of its imperialist ambitions stimulated the genesis of an indigenous counterpart who was trying to achieve the same mantle at the cost of the toiling masses of the country. The essay hence goes further to highlight how colonialism was essentially stimulating an unequal social structure. It was not just the foreign rulers but also indigenous capitalist entrepreneurs, who were equally responsible for exacerbating this inequality. This particular facet was often missing from the nationalist discourses on colonial exploitation. Despite producing economic critiques of Imperialism, there was a stark absence of any critical remarks against the economic exploitation of the working class under the incipient *Swadeshi* capitalists. The reason was that most of these leaders were themselves landed gentries or proprietors of such enterprises. INC was funded by these bourgeois capitalists functioning in the interstices of the feudal society. Ahmad was criticising this comprador class,

⁷⁰ The Workers and Peasants Party of Bengal, or *The Labour Swaraj Party* was formed in 1925 and it started producing *Langal* as its mouthpiece with Nazrul as the editor. It was replaced by *Ganabani* in 1926 with Muzaffar Ahmad as its new editor. *Ganabani* published the first Bengali translation of the Communist Manifesto done by Saumyendranath Tagore and titled ‘*Sadharan Swattabadir Ishtahar*’. For further reference see Chattopadhyay, *Communism and Bengal's Freedom Movement*, pp. 94-105.

⁷¹ Ahmad, Muzaffar. *Prabandha Sankalan* (Collection of Essays). Calcutta: Saraswati Library, 1970. pp. 1-2.

*They might not know the location of the property but they own it, without even touching a commodity they are the biggest stakeholders and profit earners, they are not even the manufacturers of any good but they own it all and finally when it comes to the service sector the lesser they work the higher their pay gets.*⁷²

This coruscating sarcasm and opprobrium of the collaborator class are grafted in the Marxist theory of Alienation. Indian capitalists, landlords, and financiers were involved in the alienation of the working class from their manual and intellectual labour for the maximisation of the surplus value. Meant for the consumption of the marginal classes the simplified articulation and the lively metaphors were a refreshing departure from the intellectual enterprises of the traditional nationalist intelligentsia. It can be discerned when Ahmad comments further, ‘We have seen in our daily lives how a common house cat is often chased by a dog and in dire desperation, it flees for protection. But then it retaliates and often the dog has to retreat.’⁷³ But he laments that this desperation of fighting back the oppressor was missing among the downtrodden masses of the country. He identifies the problem within the deplorable socio-economic conditions of the plebeians which the corrupted religious clerics and godmen exploited to exhort more money from them. He sees them as a factor fuelling the interests of the capitalist class. He advocated for a revolution from below since the workers and peasants accounted for 95% of the population and outlined that the onus of making them aware of their exploitation lay on the vanguard. That was the sole path for salvaging the country from the shackles of colonialism. He writes,

*the workers and peasants should be made aware that they have full rights to the commodities which are produced utilising their labour. Sacrificing their prerogatives because some godmen directed them to do so for a smooth passage to the afterlife is ignorant. There is no masculinity hidden in self-sacrifice. Nothing can be achieved until an intense desire for a lifestyle grafted in worldly needs can be instigated within them.*⁷⁴

⁷² Ibid. p. 4.

⁷³ Ibid. p. 5.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 6.

Ahmad designates the foundation of the evils of colonialism in the dialectical relationship between the classes. This is also an implicit critique of the Gandhian approach of redressal of masses which was based on his creed of spiritualism, *Ahimsa*, or non-violence. The trope of self-sacrifice was banal among the Gandhian trade unionists who posed it as the only way for the amelioration of the masses. The newer generation of leaders saw in it the clear intention of hindering working-class radicalisation at the grass-root level to benefit the national bourgeoisie. Indeed, the Gandhian mass movement was a coalition of sections with conflicting interests, which was inordinately difficult to mitigate. It is pertinent to understand that their whole discourse on what was the underlying cause of the expanding economic inequality between the working class and the capitalists and their conflicting interests stood in stark contrast and stringent criticism of Gandhian Trade Unionism.

Saumyendranath Tagore in his essay *Gandhism and Labour Peasants' Problem* criticises Gandhi's vision on labour activism and class collaboration.⁷⁵17 Quoting from Gandhi's piece in *Young India* that the union, *Majdoor Mahajan*, represented an ideal condition of the Labour-Capitalist relationship resembling a 'Happy Family', he writes was nothing but a utopia, and the deplorable living status of the workers stands testimony to it.⁷⁶ He cites the *Majdoor Mahajan* of Ahmadabad as a typical case of 'yellow unionism', and Gandhi's deliberate attempt to prevent it from getting affiliated with the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) was an intentional move to obstruct working-class militancy. Gandhi on the second-anniversary of this union advised the workers, 'I do not propose to examine the duty of the capitalists. If the labourer alone were to understand his rights and responsibilities and confine himself to purest means, both must gain.'⁷⁷ Tagore assiduously keeps pointing out that the Gandhian tactics of bargaining had no space for any radical means of protest. By 'purest means' Gandhi was harping on how the workers should never go beyond appeals and petitions to demand their rightful prerogatives, categorically denouncing strikes as violent. Even this was reflected in the writings of contemporary Gandhian Labour

⁷⁵ Tagore, Saumyendranath. "Gandhism and the Labour-Peasant Problem." In *Against the Stream: An Anthology of Writings of Saumyendranath Tagore*, Vol. 1. Edited by Sudarshan Chattopadhyaya, 19–31. Calcutta: Miss Sarojini Hutheesing on Behalf of the Saumyendranath Memorial Committee, 1975.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

leaders, like Shyamshunder Chakraborty which highlights the attitude of Gandhian Trade Unionists, The high priest of the cult of *Ahimsa parama dharma* has fully realised that industrial workers away from ... the charm of free pastoral life working under brutalised conditions in mills and factories where passions and prejudices find full play are unfit for nonviolent political work.⁷⁸ Communist labour leaders like Ahmad and Saumyendranath saw this as nothing but the betrayal of the interests of the working class. As the latter further comments on the absurdity of the Gandhian tactics of arbitration and how the dialectical relationship between the classes makes the phrase, ‘both must gain’ synonymous with nothing but robbery of surplus-value of labour by the capitalists. Declaring Gandhi as ‘the prophet of the bourgeoisie’ Tagore vehemently criticised his concept of arbitration as the ideal tactic for wage bargaining.⁷⁹ Saumyendranath, wrote this piece while he was on his brief sojourn in Europe between 1927 and 1934 during which he was intimately allied with the anti-fascist and communist movements there.⁸⁰ Drawing a parallel between the German state under the Social Democrats on the verge of transforming into a fascist state and their coercive action which made arbitration compulsory, and Gandhi’s enticement with the same, he stressed how Arbitration was becoming ‘a mighty weapon in the hands of the capitalists.’⁸¹ He further cites Gandhi as he wrote in *Young India*, ‘I know strikes are an inherent right of the working men for justice but they must be considered crime immediately after the capitalists accept the principle of arbitration. Wages are improving there is every possibility of continuous improvement.’⁸² He comments that Gandhi’s claim about ‘improving wages’ is illusionary because the increase in wages means lesser surplus value for the capitalists until and unless the intensity of the labour is increased in itself. It was the order of the day as he

⁷⁸ *The Karmi*, Issue 1, August 1921, p.1.

⁷⁹ Tagore, “Gandhism and the Labour-Peasant Problem.”, p. 21.

⁸⁰ For more information on his sojourn in Europe and the development of his political ideas refer, Sen, Manaswini. “Manufacturing ‘Internationalism From Below’: Saumyendranath Tagore on Fascism and Ultrnationalism,” *Journal of History of Ideas Blog*. (<https://jhiblog.org/2022/06/15/manufacturing-internationalism-from-below-saumyendranath-tagore-on-fascism-and-ultra-nationalism/>).

Tagore, “Gandhism and the Labour-Peasant Problem.”, p. 21.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 22.

points out that the Bengal jute labourers are working under a 25% reduction in wages, and international German Emergency Decrees, Macdonald's labour government, and the juggling of financiers with the English pound all culminated into significant contraction not only in wages but also the standard of living of the working class.⁸³ Strikes were the signifier of the heightening class consciousness and not an improvement but the total disappearance of wages as an economic category in itself would ensure a just and equal social order. Capitalism has floundered miserably in the task of feeding the multitudes and hence should be replaced by Communism under which the workers will own the means of production. His criticism was grafted in the classical principles of Marxism. Gandhi did not subscribe to the concept of class struggle but class collaboration which according to these leaders translated into nothing but a further aggravation of the existent inequality among the classes. His ideas are divulged in a letter to British Communist, Shapurji Saklatvala, in 1927 where he opined, I do not regard capital to be the enemy of labour. I hold their coordination to be perfectly possible. The organisation of labour I undertook in South Africa, Champaran, or Ahmedabad was in no spirit of hostility to the capitalists.⁸⁴ Saumyendranath stated the sheer impossibility of the situation where Gandhi insists that the mill hands should identify with the interests of the mill owners. As per Gandhi, that would result in the improvement and upliftment of the indigenous industrial sector and would be potent in countering the economic backlash of colonialism. Their interests were fundamentally opposed, and hence for him, the Gandhian tactics were nothing but synonymous with forwarding the interests of the *Swadeshi* capitalists at the cost of labour exploitation. There was a robust critique of the Gandhian cult of *Ahimsa* or Non-violence in these discourses because for them it surmounted to nothing but a bonafide tool to contain the brimming working-class revolution in the country. Gandhi wrote,

Strikes are the order of the day. They are the symptom of the existing unrest ... there are not wanting leaders who consider strikes may be engineered for political purposes. In my opinion, it will be most serious mistake to make use of labour strikes for such a purpose. I do

⁸³ Ibid., p. 23.

⁸⁴ Saha, Panchanan. *Pioneers of Indian Trade Union Movement*. Reprint, Kolkata: Parul, 2014, p., 81.

*not deny that such strikes can serve political ends. But they do not fall in the plan with non-violent Non Corporation.*⁸⁵

Gandhi's advocacy for 'lawful demands' and 'lawful ways' to extract the demands were nothing but pushing the interests of the capitalist state since the very definition of 'lawful' shrinks to the interests of the capitalist class dictated by the state. Like in Nazi Germany, the very right to demonstrate against hunger and starvation was deemed unlawful.⁸⁶

Political action derived from unfettered patriotism came under sharp criticism in the writings of the union leaders. The term *ugro jatiyataabad* or ultra-nationalism was frequent in the writings of trade union leaders like Saumyendranath Tagore.⁸⁷ In the inter-war period, Europe witnessed how imperialism and capitalism created dire circumstances leading to the rise of fascism. Saumyendranath's sojourn in Europe during the turbulent decades of the 1920s and early 1930s, his association with anti-colonial and anti-imperialist writers like Andre Gide, and his ardent admiration for Henri Barbusse, a French pacifist and communist profoundly influenced him pen down several nuanced critiques on imperialism across the globe, which he likened with fascism.⁸⁸ After his brief stay in Moscow around 1927, where he wrote an alternative colonial thesis which did not quite sit well with the likes of M.N. Roy and the pro-Stalin lobby during the sixth International of Comintern in 1928, Saumyendranath left for Berlin.⁸⁹ His close association with the League Against Imperialism and direct exposure to contemporary European politics led Tagore to develop a sagacious understanding of the multifarious ways in which 'ultra-nationalism' and its manifestation in different forms. He blamed the 'ultra-nationalism' as the root cause of

⁸⁵ Tagore, "Gandhism and the Labour-Peasant Problem.", p. 25.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 25.

⁸⁷ He was using the term while criticizing the Gandhian Anti-Colonial movement as well as the political action of the *Swaraj Party* of C.R. Das. Tagore. *Jatri (Voyager)*. Calcutta: Abhiyan Publishing House Ltd, 1975, p.97.

⁸⁸ Sen Gupta, Shatarupa. Tagore, Saumyendranath (1901–1974), *WileyOnline Library*, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781405198073.wbierp1431>, accessed 6 March, 2021.) He elaborated on his encounter with Gide in a letter addressed to Rabindranath Tagore in 1933. (Saumyendranath Tagore, to Rabindranath Tagore, 1 Nov, 1933. In Tagore, *Fascism*. Kolkata: Charpatra Prokashona, 2019).

⁸⁹ File: IB: 166/1926.

social inequalities in addition to exacerbating the political and economic crises.⁹⁰

The inexorable repression from the Gestapo and the Nazi state culminated in his arrest in 1933 on the absurd ground of conspiring to assassinate the *Fuhrer*.⁹¹ Following his release from the *Gestapo* prison in Munich, Germany, Tagore produced a series of essays in 1933. It was based on his first-hand experience as a prisoner in Nazi Germany, and he became an advocate of the Anti-Fascist circle in Paris. He described the menacing face of the racial apartheid created by the Nazis in Germany. He wrote his experiences and political views which were compiled in an anthology called *Hitlerism: the Aryan Rule in Germany*.⁹² Expressing in an article titled, *Who Paved the Way for Fascism in Germany*⁹³, Tagore elucidated the treacherous role played by the German Social Democratic Party in facilitating the rise of Adolf Hitler and his dictatorial regime in Germany. He highlighted how the German socialists had betrayed the interests of the working class in the garb of stabilising the economy of the country in the aftermath of the First World War. Under the German socialists, the basic rights of human upliftment remained unfulfilled, and unemployment and a depreciating standard of living became a recurring phenomenon. Delineated as 'chauvinistic, capitalist and wholehearted supporters of militarism', the German socialists were actively responsible for crushing a series of contemporary proletarian upheavals, which include the Berlin Transport Company workers' strike in 1932.⁹⁴ Saumyendranath's essay was a scathing attack on socialists like Ebert Noske and his instrumental role in the assassination of dissenting communist voices like Karl Liebrecht and Rosa Luxemburg. He rebuked the counter-revolutionary character of the socialists and their capitalist leanings,

⁹⁰ For further information on The League against Imperialism consult, Chattopadhyay, *Communism and Bengal's Freedom Movement*.

⁹¹ Politische Archiv des Auswartigen Amts (German Foreign Office Political Archives), File on: Inders Soumyandranath Tagore, April, 1933. No. III O.

⁹² Tagore, Saumyendranath. *Hitlerism: The Aryan Rule in Germany*. Calcutta: Ganashakti Press, 1933.

⁹³ Originally published in *Hitlerism: The Aryan Rule in Germany*. Calcutta: Ganashakti Press, 1933. (Saumyendra Nath Tagore 'Who Paved the Way for Fascism in Germany?' in Sudarshan Chattopadhyaya (ed.), *Against the Stream: An Anthology of Writings of Saumyendranath Tagore*, Vol.1. Calcutta: The Technical and General Press, 1975.)

⁹⁴ Ibid, p. 12.

which prompted them to attack the communists from time to time. In their desperate efforts to suppress any mass insurrection, the German socialists indirectly insinuated the rise of fascism in Germany. While May Day rallies were deferred, propaganda rallies of the Nazis were permitted in the name of upholding the cherished ethos of 'democracy'. Saumyendranath Tagore further criticised the German socialists' apathy towards the downtrodden led to the displacement of the international theory of 'solidarity of the working class' with the bourgeois theory of 'solidarity of all classes'.⁹⁵ What transpired was the most vicious of crimes against humanity orchestrated by the authoritarian German state in form of Anti-Semitism. In a speech delivered at a protest meeting in Paris around September 1933 against the *Reichstag Fire* implicating Herman Goring, Joseph Goebbels, and other Nazi leaders in the skulduggery, Tagore emphasised that racial bigotry against Jews served two specific purposes 'one is to divert the class struggle of working-class into blind alleys of racial struggle' and the second was holding the Jews accountable for the economic distresses of the German mass shrugging away all liabilities.⁹⁶ He reprehended the Nazis of partaking in nothing short of a diabolical "racial cannibalism" which to him called for condemnation by any civilised individual.⁹⁷

Saumyendranath's monograph titled *Fascism (1934)* was the first comprehensive critique of the nature of an authoritarian state in Bengali. It was published in 1934. this.⁹⁸ Through a careful discernment of the body politic of the Italian fascist state, he analysed how fascism effectively uses jingoism, and insecurities of the petty bourgeoisie to create and legitimise a centralised government, which became notorious for curtailing individual dissent and agency. In the preface, he writes,

with the imminent crisis of the twentieth century dawning upon us never before in the

⁹⁵Ibid., pp. 12-16.

⁹⁶ Transcribed speech originally published in *Hitlerism: The Aryan Rule in Germany*. Calcutta: Ganashakti Press, 1933. (Saumyendranath Tagore "Reischtag Fire" in Sudarshan Chattopadhyaya (ed.), *Against the Stream: An Anthology of Writings of Saumyendranath Tagore*, Vol.1. Calcutta: The Technical and General Press, 1975,p. 18.)

⁹⁷ Ibid., p.18.

⁹⁸Wilhelm Pieck, *Report on the Activities of Executive Committee of the Communist International:26 July 1935*. London: Modern Books Limited, 1935.

history of mankind the world has been polarised into two specific camps: the Communists and the Bourgeoisie. Despite coming from disparate backgrounds all sections of the bourgeoisie ultimately have the common goal of saving capitalism and hence pits itself as the class enemy of the proletariat. As the decisive moment of the working class revolution is nearing, the insecurities among these various sections of the Bourgeoisie are making them endorse various fascist groups. The days of saving capitalism through bourgeois liberalism are long gone. Hence, they have given up the facade of democracy and liberalism and have resorted to the use of brute force.⁹⁹

Tagore was contemplating how the capitalist bourgeoisie was losing hegemony among the masses, and hence resorting to dominance without the involvement of the masses. His *longue duree* approach to analysing the genesis of fascism is conspicuous in the essay titled *Mussolini*. Tagore had attempted to offer a comparative study of the Italian dictator's writings before and after the First World War in socialist mouthpieces like *Avanti*, and later *Il Popolo d'Italia*. He painstakingly explains how Mussolini used the veil of socialism to win the trust of the working-class populace and recruit them into an imperialist bourgeoisie war only to serve the interests of their class enemies.¹⁰⁰ Tagore elucidated how a fascist emerged from the folds of bourgeois nationalism in the case of Mussolini. From asking the masses to stay neutral during Italy's war efforts against Austria in the initial days of the war, and by engaging in vigorous war propaganda by the end of 1914, inciting popular sentiments through the most effective tool of 'patriotism' and 'love and sacrifice for the motherland,' he shamelessly pushed the proletariat into an imperial war. ¹⁰¹ Tagore concluded that the betrayal became imminent when Mussolini openly advocated for the war in April 1915, as it would liberate them from the clutches of the socialists whom he branded as reactionaries.

Tagore's crusade against fascism found expression in his effort to open a branch of 'The League Against Fascism and War' in India with assistance from Rabindranath Tagore, S.A. Dange, and others in 1936 when Spain was ravaged by a horrific Civil War instigated

⁹⁹ Tagore, Saumyendranath. *Fascism*. Kolkata: Charpatra Prokashona, 2019, p.95.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, pp.9-28.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, pp.9-15.

by fascist elements in the country.¹⁰² In an article titled *Fascist Aggression in Spain* published by the League, he criticised the brazen assault of the Spanish reactionary elements against the democratically elected government of the People's Front.¹⁰³ International solidarity accompanied by intellectual and political curiosity in the discourse of Saumyendranath Tagore's writings and opinions were somewhat unique for his time. Tagore further criticised how the reactionary political forces presumptuously flouted numerous international laws by perpetrating heinous crimes against the working class and the Republicans. In the aftermath of the First World War, such fascist forces were supported by the dictatorial regimes in Germany, Italy, and Portugal with military and financial aid. Calling out the non-interventionist policy of the European democracy as sheer passivity, he remarked thus: 'The farce about non-intervention has gone on long enough. The peace-loving people of the world must insist that action be taken to make non-intervention a reality.... the adaptation of an effective plan for control of the Spanish frontiers.'¹⁰⁴ The belligerent political climate orchestrated by the fascists in Spain, far from being a mere civil war for Tagore, was a conflict where two 'antagonistic' world orders were pitted against each other, i.e., the revolutionary and the reactionary. He called for collective action by the workers, peasants, and youths from India against it in a bid for manufacturing internationalism from below.¹⁰⁵

He never saw the rise of fascism in isolation or as a strictly European phenomenon and stressed the possible upsurge of this vicious trend within the ranks of the anti-colonial struggle in India, especially, actions that elicit from unfettered patriotism. Referring to professors from Calcutta University like Promotho Roy and Sunitikumar Chattopadhyay, and their efforts at translating the speeches of Mussolini and eulogising him, he was unveiling the

¹⁰² IB File No. 166/1926.

¹⁰³ Originally published as a booklet titled *Spain*, from the League Against Fascism in 1936. Saumyendranath, Tagore. "Fascist Aggression in Spain" in Sudarshan Chattopadhyaya (ed.), *Against the Stream: An Anthology of Writings of Saumyendranath Tagore*, Vol.1. Calcutta: The Technical and General Press, 1975.)

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. p. 86.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. p. 88-89.

reactionary nature of the Nationalist Bourgeoisie.¹⁰⁶ This stands as testimony to his far-sightedness, and how the INC being funded by the indigenous capitalists could very well nurture this vicious trend.¹⁰⁷ As he further cites Gandhi's statement, 'The avowed policy of non-cooperation has been not to make political use of disputes between Labour and Capital,' he comments that it was in the sole interest of the indigenous capitalists that he propagates such a concept. Gandhi stressed that or else it would play into the hands of the Imperial government as it would try pitting one section of the society against another.¹⁰⁸ For the trade Unionists, this statement was intrinsically flawed as the crux of their discourse was based on the fact that, British Imperialism in India rules India not by setting Labour against Capital, it rules India in the interest of British capitalists, the Indian capitalists, and the landlords. It ruled India with the help of Indian capitalists, the Native princes, and the landlords. Its rule is synonymous with the unparalleled oppression of the masses of India.¹⁰⁹

Tagore was also anxious about class collaboration in working-class agitation. For example, he raised his apprehension that reformists like P.C. Joshi, Chaman Lal, and other trade unionists were being myopic and prejudiced in their attitudes. They provided more space to bourgeois labour leaders from Congress on a platform like the All India Trade Union Congress. This was equivalent to supporting Indian capitalists, and in turn, British imperialism, hence following the footsteps of the 'Socialist lackeys' in Europe and America.¹¹⁰ He denounced authoritarianism in all forms. Despite his fervent admiration for Soviet Russia, he pointed out certain unwelcoming trends within the new order. In the two Bengali monologues titled *Revolutionary Russia* and the *Soviet Republic*, written by Tagore after the Sixth Communist International, he criticised the 'almost religious' deification of

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, p. 96.

¹⁰⁷ Tagore, *Fascism*, p. 95–6.

¹⁰⁸ Tagore, "Gandhism," p. 27.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Originally published in *Hitlerism: the Aryan Rule in Germany*. Calcutta: Ganashakti Press, 1933. (Saumyendranath Tagore "Who Paved the Way for Fascism in Germany?" in Sudarshan Chattopadhyaya (ed.), *Against the Stream: An Anthology of Writings of Saumyendranath Tagore*, Vol.1. Calcutta: The Technical and General Press, 1975, p.16.)

Lenin and the gradual erosion of democratic space within the Communist International.¹¹¹ His sojourn in Russia and personal experiences were reflected in these two first-hand accounts. He was emphasising the vulnerability of the augmentation of left conservatism due to apparent control and surveillance of the creative activities of artists and writers in the name of proletariat art in the late 1920s Soviet Socialist Republic.

Saumyendranath Tagore's writings dispel the generalisation of the mainstream historiography, which postured the early Communists in India as mere puppets, imitating either the Comintern's decision or the Communist Party of Great Britain's decisions (CPGB) uncritically. This section through Tagore's critical gaze of writings refutes the existing historiographical claim that since Indian communists were colonised subjects in India, they were divested from any agency and always looked up to representatives from the Communist Party of Great Britain before taking any decisive actions.¹¹²

It might be argued that *Fascism*, was simultaneously published with British communist R.P. Dutt's *Fascism and Social Revolution* and coincided with the occurrence of the Seventh Congress of the Soviet Communist Party, which officially considered fascism as a terrorist onslaught of the most vicious of the reactionary capitalists, reflected similar arguments.¹¹³ However, Saumyendranath far from being a full-fledged left theorist was a labor activist, whose appraisals emanated from his first-hand encounter as a colonised subject in the European heartland of fascism. Hence, far from being banal, it is a veritable local response to a global crisis. The employment of vernacular, the register anchored in colloquialism, and riddled with scintillating metaphors was making the discourse accessible to a wider population. His endeavor democratised the constricted space of ideological

¹¹¹ Tagore, "Biplobi Russia" in Shipra Sarkar, Anamitra Das, eds. *Bangalir Samyabad Charcha*. Calcutta: Ananda Publishers Pvt. Ltd, 1994, pp. 114-116.

¹¹² For similar views check, Roy, *Bengal Marxism: Early Discourses and Debates*.

¹¹³ Dutt saw fascism as a further stage and episode of the general crisis of capitalism. The only alternative to this "barbarism and spreading decay was the world socialist revolution which began in Russia in 1917 and which would build the "classless communist society". But this was to be no automatic process. (R. Palme Dutt, *Fascism and Social Revolution: A study of Economics and Politics of the Last Stages of CAPITALISM in decay*. Calcutta: National Book Agency, 1946.)

introspection monopolised by the anglicised upper-class intellectuals.

1.7 *Dwandamulok Bostubad*: Dialectical Materialism and Reading Inequality Through Class Struggle

The major corpus of the literature produced by the trade unionists dealt with the dialectical relationship between the class interests of the working-class proletariat and the capitalist bourgeoisie. The systematic oppression of the labourers by both the colonial and the indigenous capitalists was at the end of their vehement denunciation. The contents of these essays ranged from theoretical speculations on the various concepts entailing the newly emergent creed of Marxism to the aggravation of economic inequality triggered by the exploitative colonial state and its capitalist agents. From the 1930s, the latter generally dominated the field. Post the 1917 revolution in Russia, Bengal's press and literary or scholarly circles witnessed a wave of such generic writings. These were mainly confined to the history of the revolution, reflections on Marxist-Leninist thought from a very Eurocentric perspective, or at times unenhanced translations. But what is compelling about the literary output of the labour leaders was that unlike the conventional left-oriented intellectuals their writings emanated from their political praxis and their direct activism. Hence, it divulged certain nuances, incongruencies, and dilemmas that emerge while countering the contentious terrain of mitigating political practice with political ideology. These essays reflect the indigenous reception of an ideology as terms and concepts like 'imperialism' or 'primitive accumulation' were getting redefined in the context of colonial India in general, and Bengal, in particular adding to the edifice of the existing global discourse on Marxism. Targeted at a readership that overtly comprised of the wage labourers and petty clerical bourgeoisie these essays were composed lucidly both in terms of the language and the manner of articulation. The rhetoric of class struggle was eloquent in these pieces and also the desire to organise and educate the workers on similar lines.

From the late 1920s and throughout the 1930s and 1940s there was a proliferation of a myriad of socialist and communist mouthpieces like *Din-Majur* (Wage Labourer), *Sarbahara* (The Proletariat), *Marxsbadi* (Marxist), and later *Janajuddha* (The People's War)

which provided them the platform for such discursive enterprises. A major part of this discourse revolved around the nature of Middle-Class leadership particularly the nationalist bourgeoisie and their function in the working-class struggle. It should be noted that these leaders imbued in the gospel of Marxism perceived the incontrovertible conflict in the interest of the leadership class in Congress, who were making steady inroads into *Swadeshi* capitalist enterprises and the labouring class. They were contemplating how this antithetical contradiction would further perpetuate the already lopsided relationship between the capitalists and the workers, aggravating their economic distress. This remained a pressing concern among the early Socialists and fuelled the doubt over the collaboration with the Nationalists as the path to be adopted for the Anti-Imperialist struggle.

In a two-part essay published in 1926 titled *Sreni-Sangram* (Class Struggle), Ahmad was foregrounding the nationalist denial around the existence of class struggle in India. For the nationalist politicians, it was a necessary evil of the West that has no bearing on the Indian socio-economic order.¹¹⁴ Ahmad contradicted that the Marxian theory of class struggle is universal and has no spatial constraint to it despite being written in the context of Europe. With the steady rise of industrialisation in India, the divide between the two classes will get more pronounced. He was calling out the Gandhian Nationalists whom he tags as *bhondo* socialists or ‘corrupted socialists’ as their sporadic liaison with Socialism remained confined to the realm of intellectual reflections and was met with complete insouciance as far as their application in the political practice was concerned¹¹⁵ Their assertion that the engrafted spiritualism in the Indian social system automatically impedes any economic contradiction or even formation of conflicting classes, had vested class interest in it. The strategy of class collaboration in the trade union struggle for him was nothing short of a brazen betrayal of the working class, which these pseudo-socialists and upper-class leaders partook in.

Written in a similar vein the essay of, Bhupendranath Dutta, *Bhuter Mukhe Ram Naam*

¹¹⁴ Ahmad, Muzaffar. “Srenisangram (Class-Struggle).” In *Bangalir Samyabad Charcha* (Bengali’s Tryst with Communism). 4th ed., edited by Shipra Sarkar and Anamitra Das, 80–81. Kolkata: Ananda Publishers Pvt. Ltd, 2019. Pp. 84-86

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

(The Devil Reading the Scriptures), ridicules the self-proclaimed ‘narrow nationalists’ whose sudden enchantment with Socialism was based on a flawed notion of class and the contradictions that entail it.¹¹⁶ He was a stalwart labour organiser in the late 1920s and an authority in Communism given his erstwhile association with the Ghadar Party and his stay in Germany around the First World War. He condemned this cult of experts in a very Chomskyan way as ‘self-serving, for those who propound it, and fraudulent.’¹¹⁷ Invoking Marxian doctrine of, ‘under similar circumstances, similar results will take place’ he was drawing a parallel between the German democrats turned ‘social democrats’ and the Indian nationalist bourgeoisie’s sudden approbation of Marxism. Citing the alternative thesis on Socialism of Dr. Eugene Duhring, the Berlin University philosopher and a staunch anti-Marxist he elucidated, borrowing from Fredrich Engels, the poverty and hollowness of Duhring’s ‘ethical communism’. This trend was endemic among the liberal democrats. He further illustrated it through the functionaries of the Historical School of Economic Thought like Adolf Wagner, who to pose a veritable opposition to Marxism resorted to welfarist policies towards the working class. They hardly addressed the deep-seated issues plaguing the workers, which earned them the title of ‘Cathedra – Socialists’ or ‘Chair – Socialists’. He was insinuating the rise of such ‘Chair-Socialists’ in India whose propensity was to device a form of Socialism whereby despite their nominal cognisance of class conflict in the society, they had the proclivity to homogenise it in the facade of a united Anti-Colonial struggle. Dilution of material contradictions between classes to serve their agenda was the basis of Bourgeois Democracy and hence, could never pave the way for a Socialist revolution in a colony. Hence, the fascination of this nationalist bourgeoisie with socialism was as paradoxical as the devil taking the name of a deity like Rama. Intriguing was his use of ‘declassified intellectuals’ or *Srenigyanshuno* concerning the newer brand of Communist trade unionists who held the opinion that political liberation devoid of economic upliftment of the proletariat is an inadequate premise for decolonisation. The application of this term in the colonial Indian context was fairly new in the early twenties, but more interesting was its

¹¹⁶ Dutta, Bhupendranath. “Bhuter Mukhe Ram Naam (The Devil Reading the Scriptures).” In *Bangalir Samyabad Charcha* (Bengali’s Tryst with Communism). 4th ed., edited by Shipra Sarkar and Anamitra Das, 127–130. Kolkata: Ananda Publishers Pvt. Ltd, 2019.

¹¹⁷ Chomsky, “The Responsibility of Intellectuals.” *The New York Review of Books*, 23 February, 1967.

vernacularisation and usage. Here declass inevitably means to eliminate one's perceived class to create an organic bond with the proletariat rather than the apparent lack of class consciousness in an individual, which the word *Srenigyanshunyo* literally translates to. By the middle of the 1930s, the discourse addressing the burgeoning economic inequality between the capitalists and working class and the expedited class polarisation took a perceptibly different turn. It was now being addressed through tracts that aimed at initiating awareness among the workers through a pedagogy the crux of which was class struggle.

Also, a substantial amount of literature around the appropriateness and effectiveness of certain praxis and strategies that can reverse the capitalist onslaught by strengthening the Unions and ensuing militant activism was produced. These essays dealt with the most basic aspects of labour organisation and the impediments these leaders faced in the field. Saroj Mukherjee's essay *Union Jinish ta Ki?* (What is a Union?) elucidated the need for establishing trade Unions in the bid of struggling for collective bargaining by the working class.¹¹⁸ It was a short piece that aimed at making the workers aware of exploitation at the hands of the mill owners. The real competition should not be with their fellow workers, but with the capitalists who utilise these dissensions to further increase their profit margin, augmenting the differential between the real wage and the nominal pay. Casualisation of labour was a persistent problem throughout the late colonial period and a burning issue that figured frequently in trade union agitation. Noteworthy, however, is the use of the first person while writing these essays. The use of 'we' although many of these leaders did not belong to the ranks of the labouring class was not merely a stint in active propaganda. Not only was it an effort to instill among the workers a sense of collective consciousness or belonging, but it made conspicuous an ardent effort to bridge the gap between the middle-class leadership and the workers in general which was diligently maintained by the erstwhile labour organisers and nationalist trade unionists in particular. With steady Industrial growth in the colony, and especially the demand created by the First World War they opined that India had long surpassed the stage of being treated as a supplier of raw materials. It was now a dumping ground for British manufactured goods. Hence, with the changing mode of

¹¹⁸ Mukhopadhyay, Saroj. "Union Jinishta Ki? (What is a Union?)." In *Bangalir Samyabad Chorchha* (Bengali's Tryst with Communism), 4th ed., edited by Shipra Sarkar and Anamitra Das, 256–257. Kolkata: Ananda Publishers Pvt. Ltd, 2019.

production, the feudal ties were now substituted by the emergent capitalist relations of production which automatically made them question the revolutionary nature of the indigenous bourgeoisie. At the heart of their entire enquiry was *dwandamulok bostubad*, the vernacular equal for dialectical materialism, as Ahmad commented ‘a lion will be always after the blood of a buffalo until it turns vegetarian.’¹¹⁹ They viewed the National Freedom Movement essentially through the classical Marxian paradigm of class struggle hence stressing the futility of freedom devoid of economic emancipation of the masses.

1.8 Addressing the Underbelly of Colonial Society: Reinterrogating Religion, Class, and Caste

The Muslim-majority province of Bengal from the late 1920s and especially after the provincial autonomy of 1935 was plagued with virulent communal dissensions. The demand for a separate electorate spearheaded a bitter struggle between the sectarian political organisations like the *Krishak Praja Party*, Muslim League, and the *Hindu Mahasabha*.¹²⁰ The 1937 Bengal election under The Government of India Act 1935, saw the Krishak Praja Party headed by A.K. Fazlul Haq in alliance with the Muslim league forming the first government since the Congress stuck to their policy of boycotting the legislature. The communal riots that ensued threatened to disrupt the social fabric of the province. However, the syndicate of capitalists and state often harnessed these riots in the working class ghettos which aided in their mutual interest in strikebreaking reducing it into a mere clash of conflicting religious interests. These leaders were producing literature that was categorically an economic critique of Communalism, a major intervention in the contemporary discourse of Communalism. One of the primary feats of early Socialist coalitions like WPP was to address the communal menace that was wrecking the province, especially during the riots of

¹¹⁹ Ahmad, “Sreni-Sangram,” 81.

¹²⁰ For details refer to, McPherson, Kenneth. *The Muslim Microcosm*. Calcutta, 1918 to 1935. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1974, and Chatterjee, Joya. *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932–1947*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

1926.¹²¹ Not only did the labour leaders campaign against communally minded journals like *Dainik Soltan* and *Anandabazar Patrika*, but *The Manifesto of Communist Party of India: Hindu-Moslem problem*, published on 15 May 1926, entreated the working class to struggle for economic emancipation rather than engaging in a fratricidal war.¹²² Their perception of social inequality engineered by communal forces formed a raging discourse in 1920s Bengal which apprehended Communalism solely as a conspiracy of the rich divorcing it from other socio-political premises. The Marxian aphorism of religion being the opium of the masses resounded in several of their writings.¹²³ The vernacular parallel of opium or aphin was a frequent metaphor used for religion and its delirious impact, which like an intoxicant, was keeping the proletariat distracted from agitating for their prerogatives. communalism, for them, was a manifestation of material contradiction; an apparatus of class oppression and aspiration rather than being a cause in itself. By only embracing the path of communism which is grafted in humanitarianism this virulent social evil can be averted. Simultaneously, they were pragmatic enough to comprehend that the desires of ordinary masses can most conveniently be expressed in religious terms. So, it was not unusual for them to organise religious festivals from *Eid* to *Vishwakarma* pujas in working-class ghettos which facilitated their mobilisation drives.

In this regard, the Communists and their analysis of the *Moplah Rebellion* (1921–1922) of Malabar are crucial.¹²⁴ The contemporary nationalist presses and the official Congress leadership were essentially deriving it as a struggle between two communities – the Hindu landowners and the poor Muslim peasants, divesting it of its revolutionary characteristics. The communist introspection was on the axis of class struggle. Highlighting the fact that the peasants revolted against the landed magnates irrespective of their religion

¹²¹ McPherson, *The Muslim Microcosm*. (Refer for further details on the Communal tension and riots in Bengal during the 1920s.)

¹²² Chattopadhyay, *An Early Communist*, pp. 166–7.

¹²³ Ahmad, Muzaffar. *Nirbachito Prabandhya* (Selected Essays). 2011. Reprint, Kolkata: National Book Agency, 2014, p. 47.

¹²⁴ Ahmad, *Nirbachito Prabandhya*, p.46. (Saumyendranath published a pamphlet in 1937 titled ‘Peasants Revolt in Malabar’ which interpreted it as a revolutionary upsurge against feudal elements, not mere riot. It was banned by the Bengal government. Tagore, “Peasant Revolt in Malabar”.)

they placed the class interest and the bourgeois composition of Congress as a hamstring which inexorably led to such biased narratives.¹²⁵ The peasants to them, were far from being anti-Hindu. They were overwhelmingly Muslims, but their protests were characteristically against feudal tyranny and the government. For Tagore, it was the class interest of the INC masquerading in the guise of non-violence and communalism that aided British Imperialism in the crushing of the rebellion. He writes,

*The class content of Gandhism, hidden behind the thin veil of non-violence, manifested itself in all its ugliness. Terrified by the reality of mass upheaval, horror-stricken by the method of swift justice that the peasants meted out to spies and informers who happened to be Hindus, alarmed out of their wits by the jacquire started by the peasants in the estates of landlords who in this case were also Hindus through mere chance, the Gandhist Congress leaders of Malabar used the dogma of non-violence to sabotage the uprising.*¹²⁶

From the 1930s trade unionists were zealously engaged in probing how communalism had been ravaging and disrupting collective action among labourers at the basic level. Somnath Lahiri wrote an article titled, *Thirty Thousand for Six*, which mainly focused on the different facets of the jute mill strike at Titagargh, a northern suburb of Calcutta, in the winters of 1938.¹²⁷ He was reinforcing how organisations like *Hindu Sandhi* were harnessing communal sentiments among the Hindu workers whose demand for a week of puja holidays was reduced to a tenure of four days as their Muslim counterparts turned up for work.¹²⁸ The organisation manipulated this issue to cause discord among the workers as the Hindu labourers refused to return to work around 5 pm during the month of Ramadan relieving the Muslim workers to break their fast. Lahiri concludes that in turn, it culminated in the untimely failure of the strike stressing the class characteristics of these communal organisations and their underlying class interest. Indeed, the various communal associations

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Tagore, Saumyendranath. "Peasant Revolt in Malabar." In *Against the Stream: An Anthology of Writings of Saumyendranath Tagore*, Vol. 1, edited by Sudarshan Chattopadhyaya, 53–64. Calcutta: Miss Sarojini Hutheesing on Behalf of the Saumyendranath Memorial Committee, 1975, p. 64.

¹²⁷ Lahiri, "Thirty Thousand for Six." *National Front*, 25 December, 1938.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

active in late colonial Bengal were mainly composed of upper-caste Hindu and Muslim landed gentry or white-collar class whose vested capitalist interests fuelled their enterprises by insinuating religious fanaticism.

The union leaders of Calcutta fiddled with the idea of reconciliation of religious identity with socialist consciousness. In an article titled *Swadhinatar Sangrame Musalman O Bharater Adarsha* or *The Ideal of Muslims in The Struggle for Freedom in India*, Abdul Halim invoked the attitudes of Tatar Muslims of Russia post the 1917 revolution, whereby they perceived Pan-Islamism synonymous with socialism. In their discourse, Tatar Muslims of Russia postulated an advanced form of Islam, where the clerical stronghold would be replaced by Marxism.¹²⁹ While advocating this idealistic prognosis, Abdul Halim feared that a movement like this might be hijacked by religious renegades which could displace the workers and the peasants, thus nullifying the highest principles of the movement. For the Indian society, however, he advocated Hindu-Muslim unity as a panacea for the working-class community's revitalisation.

A particular lacuna is noticeable in the intellectual production pertaining to caste oppression. However, this should never translate into any habitual remissness towards caste-based violence within the movement. The first strike of the scavengers working under Calcutta Corporation took place in 1928 under the leadership of early Communists like Dharani Goswami, Ahmad, and Dr Prabhabati Dasgupta.¹³⁰ Saumyendranath in his autobiography, *Jatri* (The Voyager) mentioned instances where he reproved Gandhi's writings in Young India advocating his adherence to *Varnashram*¹³¹. According to him, it was allegiance to an outdated and unscientific norm perpetuating structural societal inequality for decades. The apparent lack of constructive criticism of caste-based inequality, in theory, can be attributed to the nature of the electoral politics in the province where the

¹²⁹ Originally published in *Ganabani*, 9 September 1926. (Halim, Abdul. 'Swadhinatar Sangrame Musalman O Bharater Adarsha' in Gautam Chattopadhyay (ed.), *Sanhati, Langal, Ganabani*. Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi and Company, 1992.

¹³⁰ For more refer, Sarkar, Tanika. "Dirty Work, Filthy Caste: Calcutta Scavengers in the 1920s." In *Working Lives & Worker Militancy: The Politics of Labour in Colonial India*, edited by Ravi Ahuja, 176–206. New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2013.

¹³¹ Tagore, *Jatri*, 108–10.

depressed class agitation was primarily clubbed with the streams of sectarian minority politics of that of the Muslim political parties. The contemporary Communists with their heavy reliance and compulsion for seeking a materialistic cause behind all facets of oppression failed to grasp the nuances of identity politics to an extent.

1.9 Gender, Class, and Inequality in Working-Class Politics

In this section, it will be analysed how the question of inequality among workers was deliberated along the axis of gender. There was a consensus among labour leaders about women workers being subjected to double-edged oppression that emanated from the structural persecution of both capitalism and patriarchy of their labour. Prior to the 1920s and 1930s, the narratives mainly revolved around women being portrayed as the weaker sex. So, there was a need to salvage them from the tyranny of the capitalist bosses because of their relatively precarious position compared to their male counterparts in relation to the appropriation of their labour. From the 1920s onwards there was a perceptible departure from this trend consequently due to the rise of women Trade Unionists in the field. The women's questions in general, and vis-à-vis the working-class welfare in particular, were given quintessential importance in the writings published in various socialist mouthpieces such as *Langal* and *Ganabani*.

Ironically, while the authors were predominantly male, their advocacy for women's rights in the class struggle was noteworthy in early twentieth-century gender politics. Through pieces like *Nari –Purusher Samandhikar* or *Equal Rights for Women and Men*, published in September 1929 in the editorial of *Ganabani*, there was strong advocacy for equal treatment of civil rights for both women and men.¹³² This editorial also criticised the societal norm of imposing male entitlement, which over the decades enabled them to determine the issues relating to women. In the process, the voices of women were virtually

¹³² Originally published in *Ganabani*, 9 September 1926. (Ahmad, “Nari-Purusher Samandhikar” in Gautam Chattopadhyay (ed.), *Sanhati, langal, Ganabani*, Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi and Company, 1992.

marginalised and given no space.¹³³ Owing to the predominant barriers imposed by the patriarchal society, any writing by female authors was difficult to come by.

However, from the 1920s onwards, there was the inception of a few women labour leaders who challenged the pre-eminence of male activists in the field. Often, belonging to the privileged upper-middle-class background and with pristine educational qualifications, leaders like, Santoshi Kumari Devi were setting precedence through their onerous organisational enterprises among the working-class populace. In 1924, Devi with the assistance of her brother Promod Kumar Roy and veteran communist labour leader Kalipada Sen initiated the publication of a trilingual weekly titled *Sramik* or *The Worker* dedicated to addressing the grievances of the toiling masses of the colony. *The Worker* was one of the pioneering journals in early twentieth-century Bengal to have a discernible socialist orientation.¹³⁴ Before this, Devi wrote a series of striking essays in *Sanhati* (Solidarity), a pro-nationalist weekly that was published in the opening years of the second decade of the century.¹³⁵ Titled *Banglar Chotkoler Kotha* or *A Word About Bengal's Jute Mills*, this three-part essay in 1923 elaborated on the grievances of the workers, such as the increase in working hours in the jute mills and heavy casualisation of labour. In the aftermath of the First World War.¹³⁶ She contradicted the official claim of the colonial state to issue welfare measures for the labourers to manage the pitfalls of the war and the resulting increase in real wages following the war's aftermath. Kumari Devi, through her writings, offered a robust criticism of the socio-political and economic drain of India. She widely used empirical data and astute logic better than her male counterparts in the 1920s.

The extant historiography only emphasises the need for a recognition of gender-based inequality among the working class in the discourses put forward by the female leaders. However, this study suggests that grassroots issues faced by women, such as the compulsory

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Chattopadhyay, Manju. *Sramiknetri Santoshikumari*. Calcutta: Monisha Granthalaya, 1984, p. 32.

¹³⁵ Chattopadhyay, Gautam (ed.). *Sanhati, Langal, Ganabani*. Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi and Company, 1992, pp. i-xxx.

¹³⁶ Originally published in *Sanhati*, Kartik, 1923. Kumari Devi, Santoshi, "Banglar Chotkoler Kotha" in Shipra Sarkar, Anamitra Das, eds. *Bangalir Samyabad Charcha*, Calcutta, Ananda Publishers Pvt. Ltd, 1994, pp. 56-59.

paid maternity leave and concerns over proper sanitation in the working-class ghettos, were making their headway in the labour leaders' quest for economic justice and gender equality. As a result, the 1920s Bengal witnessed a sort of rudimentary cognizance of the role of gender in the working-class struggle.¹³⁷ Moreover, many women had painstakingly undertaken the task of setting up night schools and health centres exclusively for working women and children. This was an important issue that hardly received any attention from the mainstream nationalist trade unionists.¹³⁸

The discourse of male hegemony in the circuit of labour activism in late colonial Bengal was successfully contested with the active participation of women, thus underscoring emergent dynamics in gender and politics. The decades following the 1930s and 1940s witnessed the proliferation of women trade union leaders in the field, with greater female participation reaching a zenith during the Second World War years. *The Annual Report on Working of Trade Union's Act of 1942-43* recorded a significant increase in the number of female trade unionists from 1690 in 1941-42 to a whopping four-fold increase of 4340 women.¹³⁹ Few of these women garnered unprecedented popularity among the workers and reached the position of labour leadership. They often eclipsed their male colleagues and their appointments in pivotal decision-making positions in various trade unions and federations.¹⁴⁰ Also, women like Sudha Roy who was a prominent leader of the Bengal Labour Party in the

¹³⁷ Scholars in the field often accentuate the deficit in explicit recognition of gender-based inequality among the working class in these discourses by the female leaders Sen, Samita. *Women and Labour in Late Colonial India: The Bengal Jute Industry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

¹³⁸ Chattopadhyay, Manju. *The Trail- Blazing Women: Trade Unionists of India*. New Delhi: All-India Trade Union Congress Publications, 1995, p. 4.

¹³⁹ West Bengal State Archive: *Annual Report on Working of Indian Trade Unions Act, 1926 in Bengal*. (1 April 1942- 31 March 1943).

¹⁴⁰ The First General Jute Strike in Bengal was led by the Bengal Jute Workers Union whose president was Dr. Dasgupta. (*India's Struggle for Freedom*, West Bengal Govt. Publication, 1987). Also see, Chattopadhyay, *The Trail- Blazing Women*, pp. 14-16.

1930s almost single-handedly administered the party's work among the dock workers of Calcutta.¹⁴¹

It was striking to see that these women were challenging the very patriarchal conception of 'modesty' by contravening the gender barriers of the then-colonial Indian society. Not only the women trade unionists making conscious decisions to actively pursue ground-level radicalisation, but also, they were rechannelling the welfare activities for the workers coming from the most ostracised sections of the society. Women trade unionists such as Prabhabati Dasgupta and Begum Sakina organised social and labour awareness activities among the scavengers and sanitiser workers of the Calcutta Corporation. Such kind of radical and reformist activities from women were unthinkable during this period. Even the upper-caste Hindu *Bhodroloks* could not even comprehend that the most wretched of the earth (i.e., the scavengers in Bengal) would be able to bargain for their rightful entitlements. These women hence confronted the multifaceted inequalities intersecting class, caste, religion, and gender through their working-class politicking.¹⁴²

The political programme of action and intellectual ventures of these working-class leaders encompassed a wider process of social transformation during the late colonial era. The fact that these men and women were the product of an age, which had its very foundation built on asymmetrical power at the helm explains their insatiable urge to overturn the same. Hence, a political ideology that considered 'egalitarianism' as the bedrock for the vision of the new world order was so beguiling to them. Their reception of socialism and doctrines of communism was fairly organic, as the Second World War (1939-1945) further radicalised their literature. Their direct exposure to the plight of the workers and search for a possible social and economic prognosis on the question of class struggle became unique characteristics of their writings. The trade unionists, both men, and women, poignantly articulated the questions that were drowning in the larger currents of the mainstream decolonisation movement, which was dominated by the rhetoric of Bourgeois

¹⁴¹ Kolkata Police Museum File (KPM). KPM/SB/03114/05. Indian Transport Workers' Union/ Marine Workers' Union.

¹⁴² Chattopadhyay, Manju. *The Trail- Blazing Women: Trade Unionists of India*, pp. 6-13.

nationalism. More importantly, they also bolstered the voices and aspirations from the margins aiding in the reclamation of their agency.

1.10 Conclusion: (Re) Interrogating the Personal: Declassing and Reconciliation of Consciousness(es).

This chapter has attempted to offer a nuanced understanding of the various sociocultural and political developments, which led to a transformation in the nature of trade union leadership in Bengal from the 1920s onwards. This research highlights that these developments culminated from the emerging ideologies properly manifested in the 1930s. The international network of communism and its impact opened up channels for the crystallisation of a new social composition of the leadership class. Unlike the previous period, where politics was a reclusive domain for the elites and the upper-middle class, the emerging trade union leaders in Bengal came from disparate backgrounds. The apparent radicalisation of the labour movement transformed their political praxis and approach towards anti-colonialism which countered the hegemony of the upper-class nationalists in the political sphere. Hence, it is proposed that the working-class leadership was no more surrogate as Sabyasachi Bhattacharya proposed in relation to middle-class vanguardism. It is established how leadership extended to lower-middle and lower castes. Men like Mohammad Ismail who was a conductor was the most influential figure in the 1940s tramway strikes in particular and the massive strike waves in the war years in general. Evidence of many speakers in protest meetings belonging to the lower castes names like Bablu, Chotu, or Dukhi, infiltrate the official records. Even if this move was strategic it democratised the political sphere monopolised by upper-class bourgeoisie. Even the official sources attest to the increase of women activists in the movement from the late 1930s and especially in the 1940s. Women like Sakina Begum, Renu Ray, and Dr. Maitreyi Bose held titular official positions in the unions.

This was a significant contravention in the history of the labour movement because, during the earlier period, politics was mainly dominated by the white-collar class and the landed gentry. Indeed, this was a breakthrough in the transformation of the trade union

movement in the 1920s and 1930s Bengal. The emerging labour leaders, both men, and women, played a proactive role in expanding the critical popular base for this new undertaking. These leaders also facilitated the political education of the workers on the line of class struggle and made them aware of the egalitarian question. The chapter has shown how the trade union movement in late colonial Bengal took a different historical trajectory as it helped in radicalising workers from different castes, communities, and religions, as well as commingling several isolated movements into a single decisive force against imperialism.

The original contribution of this chapter brought forth the idea of “declassed” intellectuals, striving for an equal and just society through their organic engagement with the working-class populace. Perhaps, this was the most riveting aspect of the transformative facet of vanguardism in Bengal. The acceptance of a global ideology and the efforts to mitigate multiple and often contrasting socio-cultural identities were articulated through a discourse on ‘Internationalism from below’. The trade unionists’ letters of correspondence and memoirs often mirrored a habitual struggle to negotiate between political ideology and political action. The chapter has elucidated how dialectical interplay between individual radicalisation and wider established social stigmas often posed insurmountable impediments, especially in the context of their activism. The case studies of two organic political intellectuals, Ahmad and Tagore, who subscribed to the idea of ‘internationalism from below’ and working-class emancipation, discussed previously, illustrated how a concerted effort on the question of class struggle and working-class emancipation that these leaders stood for, a quintessential issue, which was pretty much ignored by the nationalist bourgeoisie. Our study suggests that these were unique historical developments in the history of trade unionism and India’s anti-imperial and anti-capitalist struggle.

Saumyendranath Tagore was one of the very few leaders who acknowledged his class privilege and chose to use his prerogatives to be part of an alternative wave of anti-colonialism that had a fairly organic leadership. The Tagore family of Bengal had been associated with every intellectual current, which represented all cerebral dissent against foreign rule, the reform, and renaissance to the Indian nationalist movement. Breaking from this pigeonhole of the conventional political spectrum, Saumyendranath decided to join mass politics, which represented the aspirations from below. Soon he began to associate

with a party whose nascent endeavours to organise the workers and peasants of Bengal were fraught with extreme difficulties from the surveillant colonial state. In his memoir, he denounced the peculiar romanticisation and aesthetics of life that ran into their family and his habitual struggle in abandoning these values. He tried to overcome the erudite brought-up inculcated to him since his childhood days and began to adapt to the stringent ways of politics along the lines of class struggle.¹⁴³ Bridging the ever-growing gap between theory and practice, Saumyendranath retained his ideological distinctiveness, even when it was in confrontation with Rabindranath Tagore.¹⁴⁴ In 1933, he wrote a letter to Rabindranath Tagore where he methodically criticised Tagore's piece in *Calcutta Review* supporting the German Councilor's speech on panegyrising Nazism.¹⁴⁵ Though, fraught with a dilemma (which is evident from the concluding part of this letter), Saumyendranath had daringly chosen to argue with one of his strongest influencers in life, a remarkable demonstration of his socialist consciousness.

To conclude, this chapter elucidated the contributions of the working-class vanguards as organic intellectuals in late colonial Bengal, who successfully articulated an alternative vision of anti-colonialism by contextualising the global theories of Marxism and socialism in the Indian context. These leaders and thinkers offered an inclusive space for the accommodation of marginal political sensibilities within a broader framework of a new emergent egalitarian world order, and in a sense paved the way for the recovery of globalism within a history of eternal localism. Thenceforth began a trailblazing shift in the working-class movement of Bengal from the 1930s onwards.

¹⁴³ Tagore, *Jatri* (Voyager).

¹⁴⁴ Saumyendranath Tagore was the grand-nephew of Rabindranath Tagore. The grandson and eldest brother of Rabindranath, Dwijendranath Tagore.

¹⁴⁵ Tagore, *Fascism*, p.95.

Chapter Two

The Making of the ‘Protest’ Mentality: Changing Forms of Mobilisation, Working-Class Militancy, and Proletarian Internationalism

‘The history of all countries shows that the working class exclusively by its own effort is able to develop only trade-union consciousness’

Vladimir Lenin, *‘What is to be Done?’* (1902)¹

Probably the one statement in the history of mankind that essentially triggered the most contentious question in the discourse of the history of class struggle was penned down fifteen years before the Bolshevik Revolution (1917). At the turn of the century, it continues to be the most contemplated and vexed issue in the metahistory of Marxism and a perpetual conundrum in revolutionary praxis.² Is the formation of unions the sole way of manifestation of class consciousness of the working class? What are the necessary markers of burgeoning class consciousness within workers in a colony? Did the political climate and informed trade union radicalisation in the late colonial period fetch a more conscious labouring class in the twentieth century? The 1930s set a new ripple across working class activism in the city of Calcutta and its immediate suburbs. Unionisation became more vigorous, mobilisation more personal and rigorous; the workers’ resolve to push for their rightful prerogatives was well-grounded like never before. Despite the initial setback with the Meerut Conspiracy trials, which shook the foundation of the nascent trade union militarisation towards the end of the

¹ Lenin, Vladimir. *Collected Works*, Vol:5. Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1961, pp. 347-530. (Accessed through Marxist.Org. Accessed August 2022. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1901/witbd/index.htm>)

² One of the most influential works contemplating on working-class consciousness is: Lukacs, Georg. *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1971. In relation to Bengal’s working-class the issue was a hot debate from the 1970s in academia. One of the most prominent being a series of essays and counter replies from two leading Marxists social scientists at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, Dipesh Chakraborty and Ranajit Dasgupta. Chakraborty, Dipesh. & Ranajit Das Gupta. *Some Aspects of the Labour History of Bengal in the Nineteenth Century*. New Delhi: OUP, 2019.

1920s, the decade fostered political maturation among the trade union leaders across Calcutta.³ The familiarity with the ‘language of class,’ blurred the lines between the erstwhile bourgeoisie leadership and the working-class proletariat.⁴ The thirties, however, also marked a period where ideological ambiguities beleaguered the newly emerging vanguards coxswained by Marxist-Leninist thought. The reception of the creed of socialism and its implementation in the question of national liberation differed significantly leading to virulent factionalism in Bengal’s political sphere. Several socialist parties emerged in the scene during the decade as discussed in the previous chapter. By 1939 the fate of the Left coalition was a forgone dream. Despite Subhas Chandra Bose’s attempt at forming a Left Consolidation Committee at the Tripuri session of Congress, no decisive action could have been adopted concerning the United Front policy.⁵ Also, the general dilemma of joining a separate left party headed by Bose was resented by the major Leftist factions, from CSP to CPI, being the catalyst for the formation of the Forward Bloc on May 3, 1939.⁶ These upheavals among the significant actors in the political arena of Bengal in general, and the labour circuit in particular, impacted profoundly the formation, evolution, and functioning of the unions across the city.

This chapter will illuminate how the working class registered their dissent against the oppressive structures of imperialism and capitalism in the decade. By tracing the unionisation process at the grassroot level to delving into the nuances of the day-to-day functioning of these organisations, the study aims at expounding the transformation in the psyche of the

³ The colonial state as an offensive against the Bolshevik threat in the colony, apprehended and convicted 31 leftist trade unionist leaders in March 1929.

⁴ The term became popular after the path breaking anthology of essays, *Languages of Class*, by Gareth Stedman Jones was released in 1983, which revolutionised the analytical concept of ‘class’ as well as the literal manifestation of ‘class’ in the capitalist society. (Jones, Gareth Stedman. *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working class history*. Cambridge: CUP, 1983.

⁵ Kolkata Police Museum files of the Special Branch, henceforth will be referred to as, KPM/ SB. KPM/SB/ 00114/05, Special Branch (Calcutta Office) Report on the United Front (National). Also see, Dasgupta, Koushiki. *Minor Political Parties and the Politics of Late Colonial Bengal (1920-1947)*. New Delhi: Abhijeet Publications, 2013, pp. 174-76.

⁶ For further details on Forward Bloc consult, Bose, Subhas Chandra. *The Indian Struggle, 1935-42*, Calcutta: 1952.

working class and the fashioning of the protest mentality. Seminal works have addressed the history of working-class mobilisation in late nineteenth and twentieth-century Bengal. From Dipesh Chakrabarty's rumination on class consciousness among the jute workers in Bengal to Subho Basu's insight on how union-making advanced under Congress in the 1920s to the Socialist takeover from the 1930s of the sector are some of the critical breakthroughs in the extant historical scholarship.⁷ There emerged crucial discourses during this period centred around working-class militarisation and consciousness. Nirban Basu contemplated the role of various political parties in the labour circuit of Bengal from the 1920s to the close of the colonial era to elucidate the underbelly of union politics in the period: left factionalism and bitter party squabbles.⁸ Moving beyond the above-mentioned scholarship, this chapter attempts to strike a balance by addressing both of these facets of mobilisation i.e., left factionalism and bitter party squabbles that created a distinct culture of proletariat consciousness. The chapter is divided into two major parts. The first part is dedicated to analysing the very structure of union formation in Calcutta during the decade in order to assess the changing rationale, reception of socialism, and the impact it had on working-class radicalisation. Considering sectors that are rarely addressed in mainstream labour historiography, it strives to bring forth unexplored dynamics in late colonial trade unionism.

2.2 Anatomy of a Trade Union: Groundwork and Making of an Organisation

Bengal witnessed the inception of a newer brand of activists in the trade union circuit from the late 1920s onwards. As discussed in the previous chapter, their vision, political strategy, intellectual stronghold, and social placement significantly differed from their predecessors. The 1930s saw the proliferation of trade unions across sectors that were never unionised before and their idea and protest discourse was a new undertaking in the context of early

⁷Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Rethinking Working-Class History: Bengal 1890-1940*. Princeton: PUP, 1989. Basu, Subho. *Does Class Matter? Colonial Capital and Workers' Resistance in Bengal (1890-1937)*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004.

⁸ Basu, Nirban. *The Political Parties and the Labour Politics, 1937-47: With Special Reference to Bengal*. Calcutta: Minerva Associates (Publications), 1992, pp. 52-99.

twentieth-century global history.⁹ Hence, it becomes pertinent to delve into the background, the plan of action, and the rationale behind the formation of a union. The process was far from uniform, swinging between formal and informal, planned and spontaneous, ideologically driven or springing out of practical predicaments. These developments not only facilitate comprehension of ways in which the working class was getting radicalised, but also shed light on the nuanced and layered process of the burgeoning class consciousness among the vanguards and the workers in late colonial Calcutta.

The Bengal's trade union circuit faced a political void after the Meerut Conspiracy arrests in 1929. Veteran socialists and communists like Radharaman Mitra, Gopen Chakravarti, and Muzaffar Ahmad were behind bars.¹⁰ The secret office of the Calcutta Committee of CPI at Zakaria Street under Abdul Halim became the nuclei for young students, clerks, and middle-class petty bourgeoisie activists who started taking a healthy interest in Marxist-Leninist thought.¹¹ Md. Ismail who emerged as a crucial figure in the 1930s and 40s trade union movement, was a clerk at the advertisement department of the *Rozana Hind*, the Urdu newspaper, with its office also at Zakaria Street. Halim got acquainted with Ismail while getting the Urdu party handbills printed from the newspaper office.¹² College students like Saroj Mukherjee also frequented the office.¹³

Though lacking in experience these leaders were well taught in the tenets of socialism and introduced innovative methods and tactics which was a deliberate attempt at bridging the divide between middle-class leadership and the working class. Efforts were made to form a

⁹ Many new sectors were unionised during this period for the first time which included the book printers and sellers, the umbrella makers, and other petty bourgeoisie enterprises like several insurance companies. KPM/SB/03112/05 (Socialism: --- Umbrella Stick Workers Union).

¹⁰ For more details on the trials consult, Basu, Jyoti, Sailen Dasgupta, et al, eds. *Documents of the Communist Movement of India, Vol. II, Meerut Conspiracy Case (1929)*. Calcutta: National Book Agency, 1997. Hutchinson, Lester. *Conspiracy at Meerut*. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1935.

¹¹ Intelligence Bureau Files from West Bengal State Archives, henceforth will be referred to as, IB. IB 210/27 (23/1927). Referto Chattopadhyay, Suchetana. *An Early Communist*, pp. 226-32.

¹² Mukherjee, Saroj. *Bharater Communist Party O Amra (Indian Communist Party and Us)*. Calcutta: National Book Agency, 1985, pp. 54-55.

¹³ Ibid. p. 54.

personal bond and familiarity with workers before getting them to enroll in night schools to educate them politically.¹⁴ These leaders often infiltrated the worker's post-work gatherings popularly known as *addas* or *theks* initiating dialogues to make them join the study circles and night groups.¹⁵ These young men often waited hours outside the factory gates, walking with the workers to their homes, convincing them of the importance of joining trade unions through friendly conversations. Promoting the idea of union politics was a persevering exercise that was often futile, but these leaders remained tenacious and dedicated.¹⁶ In 1934, a SB Report mentioned that their Department received secret intel that veteran Labour Party head, Niharendu Dutt Mazumdar admitted to an undercover agent that he had initiated a drive for the formation of factory groups in the Bengal Chemical workshops, 'in order to make the workers class conscious, and to take up the leadership in the coming revolution'¹⁷ Sushil Bhadra, Kamal Sarkar, and Promode Sen secretly read out the contents of the listed books to the workers. The list primarily entailed translation of Russian books on Marxist-Leninist thought, *Leninism* by Joesph Stalin, Maxim Gorky's *Mother*, *What is to be Done* of Lenin, and some Socialist newspapers and journals like *India Forum*, *International Press Correspondence* of the Comintern, and *Russia To-Day*, a newspaper from Uzbekistan.¹⁸ Mukherjee recounts how the CPI leaders were to enroll in mandatory language training in Hindi and Urdu.¹⁹ Calcutta and its suburbs had an overwhelming number of workers whose native tongue was not Bengali. The linguistic barrier never was an obstacle in trade union mobilisation. The party initiated the publication of Hindi and Urdu journals like '*Jangi Mazdoor*' (Militant Labourer), '*Naya Rasta*' (The New Way), and *Naya Duniya* (The New

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 56. Mukherjee discusses how study circles and workers' league were coming up in Calcutta from early 1930s to educate the workers in Marxism-Leninism.

¹⁵ Amal Dutta, "Interview with Amal Dutta on Activism during his initial days in the 1940s," interview by Author, 10 February, 2019.

¹⁶ Sanmatha Ghosh. "Interview with Ghosh on Labour Organisation with Forward Bloc in the late 1930s," interview by Author, 22 December, 2018, and 18 October, 2019.

¹⁷ KPM/ SB/ 03157/05, Special Branch Report on All Bengal Chemical Workers' Union. Excerpts from Secret Report dated 8 January, 1934.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Mukherjee, *Bharater Communist Party O Amra*, p. 56.

World) in the early thirties. Illegal cyclostyled handbills in these languages were printed on Strand Road and Tarachand Dutta Road of the city under the direction of Halim and Somnath Lahiri.²⁰

Trade union leaders deployed a common tactic to radicalise the workers and acquaint them with the repertoire of class struggle. To achieve this goal, they conducted frequent and planned ‘*bustee*’ drives in a timely fashion. *Bustees* or slums were communal living quarters inhabited primarily by men and women of the working –class. The trade unionists initiated a work of active propaganda in these spaces. Often the night schools and the study circles which provided pedagogy in Marxist-Leninist thought to the workers were held here, to ensure greater participation.²¹ The socialist and communist activists spent hours striving to gauge the social dynamics of these ghettos.²² These neighbourhoods originated and sprung up based on caste and community allegiances. Mobilisation drives were based on these undercurrents. The All-Bengal Chemical Workers’ Union was formed in 1934 and was associated with the Bengal Labour Party (BLP).²³ Started primarily with the Bengal Chemical and Pharmaceutical Workshop workers, activists like Ajit Das Gupta, Suren Sircar, and Promode Sen, of BLP led the groundwork. They took in confidence Poornima Acharya, an erstwhile employee of the company, making her the union secretary.²⁴ This ensured the better acceptance of the union among the company workers. Acharya’s residence was raided in February 1935 by officers from the Intelligence Bureau (IB) department. A sizable amount of Communist books and periodicals were seized, which Acharya acknowledged having belonged to the Union Club.²⁵ This union later affiliated itself with the AITUC. In 1936, Dasgupta with the assistance of a particular worker from the *Baagari* or *Bagri* caste, Sree

²⁰ Ibid. Also see Lahiri, Somenath. *Somenath Lahiri Rochonaboli: 1931-45 (Collected Works :1931-45)*.

Kolkata: Monisha, 1985, pp 113-302. These are several articles written by him for various short-term and long-term journals and dailies brought out by CPI in the aforementioned years.

²¹ Mukherjee, pp. 55-56, This can be attested by accounts left by other activists over the years.

²² For more information about what role caste played in working-class settlement from late nineteenth century to the 1930s, Basu, *Does Class Matter?*, pp. 49-57.

²³ KPM/ SB/ 03157/05, Special Branch Report on All Bengal Chemical Workers’ Union.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid. IB Report on the Raid at the Residence of Poornima Acharya on 13 February, 1935.

Narayan, commenced a *bustee* drive among the chemical workers of the said class.²⁶ However, the particular group's acute political insouciance superseded caste solidarity and community bond.²⁷

It should be noted that local personalities who yielded influence also formed unions. Later, these unions were either usurped by a political party or would have been gradually disbanded. On 14 August 1938, a local cleric Maulvi H. Haider Chowdhury from Golam Sovan Lane of Central Calcutta met, twenty-five coachmen of Hackney Carriage Company informally.²⁸ Drivers, mostly Muslims complained about low wages, arbitrary firing, and late payment of dues. Haider advised them to form a registered union and pay a subscription of four annas per month for its functioning. Hackney Carriage Drivers' Union was formed the following month under Haider's presidency.²⁹ The union did not have any political affiliation. Haider explicitly never expressed any socialist inkling or any communal allegiance.³⁰ The union arose solely out of pragmatic requirements. Though it essentially represented the interest of a specific religious community, it was contingent upon the composition of the employees in the company. This provides an instance of how class and community consciousness were reconciled. Unfortunately, the union was short-lived and disintegrated by late 1939.³¹ The following case studies will illuminate the diverse features of the union movements that were happening during this period.

2.3 Revolutionising Commutation: The Organisation Among the Motor Workers

²⁶ The *Bagris* are an agrarian caste from mainly Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Haryana. Post-independence they are vested with the schedule caste category (The Constitution: order of 19:IX No. 2) They were migrant workers employed at the chemical plants, as Calcutta used to be an industrial hub pulling crowds from the nearby provinces during the colonial period.

²⁷ KPM/SB/03157/05.

²⁸ KPM/ SB/ 03153/05, SB Report on Hackney Carriage Drivers' Union.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid, Report produced on 6 August, 1938.

³¹ Ibid.

The transport sector was one of the foremost sectors in Calcutta, which witnessed the union organisation process from the early 1930s. Already having a history of militant trade unionism, the 1930s saw transport in different sectors, from railways to docks, and most crucially the motor transport workers agitating for their rightful prerogatives. The years 1928-29 saw massive strikes of the Kharagpur Railway workers, and the opening months of the 1930s were marked by the historic carters' agitation paralysing the Harrison Road of the city.³² The police firing resulted in the death of seven workers, both Hindu and Muslim. A massive procession of carters and workers, irrespective of religion, was held in honour of the fallen martyrs. Such a show of communal solidarity was unique post the communal riots of 1926.³³ As a result, the police were forced to retreat, and the legislation of the buffalo cattle cartmen was restored. Later The Head of CID, Sir Horace William, commented, 'The carters of Calcutta under the instigation of communists created serious trouble. Later on, the communist members characterised it as the first barricade struggle in India with the police.'³⁴

The All Bengal Motor Workers' Union was established under the presidentship of veteran communist, Bhupendranath Dutta and other CPI activists like Bipin Chakraborty, Abani Chowdhury, and others in 1930.³⁵ In 1931-32 both Lahiri and Halim of CPI joined the union to bring it under the aegis of the WPP (Workers' and the Peasants' Party) of Bengal.³⁶ The communists secretly and privately carried active propaganda among the drivers and conductors, pushing them to strike. These strikes aimed to create a working-class consciousness aided by agitation for their rightful demands in the first place and to push for the release of the Meerut prisoners. However, it failed to yield any significant outcome. It was only in the mid-1930s and after the release of the communists post the Meerut trials that tangible actions were taken. During the early 1930s, the efforts to organise the Motor workers came from different avenues. In 1936, the Bengal Motor Workers Union was under the heavy

³² For details on the Kharagpur Strike see, Saha, Panchanan. *History of Working-Class Movement in Bengal*. New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1978, pp. 74-110.

³³ KPM/SB/00047/05, Report on Communal Disturbance: 'Hindu Muslim Tension in Calcutta'.

³⁴ Government Of West Bengal :India's Struggle for Freedom : An Album, p. 136.

³⁵ KPM SB 7306/15. SB Report on All Bengal Motor Workers' Union.

³⁶ Ibid.

influence of the revolutionary elements of various terrorist circles.³⁷ It is germane to our comprehension that there was often a lack of clarity and a socialist approach to labour activism during the period in discussion. The workers of the union were instructed by the leaders to indulge in a vigorous strike for non-payment of fines in motor cases as it would make the situation conducive for the *Ghadar Party* revolutionaries to seize power and usher in freedom for the whole of the colony. There were efforts made to disguise revolvers and pistol dealers with the workers to smuggle arms into the province, but these men found it difficult to blend in.³⁸ These initial days of the organisation saw curious strains, tensions, and an awakening of consciousness among the working class, as transcontinental revolutionary currents converged with local working-class radicalisation. The Motor transport sector was fraught with virulent factional war from 1937, as several rival unions emerged under various factions of the Left. In July 1938, members of the *Anushilan Samiti* formed Motor Vehicles Workers' Union. Led by Tridib Chowdhury, Manmatha Ganguly, and Barindra Ghosh, it aimed to capture unions by making inroads into French Motor Car, Mac Kinor & Mac Kennie Co., and Allenburry & Co. in Ballyguange.³⁹ From late 1938 and 1939, the struggle was primarily against the bus and vehicle owners, and the misuse of the license system which led to treatments 'worse than dogs'.⁴⁰ On 14 April 1939, 'License Suspension and Cancellation Day' was commemorated when prominent Communists like Kartar Singh and Nepal Bhattacharya urged the motor workers to agitate against the arbitrary use of the licensing system by the deputy commissioner in the Public Vehicles Department (PVD). There were further protests against police atrocities across the city.⁴¹ The Taxi Drivers' Union initiated similar drives, whereby Inder Singh Grewal and other leaders from the union visited taxi stands at Clive Street and offered monetary help to those workers who would go to prison

³⁷ Ibid, KPM/SB/03154/05: SB Report on Motor Workers' Union (*Anushilan*)

³⁸ Ibid. Excerpts from a secret meeting of Bir Singh, Inder Singh, and Rati Sarkar, drivers and activists of the union on 31 August, 1936. They discussed how they should radicalise the labourers in order for the Ghadar Party to intervene and do the rest for the emancipation of the nation.

³⁹ KPM/SB/03154/05, SB Report on Union of the Motor Workers (*Anushilan*): Extract from the statement of members of *Anushilan Samiti* dated 25 July, 1938.

⁴⁰ KPM/ SB/ 7306/15.

⁴¹ Ibid.

instead of paying fines in the motor license cases. A relief fund was also created, and half an *anna* was collected from each driver.⁴²

From 1939 onwards, suspicions and factional cleavages deepened. The communists were trying to capture ‘white unions’ or associations which were non-political bodies dedicated to the welfare of the motor workers.⁴³ The Bengal Bus Drivers’ and Conductors Association became fertile ground for these feuds, as both CPI and Communist League (CL) members tried to make a dent in the association.⁴⁴ In August, with the involvement of ‘Red’ activists like Bepin Chakravarty (CL), Sailen Mukherjee, and Prakash Chakraborty (CPI), the association registered itself as a union with the Labour Commissioner. However, the pro-government faction was still in domination, as evident from a meeting of the union in October, where resolutions were passed to improve the working conditions of the workers along with expressing their loyalty towards the Crown and ‘unstinted offer of their services to the defense of the Empire during the ongoing war.’⁴⁵ Mukherjee along with his colleagues Atul Roy, and taxi driver Ujara Singh, started a counter-propaganda drive against this inimical trend. They tried to prevent recruits from joining the union branding it as a ‘loyalist association’. Roy aimed at completely taking over the union under the aegis of the CPI, hence calling for the boycott of the union meetings. Saumyendranath Tagore of CL was also keen on taking this opportunity and deputed Subodh Sen to work among the bus drivers and distribute handbills to fulfill the agenda.⁴⁶

⁴²KPM/SB/03140/05, The Taxi Drivers’ Union was established in 1938 under S.K. Roy Chowdhury. But since, the drivers were overwhelmingly Sikh, veteran Socialist leader Deben Sen advised Saligram Singh and Ram Bux Singh(both drivers) to affiliate the union with BLA or TUC.

⁴³ KPM/SB/ 03176/05, Report on The Calcutta Motor Transport Workers’ Union (1939). ‘White Unions’ was an umbrella term used officially by the government to demarcate unions which were not under any Communist or Leftist influence.

⁴⁴ KPM/SB/03075/05. Report on Bengal Bus Drivers’ & Conductors’ Association.

⁴⁵ Ibid. SB Notes on the meeting, dated 9 September, 1939.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

In the same year, a conference was arranged to combat factional war among the motor workers' rival unions and unite them.⁴⁷ The conference organising committee was formed with the following unions: Motor Transport Workers' Union, Bengal Motor Workers' Union, Bengal Chauffers' Union, and Calcutta Motor Transport Workers' Union.⁴⁸ Although, Nizamuddin (a member of the executive committee of the chauffers' union) along with Mohim Singh and other motor workers convinced Muzaffar Ahmad and Abdul Rezzak Khan of CPI that the proposed conference would probably not materialise due to dissensions in the committee fomented by members of Rohini Adhikari's Group.⁴⁹ Later with further intervention from senior Communist leaders and funds from leading Socialists like Saumyendranath Tagore, new office bearers were elected for the conference to be held in May.⁵⁰

From 1941, the unions in the sector concentrated their cumulative efforts to counter the scourges of the arbitrary cases against the bus and taxi drivers under the repressive Motor Vehicle Act.⁵¹ A meeting of the Bengal Bus Drivers' and Conductors' Union was held on 24 March 1941 where resolutions were passed to lodge a case in the High Court against the Act. Pritam Singh (A driver of Bus 136, Route 11) and Kehen Singh (driver) raised a subscription for the same and urged the workers to defer paying fines in the motor cases.⁵² A general strike was their last resort against police *zulum* (oppression), they declared. From the mid-1930s, and especially the 1940s, the city's labour scene witnessed a considerable number of meetings addressed by the leaders from within the workers themselves. It was a strategic move that did not only ensure better support given the symbolic significance of the act but also countered the colonial state's narrative of painting the process of radicalisation within

⁴⁷ KPM/SB/ 03154/05. A joint conference was being planned from late 1938 onwards.

⁴⁸ KPM/ SB/ 7306/15.

⁴⁹ KPM/ SB/ 00117/05. It was a factional Socialist group formed in mid- 1938 comprising of Adhikari, Upen Dey, Biren Bhaatacharji, Sarajbans Singh, etc. They were pro INC faction which was trying to make inroads into Bengal Labour Association (BLA) to undermine the influence of Suresh Banerji and Deben Sen's influence.

⁵⁰ KPM/ SB/ 7306/15.

⁵¹ The Motor Vehicles Act of British India was passed in 1914.

⁵² KPM/SB/ 03075/05.

the working class as alien, spearheaded by educated middle-class vanguards who did not essentially belong from the similar class background. Their activism came to the realisation, and by May, it was assured by leading trade union activists that Niharendu Dutt Mazumdar, the elected representative from the Labour constituency, would put forward the question of excessive fines in motor cases in the July session of the Bengal Legislative Assembly.⁵³

2.4 Resisting Capitalism from the Belly of the Beast: Unionisation Among the Corporation Workers

The Calcutta Corporation, with a substantial workforce across several departments, was one of the sectors which began to witness the radicalisation process by the middle of the 1930s. Comprising various departments, it already had several employee associations encompassing clerks and white-collar conglomerates who were either pro-British or, at best, nationalist in their political orientation. The Calcutta Corporation with a substantial workforce across several departments was one of the sectors which started radicalising by the middle of the 1930s. The goals of these associations never exceeded their immediate employment-related concerns. There was a lukewarm attitude towards anti-imperialist struggle in general or working-class struggle in particular. Comprised of the privileged strata these organisations also acted as a ‘safety valve’ for keeping in check the greater mass of the proletariats employed in the institution, like the scavengers.⁵⁴ They actively promoted a sense of loyalty to the government among these workers, preventing them from forming any unions which might remotely have any communist affiliations, which was considered an ‘external influence’. The first strike of the scavengers working under Calcutta Corporation took place in 1928 under the leadership of early Communists like Dharani Goswami, Muzaffar Ahmad, and Dr. Prabhabati Dasgupta. It was incomprehensible within the upper caste political circles

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ The ‘safety valve theory’ is a rationale through which public discontents against the government can be contained and controlled by providing them with a platform to voice their opinions. The retired English Civil Servant A.O. Hume came up with the idea of forming the INC as a ‘safety valve’ to meet the rising displeasures of the Indian subjects in the late nineteenth century.

that sanitation workers might mobilise to push for their demands.⁵⁵ Nonetheless, it was not before the late 1930s that workers in these various sections of the corporation unionised to push for their demands.

In 1938, the Corporation Employees Association was established as an umbrella organisation. It was closely overseen by the Indian National Congress (INC), specifically the Bengal Provincial Trade Union Congress (BPTUC) faction, and vigorously opposed any communist influence.⁵⁶ To better understand the association's core politics, reviewing the details of their meeting and procession on May 29, 1939, at Wellington Square would be helpful.⁵⁷ The meeting presided over by Kalipada Mukherji (BPTUC) was attended by over 4000 audiences, primarily workers. The meeting proceeded with the hoisting of the union flag and a band performance of ten youths dressed in *khaddar* shirts, shorts, caps, and a red and green scarf with 'Shiksha Samity' () inscribed on them. As the usual slogans of 'Calcutta Corporation Karmachari (Workers) Committee ki Jay', *Mazdoor Union ki Jai* (Long Live Workers' Union), and *Inquilab Zindabad* (Long Live the Revolution) were hurled, workers in the procession came and joined from Belegkata, Watanganj, Bhawanipore, and Kidderpore. The event's main attraction was the performance of a captivating opening song by the renowned artist Bankim Chandra Boral.⁵⁸

Boral's song promoted love and equality, emphasising the importance of uniting different social classes in the fight for independence. Speeches by stakeholders in the association followed this, J.C. Mukherjee, a chief executive officer and a prominent Congress leader, Kalipada Mukherjee of Bengal Congress Committee, Sukhen Chatterjee, and other workers. Mukherjee stressed unity among the employees and how they should collectively work to achieve their goals irrespective of their ranks.⁵⁹ He firmly believed that success could

⁵⁵ Tanika Sarkar, "Dirty Work, Filthy Caste", Calcutta Scavengers in the 1920s" in *Working Lives & Worker Militancy: The Politics of Labour in Colonial India*, Ravi Ahuja (ed), New Delhi, Tulika Books, 2013, pp. 176-206.

⁵⁶ KPM/SB/03151/05, SB Report on Calcutta Corporation Employees' Association.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

only be achieved in the long term by accepting the creed of non-violence. However, the communist takeover of the unions in the city posed a direct challenge to the gospel of non-violence and constitutional struggle. During Mukherjee's speech, there was a grand show and an elaborate cultural performance, but there was no explicit mention of class struggle. This stood in stark contrast to the protest rallies of the Red Unions.

A clerk named Radharaman Roy Chowdhury expressed his displeasure with the interference of external individuals in corporation matters.⁶⁰ He spoke in Bengali about the influence of labour unions and other *samitis* (unions) on the corporation. He informed that already four branches of the association in each ward had been opened, running, and functional. He also expressed his wish to compete in the upcoming corporation election by filing candidates solely from the workers and the sympathisers, resisting the political control of the leftists.⁶¹ Sukhen Chatterji, another employee, had listed the union's immediate demands, which consisted of job security, complimentary accommodations for workers, free uniforms, and access to medical care and hospitals at no cost.. A bank for workers called the *Sramik Bank*, was established to rescue them from Afghan loan sharks known as *kabuliwalahs*.⁶² During the event, a few workers, such as Kalka Singh, Md. Ishfaq and Dukhi spoke to the crowd.⁶³ However, the upper-caste clerks and officers were primarily designated as speakers. Unfortunately, these associations only engaged in tokenism, limiting any radical action by the working class at the grassroots level.

However, efforts were made by various socialist factions to make a dent in the institution. In early 1939 Shibnath Banerjee (CSP) assisted Kani Chowdhury, a Mosquito control officer, in forming the 'Mosquito Brigade Union' as a rival to The Calcutta Corporation Mosquito Control Department Union, which had Congress leader AMA Zaman as president.⁶⁴ The secretary of the union was Mukundalal Sarkar from M.N. Roy's group. Sarkar was reportedly hatching an ambitious plan to secure his party's dominance over all

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ KPM/SB/03152/05, SB Report on Calcutta Corporation Mosquito Control Department Employees' Union.

the unions of the corporation employees to form a federation of such unions. As popularity waned, he conspired to oust Zaman, followed by his failure to reinstate a sacked employee. He approached Jalaluddin Hashmi, a corporation councillor, to replace Zaman in the next election as president. His efforts to draw Banerjee into the plot did not materialise as Banerjee denied cooperation.⁶⁵ The CSP not being particularly averse to Congress politics never openly antagonised the Congress Committee in Bengal.

By the 1940s the union politics of the corporation went through a complete transformation. The corporation had a greater number of elected councillors who were communists from the early forties. Hence, there were discernible changes in the attitude towards union work. The Calcutta Corporation Teachers' Union (CCTU), formed in 1938, was under the heavy influence of communists like Md. Ismail and Somnath Lahiri from the early 1940s.⁶⁶ In a resolution passed in 1944, Ismail, besides putting forward the usual demands like enhancement of the Dearness Allowance (DA) for the workers, urged the corporation teachers to educate the citizens of Calcutta about their civic rights and obligations. He further remarked that he, along with Lahiri and other corporation councillors, was trying to remove corruption and rampant nepotism within the corporation.⁶⁷ Towards the close of the colonial era, the union started pushing for measures that were beneficial to the workers placed in the lower ranks, often to the resentment of clerks and other employees at the higher posts.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Ibid. Extract from a Report dated 9 September, 1938.

⁶⁶ KPM/SB/0313/05, SB Report on Calcutta Corporation Teacher's Union (1938-47).

⁶⁷ Ibid. Excerpts from a meeting held on 27 June, 1944 at the Mahabodhi Society Hall under the presidency of Sudhangshu Kumar Mitra, corporation councillor.

⁶⁸ Ibid, A tribunal award was passed which had excluded skilled labourers and those drawing rupees thirty five or more as basic pay from availing ration concessions.

2.5 Conclusion: Hurdles in the Path of the Revolutionary Dream; the Hardships of Organising a Union

Despite the thirties being the period that saw the inception of many strong-rooted unions that posed major resistance to the onslaughts of imperialism, few unions failed to sustain themselves and disbanded within a few years of their formation. This was often an outcome of certain trade union leaders or a factional party taking over a union, but ultimately failing to cope with the spontaneity of workers' agitation during strikes. In June 1938, Deben Sen of BLA met 200 bamboo stick makers in the Chapatola umbrella factory who had gone on a strike, because they wanted three *annas* for a dozen.⁶⁹ Sen advised them to boycott the firm of the leading dealer, Paresh Bhadra until he conceded to their demands, and form a union and affiliate it with the BLA.⁷⁰ However, some work continued until a report was filed by Bhadra at Muchipara Police station on 18 May 1938 that loyal strikers were assaulted by strikers led by a worker Anukul. They even threatened Bhadra with assault and boycott if their demands were not met.⁷¹ At the turn of the week, when the strike was not availing any tangible results, Sen advised them to return to work to accumulate a substantial strike fund for the future.⁷² It did not go down well with the workers. The year saw sporadic strikes of the employees of the Messers Bhadra & Co. In late December 1938, the situation took a serious turn when the company refused to reemploy strikers. Anukul Chandra Roy, President of the union, and Suren Chakraborty, Secretary, resigned from their position citing dissatisfaction over BLA to fetch any remuneration for them in the past year. ⁷³ The union was reported to be breaking down.⁷⁴

Organising unions in specific sectors faced significant inherent sociopolitical challenges and obstacles threatening their legitimacy and functionality. In 1939, cobblers and

⁶⁹ KPM/SB/ 03112/05, SB Report on Umbrella Stick Workers' Union (1938). Excerpt from Report dated May 16, 1938.

⁷⁰ Ibid..

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid. Report from a meeting at 1, Hazarimull Lane, Howrah, dated May 20, 1938.

⁷³ Ibid. They publicly resigned at a gathering at Sradhananda Park on 1 January, 1939.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

shoemakers expressed dissatisfaction with the reduced pay rates.⁷⁵ Hence, they stopped their supplies to the dealers in early August. Sudhir Mukherjee, a member of the Bengal Labour Association (BLA), which worked within the ambit of INC, tried to seize the opportunity and held a meeting with 150 strikers or *mochis*(cobblers) to form a Union with the veteran Congress and socialist leader Dr. Suresh Banerjee as president. ⁷⁶ However, shoemaking as a trade was particularly practised and monopolised by Hindus at that point in the city, whereas the shoe merchants were chiefly composed of the high-class Muslim elites. The slipper merchants had their union affiliated with the Muslim League, and often, the cobbler-shoe merchant dispute snowballed into a Congress-League feud with more enormous communal implications. In a protest meeting of the slipper makers' union at Hrishikesh Park on 7 August 1939, Banerjee accused the Shoe Merchants' Association of its inhuman exploitation of the cobblers. He further added that the 'Muslim *bariwallas*' (house owners) in the area were refusing tenancy to the shoemakers because of their faith.⁷⁷ Not backed by hard evidence, these comments were a diplomatic disaster that ultimately led to the failure of the strike.⁷⁸

Taking to the column of *Azad*, a statement was released on 20 August, by the Secretary of the Cornwallis Market Shoe Merchants' Association, Md. Ishaque, against Banerjee's statement which he labeled as a manifestation of his 'communal mentality.'⁷⁹ He opined that his statements were against the whole Muslim community. The Muslim *bariwallahs* provided the cobblers with housing despite them being denied housing in the Hindu *mohallahs* (localities). He taunted that a 'learned man' like Banerjee should better know before accusing the merchants of coercing the cobblers to join the League, as it had been well established that the party did not accept non-Muslim members. He further claimed that Suresh was preying and playing with the sentiments of the ignorant community. Commenting on his call to boycott the shoes of the Puja Market, he pointed out that the customer base did not comprise

⁷⁵ KPM/SB/03071/05, SB Report on Slipper Makers' Union (1939).

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid. The meeting was held at the Hrishikeesh Park with 300 cobblers, chaired by Kshitish Roy Chowdhury.

⁷⁸ Ibid. The strike lost its momentum by 20 August, 1939.

⁷⁹ *Azad*, 20 August, 1939.

a Hindu clientele.⁸⁰ So, the merchants manoeuvred Banerjee's comments to meet their ends, and by 20 August, it was reported that the strike was dying down as the union lost its credibility.⁸¹

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ KPM/SB/03071/05.

Chapter Three

Towards a ‘Greater Consciousness?’ How Strikes Became Part of the Working-Class Protest Lexicon from the 1930s in Colonial Calcutta

Introduction: Striking in the 1930s

This chapter devotes itself to the pivotal enquiry in the field of labour history: class consciousness. Taking a cue from the classic argument of Sabyasachi Bhattacharya demonstrating how strikes are a signifier of the augmenting class consciousness among the workers, the chapter proceeds to scrutinise workers’ strikes in the city from the 1930s until the end of the Second World War.¹ In the process, it reflects upon how the question of class consciousness can never be addressed in isolation divorced from the broader historical context, and how class and community consciousness was reconciled. Finally, the chapter sheds light on the impact of crucial international revolutionary phenomena on working-class activism in Bengal. The collation of streams of anti-colonialism, anti-imperialism, and anti-fascism triggered a sense of solidarity, transcending the global-local binary, and serves as a methodological framework for doing working-class history. Harping on these primary aspects, this chapter elucidates how the working class in the city altered in the thirties ushering in a new era of radical trade unionism.

The official reports on Industrial disputes were of the opinion that strikes were progressively seen as an economic weapon from the 1920s onwards. The wartime inflation left the workers deeply unsatisfied and coupled with the hardships from the raging influenza epidemic the conditions were favourable for striking.² From 1926-27 working-class unrest intensified, and a strike wave swept across the provinces of Bombay and Bengal. The official

¹ Bhattacharya, Sabyasachi. “Capital and Labour in Bombay City, 1928-29.” *Economic and political Weekly*, 16, no. 42-43 (1981), pp 17-24. Also see, Van der Linden, Marcel, and Prabhu Mohapatra eds. *Labour Matters: Towards Global Histories: Studies in Honour of Sabyasachi Bhattacharya*. New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2009, pp. 336-338, for a detailed bibliography of his work on labour activism and consciousness in colonial India.

² “Industrial Disputes in India: 1921-1928”, *Bulletins of Indian Industries&Labour*; No. 43, Government of India (GOI), 1929.

narratives stated that the strikes during this phase were more prolonged in duration, but their success rate was inconsequential.³ The nascent militant trade union movement received a severe blow when the colonial government initiated the Meerut Conspiracy Case, convicting thirty-one prominent trade union activists nationwide. The movement was revived by 1933 with the release of most of these activists.⁴ However, during the All-India Textile Workers' Conference held in Bombay in March 1934, it was determined that the conditions were not yet favourable for a nationwide general strike until April.⁵ Nonetheless, rudimentary stirs were discernible across the provinces of Bombay, Bengal, and the Central provinces. Calcutta and the adjacent industrial areas experienced five strikes in progress led by Communists of different shades.⁶ The Bengal Jute Workers' Union affiliated with C.P.I. opened up a new branch at Metiaburuz, and their officials were trying to enlist strikers from the adjacent Clive Jute Mills. The newly-formed Bengal Match Factory Workers' Union is negotiating for two strikes in the concerned industry, while the Communists were inciting the dock workers around Calcutta.⁷ The authorities were threatened by the incursion of the Communists at the various sectors of the labour force in Calcutta though they were confident that the paucity of funds in their hand would be a major impediment to staging long-term general strikes.⁸

By April, Socialists in Calcutta were organising meetings at various mills around the city in the hope of staging a general strike across the sector. However, the momentum and press coverage hardly made the cut compared to Bombay, where the strike was in full swing from 23 April.⁹ The strike failed due to internal dissensions among the two major communist factions in the Bombay labour scene but held pertinence as it was followed by sympathetic

³ "Industrial Disputes in India: 1929-1936", *Bulletins of Indian Industries & Labour*, No. 62, GOI, 1937.

⁴ British Library India Office Records Files, henceforth will be referred to as, BL IOR. BL IOR/L/P2J/12/137: Indian Labour, Extract from Weekly Report of the Director, Intelligence Bureau (DIB), Home Department, GOI, New Delhi, Dated 7 March, 1934.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid. Extract from Weekly D.I.B Report dated 17 March, 1934.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid. Weekly Report dated 25 April 1934.

strikes across the country on May Day.¹⁰ On 2 May 1934, The Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) issued a circular directing its District Party Committees to pass a resolution in solidarity with the ongoing textile strikes in India and the collection of funds for it, 'Collections of money should be organised. However small these are, it is important that we should be able to continue to telegraph money to our comrades day by day.'¹¹ Shibnath Banerjee and Gauri Shankar fomented a partial strike at some cotton mills in Delhi. This was followed by strikes in mills across Nagpur from May 7, 1934. In Calcutta, May Day was celebrated with a meeting of over 300 mill workers presided by Bankim Mukherjee.¹²

Towards the end of the 1930s, the strikes became more vigorous, and their frequency increased manifold. From the opening months of 1938, Calcutta and its immediate suburbs were wrecked by a series of strikes across the textile mills.¹³ On 25 February, over 20 old spinners of Keshoram Cotton Mill went on strike, demanding the dismissal of the jobber.¹⁴ Over 2000 men came out in sympathy. August saw a strike organised by Nani Gopal Mukherjee and others of the Bengal Labour Party (BLP) organised by the men in Mahalaxmi Cotton Mills at Palta, in the nearby district of 24 Parganas. ¹⁵ CSP and even a few Congress leaders were active in the circuit. Biren Pal and veteran socialist Shibnath Banerjee led the workers of Shri Radha Kishan Cotton mills to agitate for an increase in wages from February 1939.¹⁶ From March 1939 he led a hunger strike at Howrah Cotton Mill too, but he failed to reason and win over Kanai Lal, the managing director of the mill. Strikes were also taking place under local influencers. ¹⁷ In the closing months of 1939, the spinners of Radha Kishan

¹⁰ Ibid. Extract of D.I.B. Report dated May 12, 1934.

¹¹ Ibid. Quoted from the copy of the circular issued by the Secretariat of CPGB on 2 May 1934, noticed by the IB Branch.

¹² Ibid. Extract of D.I.B. Report dated May 12, 1934.

¹³ Kolkata Police Museum files of the Special Branch, henceforth will be referred to as, KPM/ SB. KPM/ SB/ 03136/05, SB Report on Textile Strikes Across Calcutta and the Suburbs (1938-40).

¹⁴ Ibid. Report dated 25 February, 1938.

¹⁵ Ibid. Report dated 13 August, 1938.

¹⁶ Ibid. Report dated 7 February, 1939.

¹⁷ Ibid. Report dated 16 March, 1939.

Mill went on strike again, but this time it was led by weavers like Abdul Sameed and Dil Mohammed. There was no union affiliation or involvement of prominent trade unionists like Banerjee. Suresh Mazumdar of *Ananda Bazar Patrika* funded it. The strike was peaceful, and hardly two constables were deployed around the mill compound.¹⁸ The source of these strikes was often limited to the immediate causes concerning the economic demands and factory floor environment of the working class and hence was withdrawn once the issue was resolved. The causes revolved around the demand for worker dismissal concerning private fights, denial to put in extra hours for another weaver, or fixing looms of other jobbers.¹⁹ Often the demands were conceded under the agreement that if a union was formed, there would be no external political influence.²⁰ During this period, strikes were usually brief and did not have significant political or economic impacts. However, this trend altered radically during the war years.

3.2 Changing Face of Dissent: Striking During the War Years

As evident from the previous subsection, the 1930s ushered in a new age of radical urban labour action. The manifestation of this can be discerned from the altered forms and methods of striking. The First General Jute Strike of 1929 was a testimony to how workers could be organised to sustain a full-fledged strike for months despite the employment of usual repressive measures.²¹ Though strikes were numerous and sporadic throughout the decade most of them failed to transcend into general strikes.²² The strikes were often isolated, confined to designated sectors, and short-lived.²³ However, the war years saw a complete

¹⁸ KPM/ SB/ 03136/05.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid. A strike was staged from July 26, 1939 at Goari Hosiery Mill. It was organised by C.P.I. activists Gopen Chakraborty and Rabi Roy. A compromise was reached by 29th, the only clause was total disassociation from the Communists.

²¹ Saha, *History of Working-Class Movement*, pp. 111-43.

²² KPM/SB/07310/15. SB Report on General Strikes in Calcutta (1938-40).

²³ Ibid.

departure, from this trend. The wartime inflation led the food prices to shoot up, adding to the existing hardships of the working class.²⁴ The crumbling colonial administrative apparatus bearing the burden of entering a war highly underprepared, the wave of anti-imperialist, anti-fascist, and socialist propaganda led to the comprehension of how their immediate demands were intimately tied to the international political predicaments. Not only did the strikes display ingenuity and robustness as per organisation and methods were concerned, but they also attested to a perceptible transformation in working-class mentality. The war years were far from being uniform. Striking pattern nuanced in the course of the war being declared as an anti-imperialist to a people's war.²⁵ What was manifested went beyond just a testimony of heightening class consciousness. It made conspicuous how socio-political upheavals in the international arena had a direct bearing on the internal politics of the labour circuit in colonial Calcutta, shattering the rigidities of the global-local binary. The scourges and pitfalls of the war brought together the workers across Russia, Rangoon, and the heartland of Calcutta in a shared history of sufferings, hardships, awareness, radicalisation, and the paramount of it all, solidarity.

During the 1940s, student activism became more closely intertwined with the working-class movement. It was common for students to go on strike in support of protesting workers during this time. The C.P.I., banned until 1941, utilised Student Federation (A.I.S.F) as its ground organisation for these purposes.²⁶ In a secret meeting held on 2 September 1940, the student and the Trade Union section of the party decided to observe 'Students' Protest Day' the following day.²⁷ It was a move in solidarity with the striking scavengers of the Calcutta Corporation. As a result, a procession of the students and the workers were taken out from their respective colleges and bustees (cheap communal living quarters) for a meeting at Sradhanand Park. In the morning, the scavengers who proceeded from Hazra Road, Chitpur

²⁴ KPM/SB/07311/15. SB Report on Miscelenious Strikes (1940).

²⁵ Initially when the Second World War (WWII) broke out in 1939, the communists opposed the war as an 'imperialist war', but after the invasion of Soviet Union in 1941 by Germany they adopted the 'people war' ine. A worldwide struggle of the Socialist forces against the counter revolutionary fascist forces.

²⁶ Accounts of activists associated with A.I.S.F like Jyoti Basu and Gautam Chattopadhyay recounts this in their memoirs. See, Chattopadhyay, Gautam. "In Letters of Blood," *The Student*. Bombay, December 1945.

²⁷ KPM/SB/03172/05. SB Report on Labour Rallies in Calcutta (1939).

Bridge, and Hatibagan were dispersed by the local police. As a result, a third-year college student named Sukhendu Das from St. Xavier's College was arrested.²⁸

The war was at India's door, with the Far East entering the World War theatre by 1941.²⁹ In the name of 'defense for British India,' the colonial state came up with the Essential Services (Maintenance) Ordinance in 1941, whereby most of the Public Works Department (PWD) services were made mandatory with strict terms of employment.³⁰ It fed the 'colonial logic' of protection and was a full-proof tactic at clamping down on a few of the most militarised Red Unions. On 3 January 1942, the Provincial Government of Bengal declared the Calcutta Tramways Company Ltd.(CTC) as 'essential for the defence of British India and the efficient prosecution of the war and for maintaining supplies and services necessary for the life of the community.'³¹ From the 1940s onwards, significant stay-in strikes were organised by the Tramway Workers' Union. These strikes aimed to protest against the shortage of food supplies and the casualisation of work during wartime. The promulgation of the ordinance caused widespread discontent among the workers as they were employed by the system of 'no work, no pay' and denounced being bound by the strict terms of the ordinance.

Around 173 drivers of Belgachia, Kalighat, and Kidderpore Tram Depot tendered their resignations, and another 75 served petitions for leave on a different pretext.³² The Ordinance was also a backlash of the paranoia and mass evacuation of the labourers from the city to the

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ For further information on how the campaign in the Far East during the war was the final death knell to the British Empire in Asia consult, Bayly, Christopher, & Tim Harper (ed). *Forgotten Armies: The Fall of British Asia, 1941-1945*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2005.

³⁰ KPM/SB/03098/05, SB Report on Unrest of the Tramway Workers (1940).

³¹ *Calcutta Gazette Extraordinary*, Thursday 8 January, 1942.

³² KPM/ SB/ 03100/05, SB Report on Calcutta Tramway Workers' Union (1942). Extract from Report: Repercussions of Essential Service Maintenance, dated 31 January, 1942.

nearby countryside as rumours of Japanese bombing were abuzz.³³ Initially, the Communist response was to fuel these rumours, facilitating this exodus to capitulate and paralyse the colonial administrative apparatus and economic infrastructure already reeling under the pressure of the Imperial war. The inspectors at Special Branch issued an arrest warrant against Dhiren Dhar of CPI in early January of 1941, who, at a gathering of 20 to 25 representatives of the drivers, conductors, and electricians of CTC, was apparently ‘advising’ them to evacuate Calcutta when air raids would commence by the Japanese.³⁴ However, the German attack on the Soviet Union in July 1941 and the subsequent adaptation of the ‘People’s War’ line were marked by greater cooperation with the British War efforts. This should not translate to blind and uncritical allegiance to the Soviet line, a criticism of the Communists, which was quite stereotypical in the discourse of their Nationalists and other Socialist contemporaries.³⁵ The communication and liaison between the state and the communists improved, but it was not steeped in imperceptions. The Unions led by CPI were resolute in their demands and had a stronger negotiating position with the capitalist government. Evidence of this can be found in the propaganda materials released by the Unions starting in 1942. A pamphlet in Bengali and Hindi under the name of Pulin Pal, the Secretary of the Calcutta Tramway Workers’ Union (CTWU), was making rounds among the Nonapukur Tramway Workshop workers from 1 February 1942. It urged the company workers to follow in the footsteps of their fellow workers in Europe and Asia and build a strong resistance against the Fascists to save ‘Soviet Russia---- the only hope and future of the freedom of the Proletariat.’³⁶ This association of ‘freedom’ with Soviet Russia was a default line in the communist political discourse of contemporary times. Did the anti-colonial vision of the group prioritise economic emancipation over national liberation, as criticised by

³³ KPM/ SB/ 03100/05, Report on Labour Situation dated December 12, 1941. Also, this rumour peaked in August 1942, see, Notes on Repercussions In Calcutta for the Arrest of M.K. Gandhi & Other Leaders in Bombay, dated August 16, 1942. It states that from the morning on August 10, the morning after Gandhi’s arrest the city was abuzz with the rumour that now the Japanese are definitely going to bomb Calcutta.

³⁴ KPM/ SB/ 03100/05. Report of C.L.115 dated 16 January, 1942.

³⁵ KPM/SB/03103/05, Reports on C.S.P. House Searches (1942-43), Post the ‘Quit India’ Movement the CSP was accused the Communists as ‘hired agents of Government’ in many of their pamphlets. For example a Pamphlet titled ‘Must not Happen Again’ was in circulation from late 1941.

³⁶ KPM/ SB/ 03100/05, Report on Tramway Workers’ Union (C.P.I) dated 18 February, 1942.

standard nationalists or socialists? According to their discourse, the former was a necessary precondition for the latter, with the concept of 'Proletariat Liberation' taking centre stage.

The pamphlet further advised the workers to not leave Calcutta owing to the panic. This, for them, was a necessary move to 'protect the country' from the onslaughts of fascism as the war drew near the border, not to be seen as any collaboration with the colonisers. This can be discerned as the pamphlet outlined further that 'they are not to depend on the Government alone, in matters relating to the defence of the country, but to form their own 'Volunteer Guards' and make their own A.R.P.(Air Raid Precautions) and other Defence arrangements.'³⁷ This was accompanied by firm demands for the immediate release of imprisoned union leaders Mohammad Ismail, Gopal Acharya, and Chatur Ali and externment orders on all members to be lifted as a gesture of goodwill and cooperation. The pamphlet mentioned how the combined Red Unions submitted a petition under MLA Bankim Mukherjee to the Government of Bengal and the Labour Commissioner. The demands included an immediate increase of 25% in DA. The disbursement of advance money to the P.W.D. workers to send their families to the countryside. The permanence of service, provision of Provident Fund for the workers, and suitable A.R.P arrangements. All the company agents were also served a similar petition.³⁸

The comprehension of Communism as a strategy for national liberation was not envisioned in isolation but as an anti-imperialist juggernaut for South and Southeast Asian decolonisation. The party organ *Janajuddha (The People's War)*, published from 1942 onwards was printing pieces denouncing the Japanese attack on Southeast Asian countries like Burma.³⁹ In the first weekly edition of the paper, Jyoti Basu wrote an article elucidating how Japan targeted post offices, airbases, electrical units, and the densely populated areas in Rangoon. It was an irreparable psychological blow to the ordinary citizens incontrovertibly,

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ KPM/SB/01324/05, SB Report on *Janajuddha* (Bengali Newspaper of C.P.I.)

the labourers.⁴⁰ He stressed that the workers of Bengal should take it as a lesson as an air raid commenced in Chittagong.⁴¹

The wartime adversities ranging from acute food shortages to perils of Japanese bombing made the already oppressed workers desperate, and the 'essential services ordinance' exacerbated these dissatisfactions into a consolidated channel of agitation. There was wide-scale dissatisfaction across workers of various services listed under the ordinance.⁴² Though a gesture towards erecting a united front against fascism did not make them resort to radical measures, the situation was quite delicate. An official assessment of the labour situation of the first half of 1942 attests to this.⁴³ On the 'most petite excuse', the Tramway workers were assessed to be in a mood to go on strike at a moment's notice. The colonial discourse remained consistent in this regard as it held the tramway workers overwhelmingly reluctant about striking and regarded the external influence of the Communists or the 'agitators whose attitude is uncompromising' behind it.⁴⁴ A new Union of Calcutta Electrical Supply Workers was formed under the aegis of CPI leader Bankim Mukherjee and Sakina Begum, an independent labour activist.⁴⁵ The officials were apprehensive that this shift of clout from the Congress-dominated moderate leadership under Dr. Suresh Banerjee of the existing setup might lead the workers to 'disregard the restricting orders imposed on them via the ordinance.'⁴⁶ Even fairly pro-state petty bourgeois unions like the Calcutta Corporation Workers Union refused the Labour Commissioner to be associated with the committee enquiring into the war-time grievances of the employees.⁴⁷ The colonial's government veiled strategy to regulate strikes and labour militancy through the imposition of the ordinance

⁴⁰ *Janajuddha*, May 1, 1942.

⁴¹ Mukherjee, *Bharater Communist Party O Amra*, p. 253.

⁴² KPM/SB/03100/05 SW 518/42(II), Report on CTWU (Communist Trade Workers Union): Labour Situation-Essential Services.

⁴³ Ibid. Report dated 18 February, 1942.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid. Report on Labour Situation (1942).

⁴⁷ KPM/SB/03100/05 SW 518/42(II).

backfired, and it faced stringent criticism in the contemporary press and public sphere. A report published in *The Statesman* around February vehemently castigates the colonial government and the elite intelligentsia for their incompetency to broker goodwill among the workers and the capitalists despite the greater ‘consciousnesses’ on the part of the workers.⁴⁸ The author lamented,

*What is disappointing is the lack of readiness on the part of the owners and the government to act quickly....what is needed now is cooperation, only co-operation backed by the common objective can help us to weather the storm... The workers are ready to make the maximum sacrifice in the struggle against fascism which is to be owned through cooperation. The Intelligentsia is too panicky to face the realities of the coming deal. Let the Government benefit by experience and stop all the attempts to divide the sympathies of the workers.*⁴⁹

It was an implicit criticism of the Congress leadership and their dwindling appeal among the proletariats. However, contrary to the official claim the workers far from being hostile, displayed immense maturity and comprehension of the global crisis. Their attitude towards the war is evident from reasonably placing their demands on the company agents. Their letters, far from intimidating, had an amicable overtone.⁵⁰ A petition of the drivers and conductors to the agent of The Calcutta Tramway Company in February is worth noticing in this regard,

Since the outbreak of the war in the Far East, we have been ranked with the Essential Services of our duty and responsibility towards the public we are fully conscious and we would be too glad to serve them in times of difficulty. For we know that the world is engaged in the greatest struggle for the liberation of Humanity. Today Fascism is the enemy of mankind. And Germany with other barbarian hordes is carrying on organised robbery all over the world. We all hate fascism and the criminal gangsters that are stealing the life and liberty of the Free people. We stand for the destruction of Fascism. For the end of Fascism, we believe, would bring the era of justice. So, our heart goes out in full sympathy to the brave

⁴⁸ *The Statesman*, 9 February, 1942.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ KPM/SB/03100/05.

*warriors fighting in the vast front across the continent of Europe as well as in the Far East. This war is ours as they are our comrades. This, in short, is our attitude towards the war.*⁵¹

Their demands which entailed permanence of service, the reward of war-time bonuses, medical leaves, sanction of food rations due to skyrocketing inflation, and provision of bombing shelters were prerequisites for dispensing service under the emergency. However, it was met with complete nonchalance or half-hearted granting of their legitimate claims. This was followed by at least three general strikes over the year.⁵² The Company Managers in collusion with the police force resorted to repressive measures to break the strikes. Nevertheless, there was a fundamental change in the attitude of the working-class proletariats by this time. No amount of intimidation could override the desperation that starvation and the utmost precariousness of existence instilled in them.

The year 1942 was a watershed moment concerning the modalities of protests being altered. In July 1942, the Government lifted the ban on C.P.I. This affected the power equations persisting between various factions of nationalists, socialists, and communists active in the labour circuits ensuing inter-party feuds.⁵³ The repression and police action against the communists notably came down which motivated vigorous union work and open affiliation of the several prominent unions as Communists or Red Unions. With Quit India at the helm, the INC came under the radar of State supervision now. Much against the claim of the contemporary Congress or CSP leaders this hardly had much bearing on workers or unionising in Calcutta. The 'Red Unions' had unprecedented popularity among urban workers, and the much-publicised 'power vacuum' created by the incarceration and regulation of Congress leaders hardly provided any additional political advantages to the Communists.⁵⁴ It becomes perceptible gauging the local reaction to the arrest of Mahatma Gandhi and other INC leaders from Bombay in August, 'There were neither any "*hartals*" by shopkeepers nor any demonstration in organised scale in Calcutta on 9 August 1942 over the arrest of M.K.

⁵¹ Ibid, The Letter was signed under 'Sardars and Workers of P.W.D.' and was addressed to the Agent, Calcutta Tramways Co. Ltd, dated 2 February, 1942.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ For more consult, Dasgupta, *Minor Political Parties*, pp. 173-239.

⁵⁴ KPM/ SB/ 03100/05.

Gandhi and other Congress leaders in Bombay.⁵⁵ Later in the morning, a rumour was heard in the Northern part of the city that because of Gandhi's arrest, the Japanese would certainly now bomb Calcutta.⁵⁶ This was followed by isolated and sporadic protest rallies or individual outbursts demanding '*Congress Karmider Mukti Chai*' (*Freedom for The Congress Workers*).⁵⁷ However, not a single procession crossed the headcount of thirty to forty people nor was any protest meet called whose central agenda was the arrests in the upcoming days.⁵⁸ Representatives from the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee (BPCC) like Sham Mukherjee confessed that they had not received any program to be followed by the Bengal Congress from the centre. Further, they were entirely out of their wits regarding the course of action to be espoused by the Bengal Congress in the near future, though they anticipated 'some sort of movement.'⁵⁹ CSP factions of *Anushilan* Leftists like Nihar Mukherjee of the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP) conceded that a student strike which was scheduled for 10 August, had been organised mainly 'over the question of prestige.' They neither had the determination, power nor numerical strength of workers to conduct a general strike.⁶⁰

Towards the closing of the year, strikes in essential services became more recurrent. An informant reported to the Inspectors at the Special Branch that he overheard a plain-clothed tram conductor of Calcutta Tramway Company (CTC) traveling from Rajabazar to Sealdah in a bus that a strike was inevitable, and this time other essential services workers would rally in. Prior notice for the fulfillment of all their demands would be served seven days before, or else they would take recourse to a strike.⁶¹ This phenomenon of calling for a 'combined' strike was unprecedented in the prewar years. The possibility of paralysing one of the nerve

⁵⁵ Ibid. Notes on Repercussions In Calcutta for the Arrest of M.K. Gandhi & Other Leaders in Bombay, dated August 16, 1942.

⁵⁶ KPM/SB/03100/05.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid. Few protest meets were called by students on August 10, B.L.P. meeting at Calcutta Institute Hall, Marwari Student Meeting at 15 Chittaranjan Avenue, Student Federation meeting at Hazra Park to list a few.

⁵⁹ KPM/SB/03100/05.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ KPM/SB/03101/05.

centres of the colonial administration was never conceived or even dreaded as much before. On 29 November 1942, a leaflet was making rounds under the name of Gopal Acharya, Tramway Workers' Union Secretary at the Belgachia Tram Depot.⁶² The leaflet titled, *Janashadharaner Nikat Tram Sramikder Abedan* (An Appeal to the Public by the Tramway Workers) had President Mohammad. Ismail, who had been a titular figure in organising the tramway men since the 1940s under the CPI, appealed to, the general public to hold the Government and Company accountable for their collective miseries. The Company was using the strikes as a ploy to deprive the workers of public sympathy. The fare was exponentially increased under the excuse of granting war bonuses to the workers.⁶³ This era also saw the workers trying to forge a direct connection with the general masses. It was an attempt to dissolve vested societal conventions and boundaries regulated by norms of class, caste, religion, and gender. Hence, the strikes serve not only as a template to study the burgeoning class consciousness of the city's working-class but also how it moulded and mitigated the contradictions and nuances in the consciousness of an urban colonial population reeling under the crisis of Imperialism. The leaflet was an attempt to initiate a dialogue between the workers and the public, harping on the 'faith and sympathy' of the citizens of Calcutta, which was the sole reason for the Company and Government to give in to some of their demands. *Apnader Sohanubhuti o Amader Ekotar Jorei Shedin Amra Company o Government er nikot hoite prothushruti peyechilam.* ⁶⁴ The word 'sohanubhuti' or 'sympathy' is pertinent here as it appeared several times throughout the leaflet highlighting the working class's endeavour to merge their class struggle with the greater struggle against the backlash of colonialism, built on the Communist watchword of mutual respect, trust, and solidarity. The aim was to expose the diabolical move on the part of the Company to malign the workers' movement. The pamphlet explicitly mentioned that the public was put through difficulty by the Company, and they were withdrawing from the strike since it would cause 'greater trouble and sufferings' to the public. Their demands were far from being fulfilled and were now placed solely at the hands of the Labour Commissioner. Nevertheless, since the

⁶² Ibid. *Janashadharaner Nikat Tram Sramikder Abedan* (An Appeal to the Public by the Tramway Workers), leaflet in Bengali, in circulation from November 29, 1942.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

labour commissioner is a 'state agent' he was not competent enough to get them a fair deal. It now solely depends on the public pressure on the Government and the Company that their rightful *daabi* or demands will be fulfilled.⁶⁵

Similar large-scale strikes were organised among workers of other trades too. The Engineering and Electrical workers have been agitating from the year's opening months. Their success was not as tangible as the tramway workers, but these sectors witnessed strikes of this magnitude for the first time in history. ⁶⁶ However, the adaptation of the People's War line, the pro-war stand of the CPI from 1942, and the lifting of the ban on the party provided fresh grounds for Congress-Communist feuds. This coupled with the congenital factionalism within the leftist groups, posed impediments in the face of the smooth execution of striking programs, one factor that was thoroughly exploited by the State-Capitalist syndicate. At a meeting of the Tramway Workers' Union of CPI at Rajabazar Tram Depot, Amar Gupta, who was the leader of the Rajabazar section expressed resentment in his statement against C.P.I. ⁶⁷ He held the party indifferent to the plight of the tramway men as no concrete action was taken to reinstate the driver Nageshwar Singh by the party. He further added, 'It is evident from the corporation of the C.P.I. with the Government that it had lost its revolutionary urge and fighting spirit.'⁶⁸ According to informants of the police, privately, he expressed a pro-Congress stance and divulged his intention of diverting a section of workers under his influence from the influence of the Communists.⁶⁹ Similar predicaments could be traced to other sectors. The C.P.I. started losing followers among the Gas Workers of Rajabazar by December 1942.⁷⁰ It planned to open offices at Narkeldanga and Rajabazar as a remedial

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ KPM/SB/03103/05 SW 553/ 42-46, SB Report on Braithwaite's Workers' Union.

⁶⁷ KPM/SB/03101/05. Meeting was held on 29 November 1942 at Maharani Swarnamayee Road with Md. Ismail chairing the gathering of around 200 men.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid. Report dated November 30, 1942.

strategy. The plan was to carry out vigorous propaganda and political discourse among the area's workers and intelligentsia to regain their lost influence.⁷¹

3.3 The End of the War and Strides Towards Independence

As the war progressed, the working class was hit by one of the worst manmade catastrophes in history: the Bengal famine of 1943.⁷² Since 1942, a staple demand of the workers for essential services was control of the food prices due to war inflation. As the famine struck, illegal hoarding was rampant and soon bodies started piling up in the city streets. The workers agitating under the Red Unions demanded the provision of rations and control of the prices of rice and wheat. The 'Control' movement was historical and the Government budged and made arrangements for rations in the city and working-class ghettos, the first of such preparatory measures adopted in the country during the crisis. The stipulated amount for each family was around four *ser* per week, which was decidedly incommensurate, but it saved lives.⁷³

In 1945 as the Axis defeat was a forgone conclusion, the onslaughts of foreign bombing ravaged the city the city, a crippling food crisis led to mass death (read extermination) of the proletariats, and state repression was infused with almost a resurrected zeal.⁷⁴ The city experienced an invigorated current of anti-colonial sentiments as strikes became vigorous in almost all sectors. The very act of 'striking' underwent a radical transformation. A close analysis of the 'anatomy of a strike' is demanded, concentrating on the everyday nuances to comprehend and perhaps further problematise the discourse most intimately entwined with striking; consciousness. The Tramway Workers Strike from 19 September 1945 to 28 September 1945, which set up a milestone in the history of labour activism, provides a fertile

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² For further information consult, Mukherjee, Janam. *Hungry Bengal: War, Famine, Riots and the End of Empire*. New Delhi: Harper Collins (India), 2015.

⁷³ Lal Jhandar Daak, *Swadhinata* (Freedom), February 1, 1946, editorial of Somenath Lahiri. The editorial gauged the party's progress during the pressing years between 1943-1945.

⁷⁴ Mukherjee, *Hungry Bengal*.

ground for that.⁷⁵ The tramway workers across the city, who have been agitating for bonuses and heavy casualisation of labourers due to post-war depression in the labour market, resorted to a strike. The trams, one of the city's chief means of transportation, alarmed the authorities, and the police force swarmed different tram depots across the city. On the 19th morning at the Rajabazar Tram Depot, not a single worker could be spotted but the strong police presence attracted curious onlookers. The journalist reporting the incident was a communist himself, and could not wonder but enquired of a fellow Muslim onlooker, 'Why are there so many police sergeants, are they planning to run the service with their help?' To which the man smirked and retorted sarcastically in rustic Bengali with a heavy Northern Bengal dialect, '*Hu, Chagol diya Dhaan Marai Hobe.*' It roughly means being employed to do a job which the person is not trained for. It was a rural adage that was metaphorically utilised to highlight the police force's limitations and the workers' indispensability. He later found out the man was a tram worker himself. It testifies how solidarity and support towards the cause transcended communal, regional, and linguistic barriers; a hamstring that plagued organising labour in its initial stages.⁷⁶

Some pro-Company managers and employees appointed at higher positions were already present at several depots from the previous night, and rumours were spread that tram depots like Kalighat and Park Circus would be up and functioning in no time.⁷⁷ These efforts of the Company to project the failure of the strike were countered with newer strategies. In the Kalighat section, the six cashiers who joined work were served a notice by the Union to abandon work. It dissuaded a few of them to comply. Intimidating posters were put up in front of the houses of these collaborators, '*Ei barir bashinda 8000 tram sramiker golae churi marche*' (The resident of this house is cutting the throat of 8000 workers). Public support and sympathy towards the strikers were evident as the wife and son of one of the cashiers on duty came by the union office to apologise for his digressions. On behalf of the union, it was assured that he would not be physically harmed, but he should immediately leave work. Later

⁷⁵ KM/SB/03102/05: SB Report on Strikes of Calcutta Tramway Workers (1942-45).

⁷⁶ *Janajuddha* "How did the Tarmwaymen's Strike created a New History in Working-Class Struggle", 4 year, 23 vol, 4 October 1945.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

that night, in a meeting with the senior employees, it was made clear that neither the Company nor the Government could save them from the collective wrath of the agitated workers.⁷⁸ The Bengal trade union politics never witnessed the utilisation of violence like Bombay, where from the 1920s onwards, retaliation was on similar lines with the government repression.⁷⁹ The communists, to demarcate themselves from the revolutionary terrorists, consciously chose the path of an ideological struggle. However, the employment of the strategy of intimidation attests to how revolutionary ideals were getting synthesised with *realpolitik*.⁸⁰

The public-worker solidarity reached its apex during this time. By the second day of the strike, the depots were all deserted, with no signs of running trams on the street. Instead, mass rallies of ordinary passengers were spotted, making their way to Dalhousie Square, the working hub of the city, on foot. The tram workers in small squads walked by their side, expressing their gratitude, trying to strike conversations forwarding their propaganda.⁸¹ A gentleman, on being explained how if the tramway workers manage to get their demands passed it might be beneficial for the petty bourgeoisie clerks too, though not explicitly agreeing to the argument, commented, 'If the Congress managed to achieve this sort of communal unity of the Hindu and Muslims, the country would have been free by now.'⁸² The INC, which had a monopoly among the white-collar class, was losing its base with the political climate so overwhelmed with the rhetoric of the class struggle. Acharya, in a meeting with the student representatives of the Student Federation, proposed that the tram workers should be given an opportunity to campaign for their causes at different colleges across the city. So, a few uniformed tramway workers, Dhiren Mazumdar, Zaheer, and Mishir Ji, made rounds of Calcutta University, Vidyasagar, City, Ripon, and Bangabasi Colleges to interact with the students, forging an organic bond marred with anti-imperialist and anti-

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Refer to works of Sabyasachi Bhattacharya on strikes in tradeunionism in Bombay. Also, BL IOR/L/P2J/12/137: Indian Labour.

⁸⁰ *Janajuddha* "How did the Tarmwaymen's Strike created a New History in Working-Class Struggle."

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

colonial sentiments.⁸³ The response was whole-hearted and unadulterated. Students en masse bunked classes collected funds, and gathered at Wellington Square in solidarity. The party affiliations took a backseat, and students, workers, and party leaders, irrespective of their allegiance, organised a huge meeting under the banner of ‘Citizens of Calcutta’ at Shradhdhananda Park.⁸⁴ A fund for sustaining the striking workers was also created.

The Company countered by a classic move of feeding lies to the public, proclaiming that it was the conspiracy of the Communists which is elongating the strike despite the demands being granted. In the meantime, the authorities stopped the ration supply to create indirect pressure on the strikers. Over 900 workers were on the line when labourers from other sectors, like the gas or electrical works donated rice from their funds for their fellow workers.⁸⁵ The CPI took the responsibility of opening up a community kitchen. On 22 September, one regular housewife came to their Ballyguange Temporary Park and handed them four ration cards instructing them to withdraw the stipulated ration for the week in addition to the two rupees that she donated to the fund.⁸⁶ Hence, the strike’s impact was far from confined to serving the immediate needs of the tramway workers. It highlights how not just the vanguards or the workers were gaining consciousness but how the community as a whole precipitated class consciousness. It was significant how funds poured in from disparate sectors of urban working classes. The press employees of a major news outlet in Calcutta collected over 200 rupees. Hundreds of workers from DGMP Burma Cell, Tata, Town Hall, B.N.R Sealdah Transport Office, Hindustan Insurance, and Iron and Steel Control office contributed their wages and salaries to the strike fund to gather a mammoth amount of over 9000. ⁸⁷The city embodied a movement(s) that intersected rather than interceded with the conflicted class, caste, communal, linguistics, and gendered interests within the bracket of the zeal of decolonisation.

⁸³ Chattapadhyay, Gautam. “Sangrami Sramik Neta: Comrade Gopal Acharya.” in *Na Na Chokhe Gopal Acharya*, edited by Biren Ray and Soumokanti Acharya, 35-36. Calcutta; Pearl Publishers, 1999.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ KPM/SB/03101/05 SW 518/42(II).

⁸⁶ Chattapadhyay, *Sangrami Sramik Neta*.

⁸⁷ KPM/SB/03101/05 SW 518/42(II).

By 23 September, the bus and the taxi union workers also decided to join in the strike.⁸⁸ The possibility of a total paralysis of the transportation system made the Government utilise every coercive force at its disposal as buses were made to run forcefully under the watch of police convoys. There were contemplations of employment of the Army to break the strike.⁸⁹ However, it was later revealed that the Government proposal for the same was abandoned because of vigorous propaganda among the military personnel in favour of the strikers and British soldiers in Calcutta. It was done by certain members of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB). The British denied serving the Company and soldiers and also contributed 2500 rupees to the strike fund.⁹⁰ Ultimately, the tramway workers could push their demands by setting up of Adjudication Court with a nominated representative who would negotiate on behalf of the workers. It was an unprecedented move against the corrupt colonial bureaucracy and the capitalist nexus, which virtually made the implementation of any pro-labor clauses impossible in these arbitration courts.⁹¹

Post-War retrenchment became an endemic problem among workers across the city by the latter half of 1945. The period saw the amalgamation of several unions in a sector to guarantee better chances at arbitration with the companies.⁹² At a conference held around the end of August and the beginning of September various unions of Iron and Steelworkers of Braitwaites and Saxby, combined to form the Calcutta Engineering Workers Union (CEWU) under the banner of CPI.⁹³ Party leaders Jolly Kaul, Indrajit Gupta, Abdul Momin, and Bankim Mukherjee were particularly active among the workers. In a letter, the Bengal Provincial Trade Union Congress (BPTUC), under the presidentship of Mrinal Kanti Basu, guaranteed wholehearted support to the Union. However, he remarked, ‘while other countries are celebrating victory, India is facing mass unemployment, starvation, and depression.’⁹⁴

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ KPM/SB/03103/05.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid. The Conference was held on August 31 and September 1, 1945.

⁹⁴ Ibid., Juran Ganguli, the President of the union read out Basu’s letter.

The union stressed that the scourge of unemployment could have been easily avoided if the munition factories could be converted into industrial concerns. It pushed the formation of a 'Wage Board' for immediate reevaluation of the wage structure to suit the post-war crisis. Gupta harped on the acute scarcity of clothes that plagued the city from the closing years of the war. The workers agitated for the supply of cloth during the Puja and the Eid, especially at the *mufassils*(suburbs) where the crunch was acute. Gupta jeered at the utter ignorance of the State-sanctioned Enquiry Commission headed by an Englishman to investigate the exponential rise in the price of food commodities like fish. The Enquiry attributed it to the high demand for fish because of the newly acquired habit of its consumption among the working-class population. Gupta lamented this obtuseness as it was crystal clear that the cause was inflation coupled with Government inaction to provide adequate infrastructural facilities in the fishing sector.⁹⁵

These issues snowballed and the major engineering firm of the Braithwaite Co. decided to strike by the beginning of October over the immediate cause of non-disbursement of the puja bonus. They were generously supported by the workers at the Calcutta Tramway Workers' Union and Brooke Bond Tea Workers' Union who collected over one thousand rupees and contributed five *maunds* of rice daily to sustain the strike.⁹⁶ A meeting was called consisting of workers from Robert Hudson Co, Braithwaites, and British India Electrical Construction Company under the banner of CEWU to coordinate and decide on a striking program across the companies. Presided by the President Tushar Chatterjee of CPI, the speakers, who were representatives and employees of these Companies elucidating their current predicaments, harped that the strike would be a 'war against the corrupt bureaucracy.'⁹⁷ Harshit, from Robert Hudson Company, informed that the manager called the police once the strikers demanded their bonus, and they were confined in the workshop till late evening. Chatur Ali, a tramway worker, and leader, vehemently criticised how the Government machinery and the police were in the pockets of the capitalists. Babban Prasad, a worker at the Braithwaite, stated that until a 'proletarian' government is set up, their demands

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ KPM/SB/03103/05. Report on Calcutta Engineering Workers' Union (C.P.I.).

⁹⁷ Ibid.

would be unfulfilled. It is pertinent to notice how ‘the language of the class’ penetrated plebian discourses and how the rhetoric of class struggle infiltrated the colloquial register. Mihir Basu, the Secretary of the Braithwaites, informed that sticking to their demand for the puja bonus, they planned to surround the workshop with the assistance from volunteers of the Burrabazar Union office of C.P.I. on the morning of 8 October.⁹⁸

By 11 October, Martin Steel joined the bandwagon, too, as Meher Ali Mandal and Jitandramohan Das were elected as strike leaders. Indrajit Gupta, in a meeting with the workers at Balmer Lawrie Electrical Construction Company, conveyed the collective sentiments that were at work behind the strike, ‘It is regrettable that although the Japanese bombing of the docks and the killing of several workers had failed to deter them in their work of production of essential war materials, they are now rewarded at the end of the war with dismissal and reduced allowances.’⁹⁹ Strikers at Braithwaite resorted to newer ways of collecting strike funds. They opted for door-to-door collection and propaganda around the localities of Watangunj Street, Hemchandra Street, and Kidderpore. They shouted slogans and handed over the red flags as they made their case to the members of the family they appealed for funds.¹⁰⁰ As already stated, there was a constant effort to forge a bond with the masses. The paucity of funds for the CEWU Strike was also ascribed to the lack of proper coverage of the strike by Nationalist dailies. Communist leader, Acharya announced that a daily would be published on behalf of the CPI to assuage this situation, and the tram workers have already contributed money towards it.¹⁰¹

Nevertheless, there was a cardinal difference between the strike of the tramway men and the Engineering workers. Vastly owing to the lack of coordination and inexperience, the latter was quite spontaneous, and there were sporadic incidents of ‘assaults’ against the pro-company workers. The Companies and the Government assiduously exploited it as anti-strike propaganda. On the morning of 8 November 1945, Nirendranath Chatterji, Braithwaite

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ KPM/SB/03103/05. The speech was given at a meeting of the Union at Bayam Samiti Park on October 11, 1945.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

Company storekeeper, and four other colleagues were heading towards the workshop in a taxi when they were allegedly stopped by a few strikers at the Hyde Road crossing.¹⁰² The strikers accosted them to the CPI office at Garden Reach where they were instructed to return their home. However, while returning they were assaulted at Harisava Road. Chatterji could not ascertain the identity of any assailants, so the police failed to trace them. It was the Braithwaite workers who gained a notorious reputation for resorting to violence against the 'loyal' employees. In another incident two clerks of the company were brought to the Garden Reach Union office, purportedly assaulted, and paraded the localities around with a garland of shoes placed around their necks, mass shaming them for collaborating with the Company against the strikers.¹⁰³ Picketers reportedly threw themselves before Company lorries carrying workers to the factories. Apprehending police suppression and gross disorganisation, the party leaders held a meeting with the representatives of unions of the respective engineering concerns. It was decided that the Balmer and Laurie strikers would be deputed to picket the areas from where the Braithwaite back legs are likely to proceed to work and vice-versa. So, identifying the workers would be virtually impossible and arrests could be avoided.¹⁰⁴

However, within a week at the district Committee of the C.P.I., debates raged on sympathetic strikes by workers of other Essential Services sectors, especially, the transportation sector, going for a strike supporting the Engineering Workers. While some of the Executive members backed the idea, Suresh Basu and Jolly Kaul from Kidderpore Committee suggested that it would not be strategically prudent and might cost them public support and backing. By 18 November, Tushar Chatterji declared that The Braithwaites and other companies would resume work from the following day as the Company assured that a Court of Adjudication would settle their demands by the end of the month.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² Ibid. Report dated November 11, 1945.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ KPM/SB/03103/05. The announcement was followed by massive victory rallies at important centres of Calcutta.

3.4 The Bane of *Realpolitik*: The Communist-Congress Feud and the Test of Workers' Unity

In Bengal, the I.N.C.-C.P.I. relationship departed from the general trend of animosity prevalent in the rest of the country, and despite occasional friction, it was overall harmonious.¹⁰⁶ But since CPI's adaptation of the People's War line, their relationship with I.N.C. and, by extension, with C.S.P. soured. The difference in the policy towards the war and the uplifting of the formal ban on CPI further deepened the cleavage. Post the arrest of the top leadership of Congress after the 'Quit India' call in early August the CSP tried to fill the vacuum. A circular from the Bengal Committee of C.P.I. approved strikes not exceeding a day to protest the arrest of the Congress leaders.¹⁰⁷ The workers abided by the instructions, and the Labour Commissioner of Bengal later acknowledged that the communists played a crucial role in dealing with the strikes.¹⁰⁸ The vigorous anti-communist stance was evident from the propaganda materials that were in circulation. A pamphlet from August 1942 denouncing the war titled, '*Must Not Happen Again*', condemned alleged bribery by high officials of India and described the Communists as 'hired agents of the Government.'¹⁰⁹ Their apprehension about the 'Moscow Farce' and the suspicions over a truce between British Imperialists and Soviet communists was the crux of their anti-communist propaganda. In the Central Committee meeting of CPI in August 1943, moderate Communists like P.C. Joshi called for proper planning to forge greater cooperation with the INC and CSP members to achieve the goal of national liberation.¹¹⁰ The situation worsened with the war ending and the Congress workers' release. The INC held meetings throughout the city accusing the communists of brazen betrayal and collusion with the British imperialists during the war.

¹⁰⁶ GOB, *Annual Summary of Political Events in the Presidency of Bengal*, 1937. Also, for further reference consult, Basu, *The Political Parties*, p. 56.

¹⁰⁷ IB Records: Review of the Revolutionary matters by the D.I.G. , I.B. (20.8.1942 and 14. 10. 1942) as quoted in Basu, *The Political Parties*, p. 62.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ KPM/SB/03103/05. SB Report on IB Searches of CSP Offices and Residencies, dated November 27, 1943.

¹¹⁰ Joshi, P.C. *Deshbhaktader Jagao* (Awaken the Patriots): P.C. Joshi's Report to the Central Committee, August 1943. Calcutta: NBA, 1943.

Before Nehru's Bengal visit in September 1945, it was decided by the Kidderpore Committee of the CPI that the party members would rally at full strength in those meetings to counter the charges levied on them. They aimed to demand direct answers from Nehru regarding the allegations made against them and their suspensions from the Congress organisations.¹¹¹ The INC-backed *Hindustan Mazdoor Sevak Sangh* was making inroads among the workers of the Red Union. In the summer of 1946 at a meeting held at Kidderpore, Dr. Maitrayee Basu, a senior Congress trade unionist gathered around 60 engineering workers from Robert Hudson, Braithwaites, and other concerns.¹¹² Senior I.N.C. leaders like Kalipada Mukherji and Bireshwar Ghosh addressed them. They denounced the CPI leaders for instigating the workers to resort to strike after the termination of the war instead of during the war.¹¹³ This was the primary charge that was brought against the Communists by Congress leadership after the war was over. The C.P.I. Central Committee published a detailed clarification of their position authored by Joshi. They clarified that spontaneous crowd action as witnessed post 9 August 1942, fails to fetch any concrete result,

In the danger zones, the common people did not say that we had given over to the British but that we were rousing the people against Japs and much more. Unfortunately, outside the danger zones, people were reeling under the British blow and forgetting the Japanese threat, and spontaneously waiting to hit back.

*We said: don't act spontaneously, blindly: hitting back for a people must not be merely an act of revenge but must open wide the way to freedom and not head into the lap of Japs. We were misunderstood, misinterpreted, and lost popularity. But we held the majority of the working-class firm: because of our propaganda for years, the Fascist invader and Indian freedom were easily seen by them as two different categories one canceling the other out.*¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ KPM/SB/03103/05.

¹¹² Ibid. The meeting was held on May 14, 1946.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Joshi, P.C. *Communist Reply to Congress Working Committee's Charges, Part Two*. Bombay: People's Publishing House, 1946, pp. 215-19.

The predicament aggravated in 1946 as the elections to the Bengal Legislative Assembly drew near. The INC members who were apprehended during the Quit India agitation were released with the termination of the war.¹¹⁵ Though the voting rights for the workers were heavily curtailed and disproportionate, there were serious discourses among the workers about where their votes should be cast.¹¹⁶ For the Communists, they were harping on the fact, that *Sramik Netar Moddhe Sramik e Baad* (There are no Leaders from the Working Class) in the Congress candidacy for the elections. The five candidates that were being filed were all upper-middle class bourgeoisie or ‘*babus*.’ Despite the overwhelming number of non-Bengali Hindustani workers, there were not adequately represented. The greatest irony was the absence of a single Muslim candidate despite the endless rant about the Hindu-Muslim unity being the backbone of the struggle for independence. Among the five CPI candidates, Ismail and Chatur Ali were Tram workers, two were Muslim representatives and two non-Bengalis. The Communists appealed to the workers to make a conscious decision and not opt for the ‘*Poshaki*’ or Imposter Congress candidates.¹¹⁷ The scales were veritably tilted towards the Communists, but the I.N.C. did try to salvage the situation, organising last-minute promotions in and around the city and the immediate suburbs. Workers from the Bengal Belting Company in Hooghly sent a letter to the CPI platform, ‘*Lal Jhandar Daak*,’ an initiative to promote the voices of the labouring class, mentioning that the district committee of the INC called for a meeting for the workers on 20 February, 1946.¹¹⁸ It was a surprise, since as far as their conscious memories went the Congress never organised anything similar in the district. The meeting had veteran Congress labour leaders like Dr. Suresh Banerjee and Phani Ghosh from Calcutta as speakers. The audience comprised local *bhadraloks* (middle-class bourgeoisie) and a few students. The presence of the workers cannot be discerned except few managers of the factories. The letter ended in a rather acerbic note, ‘The speeches clarified why there was a sudden and urgent concern of the district committee of the Congress for the plights of the workers. In the upcoming elections, their candidate was

¹¹⁵ For details on the election refer, Chattopadhyay, Gautam. *Bengal Electoral Politics and Freedom Struggle 1862-1947*. New Delhi: ICHR, 1984, pp. 97-215.

¹¹⁶ Lahiri, Rochonaboli, pp. 20-24.

¹¹⁷ *Laal Jhandar Daak* (The Summon of the Red Flag), 1 February, 1946.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid*.

Phani Ghosh against the Communist candidate and tram worker Md. Ismail, that is why the gathering.’¹¹⁹

As Congress and CPI filed their representatives for the labour constituencies, everyday fracas and brawls became a norm in the working-class settlements around the city. These altercations and outburst of violence were often spontaneous and was planned by local I.N.C. politicians without prior knowledge of the top tier, or the capitalist bosses who thoroughly exploited this predicament. Often local fringe elements or unemployed youths from economically backward families were employed to spark animosity between the two parties. In late January of 1946, the communists were accused of throwing bombs at a Congress rally commemorating their leaders' independence from wrongful imprisonment at Kalighat.¹²⁰ However, it later came to light from the testimonies of the onlookers (mostly Congress supporters) that it was not a Communist, but a wayward boy from the locality named Malay who threw the *potka* (a bomb of lower intensity) to insinuate the brawl. The mob assuming it was an attack from the C.P.I. office nearby, stormed in, ransacked the place, and beat up the party workers who were present in the office at that time. In a meeting held at a later date the Secretary of the Bengal Provisional Committee of Congress, Kalipada Mukhopadhyay, too far from implicating the communists in the incident asked the incited public to not attack the communists based on engineered rumours.¹²¹ This incident was not an isolated phenomenon but could be seen as a desperate attempt on the part of the capitalists around India, especially in provinces that were Communist strongholds to exploit political antagonisms to repress working-class radicalisation. A similar incident occurred in Bombay prior to the Kalighat unrest when an agitated mob torched the Bombay Communist Party office. ¹²² The incident drew condemnation from the Mahatma himself. ¹²³

These incidents, however, become pertinent to assess and highlight how the workers were engaging in the contemporary political discourse. They were making conscious and

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 24 January, 1946.

¹²⁰ Laal Jhandar Daak, *Swadhinata*, year 1, issue 35, 28 January, 1946.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid.

informed choices while determining their political preferences. The surging popularity of the communists among the labouring masses cannot solely be attributed to a charismatic and declasse vanguardism but to a heightening political awareness on the part of the working class. *Swadhinata* (Freedom), the CPI daily which started getting published post the Second World War devoted a particular section edited by veteran labour activist, Somnath Lahiri, which printed responses from the workers to its reportage is beneficial to expound this phenomenon. The attack on the CPI office at Kalighat had an overwhelming response as workers from various communities gathered at the office in solidarity. Workers Mongru Sardar, Ramdhan, Ramsevak, Shobarati, and others from the Robert Hudson Company Factor's outlet at Kidderpore were headstrong and resolute to stay overnight and guard the party office in case of further perturbation.¹²⁴ The element of spontaneity in these politically charged squabbles was tactfully handled by communist leadership. A worker from the Pottery Factory who visited the distressed leaders at Kalighat furiously retorted, 'The capitalists or *Babus* who tried to trample us under their feet during our strikes had the slogan of '*Jai Hind*' at their lips, and we taught them a good lesson. The miscreants who pulled down the *Laal Jhanda* (Red Flag) at Kalighat also chanted the same. They are defaming the red flag as well as the rallying cry of, *Jai Hind*. It is time we give them a taste of their own medicine, shall we?'¹²⁵ Through careful dialogue, Lahiri persuaded the hotheaded workers not to give in to their instincts and counter the violence by organising meetings and initiating dialogues within the factory floors instead of combatting the anti-communist propaganda. The association of INC with the indigenous capitalist bosses and the party's class character was responsible for the dwindling mass base among the urban workers. The augmentation of consciousness can be further discerned when a tram driver, Kanta Mishir, from the Belgachia Depot, opined that these nuisances were created to jeopardise united union work and that the pro-state Hindi press had a titular role in fueling these rumours.¹²⁶ This refinement of political disposition resulted from the multiple levels of interactions with the local actors and the larger global sociopolitical context in which the colony, especially the city, was embedded.

¹²⁴ Laal Jhandar Daak, 21 January 1946.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

The Congress activist's desperate attempts at making inroads in various communist strongholds sometimes backfired. The class composition of Congress inherently extended to many indigenous capitalists, managers, and brokers to endorse the party. Instances can be cited where these company agents used to lure workers in concocting dissensions among Red Union workers in lieu of some monetary incentives. However, such attempts were met with resistance and were not as effective as they used to be. The primary reason for this was a radical transition in the mode of resistance in itself. The workers were getting into lengthy dialogues over these issues on the factory floors rather than resorting to violence. The discourses stand testimony to their visions and clarity in the contemporary politics of the province. A woman worker, Khatun Bibi, from a toy manufacturing unit wrote to Lahiri depicting one such interaction.¹²⁷ The factory was on strike when a male worker or *mistri* was hate-mongering against the communists among the workers. She chose to confront him citing the fact that he had been aloof when the rest of the workers were negotiating and agitating for their demands with the company bosses; what accounts for this abrupt awareness? The unnamed man replied in hesitation, 'I am not necessarily against the communists, but the Congress *babus* will look after our welfare. For the past sixty years the Congress as a party has been serving the country, the communists are relatively new in the block.'¹²⁸ The reply is germane in decoding how the working class responded and negotiated with the transformations in the composition and nature of the trade union leadership, both on ideological and ground-level activism. The vested patronisation and denial of agency, a hallmark of the class character of the Congress vanguardism was raising doubts among the working class. The conversation continued further when the *mistri* (labourer in any manufacturing sector) referred to the Congress leaders' supreme sacrifice in facing imprisonment for the cause of national liberation. Bibi was quick to retort, citing that the entire communist leadership was composed of men who had faced extreme persecution at the hands of the colonial state serving sentences in the *Kalapani* or the Andamans. The crux of the dialogue revolving around 'radicalism' also assists in expounding Calcutta's general militarisation in working-class politics in the 1940s. Pertinent is to observe how these

¹²⁷ Laal Jhandar Daak, 3 February, 1946.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

dialogues transcended the constraints of class, caste, and gender as women's participation in mainstream working-class politics intensified in the post-war years.¹²⁹

3.5 Manufacturing 'Internationalism from Below': May Day Observation and Contemplations on Class Consciousness

A perceptible change that the incursion of Socialism brought into the trade union politics of Bengal is its inclusion in the broader global trade union politics. As transnational and transcontinental ties were forged between labour leaders from Bengal and activists from the rest of the world, global phenomena were actively having a direct impact on ground-level activism. From the 1930s onwards, the trade union movement in Bengal steadily converged with the overreaching decolonial and revolutionary movements in the rest of the world. Crises especially, the rise of Fascism in Europe, the Spanish Civil War (1936), and The Abyssinian Crisis (1935) were not only sparking off debates among the elite intellectual circles in Calcutta but the working-class population was also being drawn into this discourse.¹³⁰ With the affiliation of the Communist International or the rudimentary contacts that were being forged with the Soviet Union, the one particular occasion that was harnessed to educate the workers about solidarity with the proletariats across the globe was through the commemoration of May Day; the first lesson in Proletarian Internationalism. May Day was celebrated across the city by various shades of leftists and even nationalist labour organisations, each forwarding their agenda couched in the overreaching theme of solidarity of a universal 'working class.' Elaborate programs, meetings, processions, and rallies marked

¹²⁹ *Annual Report on Working of Indian Trade Unions Act, 1926 in Bengal*. (1 April 1942–31 March 1943). (The *Annual Report on Working of Trade Union's Act* of 1942–1943 recorded a significant increase in the number of female trade unionists from 1690 in 1941–1942 to a whopping four-fold increase in 1940.)

¹³⁰ There were elite groups formed by Europe returned intellectuals, like *Porichoy* Group was formed in 1929 by Sudhindranath Dutta. The group held regular evening sessions where noted intellectuals from various fields like Susovan Sarkar, Satyendranath Bose, Bishnu Dey used to meet and discuss and debate around these pertinent global political developments.

the day. In the 1940s the day was commemorated even by various unions as a display of their strength and resolute to counter the class oppression of their capital bosses.¹³¹

An analysis of the specifics around the preparation and observation of May Day reveals how the binary of the local and global was overcome as the boundaries between international, national, and provincial had been increasingly blurred. Far from being an occasion that merely sheds light on the acquaintance of the working class with Internationalism, it becomes a fertile ground to contemplate how divergent political currents and ideological strains of imperialism, fascism, anti-colonialism, and communism intersected and interacted with each other. It is crucial to delve into the ways the observance of the day and the ancillary politics were relating the immediate crisis of the working class in the city with the broader interests of the proletariats of the world; in turn, cultivating the consciousness of belonging to a universal revolutionary class. This also assists in charting local, indigenous responses to a global ideology of Communism and its itineraries.

3.6 A Initial Acquaintances with Proletarian Internationalism: May Day and Spain Day Celebrations in the 1930s

Towards the closing years of colonial rule, May Day celebrations became quite commonplace and were done even with police permission.¹³² However, initially, in the late 1920s and the early 1930s, it was an essential tool for the newly emergent socialist and communist unions or groups to rally the workers for strikes. Besides familiarising them with the basic premise of workers' solidarity and the day's historical significance, the foremost agenda was pushing the faction's demands. A 1930 leaflet titled, '*Hartal, Hartal, Hartal*' (Strike! Strike!strike!) proposing a strike on the occasion of May Day led to a raid of Jugabrata Press at Harrison Road by the detective department on 29 April.¹³³ The leaflet was jointly issued by six unions

¹³¹ KPM/SB/00118/05. SB Report on May Day Celebrations (1940).

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ KPM/SB/ 00013/05. Report from the Office of Deputy Commissioner of Police (SB) dated Apriln 29, 1940 on 'Bengali and Urdu Leaflet Entitled: "Hartal" in Connection with May Day, 1930.

including All Bengal Motor Workers' Union and Calcutta Tramway Workers' Union.¹³⁴ The pamphlet printed in Bengali, Hindi, and Urdu, was comprehensive in elucidating the primary problems that plagued the working class in Bengal and in general, from being exploited for their labour, to being underpaid and being denied to form unions to agitating for their rightful prerogatives. It tries stringing together the working class of the whole country in the familiar chord of being drained by the capitalist class,

Whenever we combine forces to claim our rightful dues the ruling clique leaves no stone unturned to crush our fight. Within the last few days, the Government and the police have mercilessly opened fire on the Railway workers in Bombay, they have gunned down the striking cart men of Calcutta and opened fire even on the unarmed laborers of Bhabanipur. In Madras, it has opened fire on the striking miners. In Karachi, they repeated the same atrocities, and in Lahore and Peshawar too. ¹³⁵

What is significant here is how the author has been listing the violence inflicted against the striking workers irrespective of the province, cities, and localities. The aim was to instil among the workers in the city a sense of belonging, a sense of oneness. It appealed to the workers to manifest the strength of collective action by observing a *Hartal* or strike on the 1 May, "Remember! On this day, lakhs and crores of workers will observe a strike. Why will the Indian workers be left behind? By observing a whole-day strike the workers would prepare themselves for a forthcoming strike across *Hindustan*, to establish *Majdur Raj* in the world."¹³⁶ The word *Majdur Raj* or "Rule of the Workers" or "Rule of the Proletariat" was gaining popularity as an epithet widely used in this genre of pamphlets or propaganda literature. The Notification which was brought out against the leaflet from the office of Governor in Council read, "leaflets contain matter which brings or attempts to excite dissatisfaction towards the Government established by law in British India and also promotes or attempts to promote feelings of enmity or hatred between classes of His Majesty's subjects."¹³⁷ This clarifies how successfully the pamphlet conveyed the message

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

of the dialectical relationship of the classes and forwarded the message of proletariat solidarity, which made the colonial authority hysteric to the extent that they dragged this issue to a lengthy trial. May Day pamphlets were deemed seditious and printing and distributing them was a punishable offense under Section 124 A of the Indian Penal Code. However, the appeal and emotions surrounding May Day were yet to etch an imprint in the workers' hearts. yet to etch an imprint in the hearts of the workers. In the 1934 joint meeting of CPI and other communists, presided by Bankim Mukherjee on 1 May, to the utter disgust of Niharendu Dutta Mazumdar the workers started vacating the meeting due to rain.¹³⁸

During the second half of the 1930s, especially from 1936, the workers were drawn into another wave of international revolutionary current. Saumyendranath Tagore post his return from Paris, formed a branch of League Against Fascism and War with Rabindranath Tagore, S.A. Dange, and other notable Communists in 1936. ¹³⁹ The All-India Spain Committee or *Nikhil Bharat Spain Committee* with Saumyendranath as the organising secretary was trying to organise labour rallies and meetings to sensitise the workers and the youths in the city against the brazen assault of the Spanish reactionary elements against the democratically elected government of the people's front. A massive meeting of over 2900 workers under the auspices of the Water Transport Union was held on 13 April 1937. Presided over by prominent labour activist Shibnath Banerjee, the meeting was well attended by notable trade unionists like Deben Sen and Sudhin Dasgupta. The speakers were mainly drawn from the Seamen who were in leadership positions. Abdul Qadri, a dock worker addressed the crowd in Bengali. He opined that Hitler and Mussolini backed the fascist war in Spain against the people's government, but the workers should do their best to show their solidarity with the Spanish workers to bring democracy to the Spanish land, as the fate of all proletariats of the world was interconnected. Another worker, Baidul Rahaman tried connecting the immediate concerns of the seamen or lascars with the contemporary global predicaments. He requested Banerjee, who was the labour representative in the

¹³⁸ BL IOR/L/P2J/12/137: Indian Labour, Extract of DIB report dated 12 May, 1934.

¹³⁹ KPM/ SB/00075/05 (Spain Day Celebrations), Saumyendranath was deeply affected by the atrocities of the totalitarian regime of Franco inflicted upon the general proletarian mass of the country. So, with the advice from the French pacifist and Communist, Henri Barbusse, he decided to form a branch of League Against Fascism and War in India. (Introduction, Against the Stream)

provincial legislative assembly to plead their cause in the assembly. He urged the seamen to rally under the red flag irrespective of religion and caste to counter the scourges of fascism. He warned that the same fate might befall the Indian workers as the Spanish if they did not consolidate against the ‘capitalist dacoits’.¹⁴⁰ He opined that India should send men and collect funds to support the Spanish government in their struggle against the fascists. It should be noted how these working-class leaders from the ranks of the proletariat were well aware of the capitalist and imperialist roots of fascism. Banerjee and Tagore, in the same vein, encouraged the seamen to strengthen their union by actively participating in strikes and rallies to challenge the Imperial government, as days of resorting to constitutional methods are long gone. Tagore requested the workers to contribute towards the Spanish support fund or ‘Spain Fund’. He stressed that the amount is inconsequential, germane here is the show of solidarity which will boost the morale of the Spanish workers agitating against General Franco. Similar public gatherings were quite common during this period in prominent parts of the city like College Square, where scores of workers and students took the street under the banner of the red flag, hurling the slogans of ‘*Spain ki Mazdoor ki Jai*’ (Victory to the Spanish Workers), ‘*Laal Jhanda ki Jai*’ (Victory to the Red Flag).¹⁴¹

The Bengal Provincial Branch of Trade Union Congress (BPTUC) successfully weaponised May Day pamphlets in the late 1930s. As an umbrella organisation, it represented various shades of ideologues, from Congressmen to various shades of Socialists and even Communists.¹⁴² The biggest rallies and processions were generally held under its banner. Moreover, it harbored the support of the major unions in the city. On the occasion of May Day in 1938, the association organised a grand meeting under the presidentship of veteran Congress leader, Suresh Banerjee, and a victory rally at the foot of the Shaheed Minar or the Ochterlony Monument in the Maidan area in the city. It was a Sunday and hence an overwhelming turnout was expected. A pamphlet printed in Bengali, Hindi, and Urdu was circulated before the programme, which dedicated a paragraph outlining the

¹⁴⁰ KPM/SB/000 75/05.

¹⁴¹ KPM/SB/000 75/05, SB Report on Spain Day Celebrations.

¹⁴² West Bengal State Archives Files, henceforth will be referred to as WBSA. WBSA IB 55-38, Report on Bengal Provincial Trade Union Congress.

history of the 'May Day' and the Haymarket Affair of 1886.¹⁴³ Though the pamphlet falters at the accuracy of stating the location of the protest when it located Haymarket in New York City but not Chicago the depiction of the events was sound.

The official Intelligence report declared the meeting a success, which confirmed the participation of all the city's significant unions including the Dock Majdoors, the Tramway Workers, the Biri Workers, and the Calcutta Electric Supply Workers' among others. Besides noting the presence of prominent trade unionists in the city from major and minor political parties like Muzaffar Ahmad, Bhupendranath Dutta, and Deben Sen it stressed the overwhelming participation of women in the meeting. It stated, 'Almost all the unions joined the function, and many ladies with badges on attended it.'¹⁴⁴ From the late 1930s, the labour circuit of Bengal saw a rapid influx of women activists, and May Day was one occasion that testified to it. Women were playing the titular role in the organising committees. Their participation was discernible in the various cultural agendas at the heart of these celebrations. Before the May Day rally of the communists in 1939, Sudha Ray, Secretary of the Women's Sub-Committee of the Bengal Labour Party (BLP), a legal cover for the CPI, declared that her committee would develop a women's movement on socialist lines with educated and politically conscious women, and establish contact with the trade union movement. She added that preparations were being taken for an all-women's procession on May Day, and subscriptions were being accumulated for the party fund as well as for the proposed library. She even forwarded a proposal for a monthly journal around women and labour issues.¹⁴⁵ However, as evident from the statement above, women's activism in the trade union movement in the late colonial period was overtly an urban phenomenon and was composed of women hailing primarily from upper-middle-class families with sound educational backgrounds. While it raises pertinent questions regarding the movement's legitimacy and inclusivity as a mass-based movement, one cannot ignore the dent it made in a political space homogenised by men. It provided the much desired 'visibility' to the activism of strongly opinionated political discourse provided by women in

¹⁴³ KPM /SB/0018/05, Report on May Day 1938-1939, , also see, *Hindustan Standard*, 15 April 1939.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid. SB Report on the the massive BPTUC Rally that was joined by all the major leftist and socialist parties.

a society that stepped in the oppression spearheaded by patriarchy, capitalism, and colonialism.

Towards the end of the 1930s, the whole symbolism and significance of the day took a cogent turn. The resolutions that were passed transcended the narrow confines of provincial and local. Far from being a mere avenue to agitate for fee hikes and pushing party agenda, it became a platform to educate and mobilise the workers against any forms of Capitalist and imperialist oppression in the contemporary local or global political scenario.¹⁴⁶ The one prominent agenda since 1939 was the struggle toward the release of all political prisoners. From 1939 India saw a massive upheaval in workers' and peasant's protests, especially in Bombay, Bengal, Delhi, and Ahmedabad. ¹⁴⁷ The prisons were flooded with workers, youths, peasants, and activists almost in the scale and familiarity of the Non-Cooperation years. The resolutions passed in the May Day meetings from the end of the decade traversed multifaceted issues and were a war cry against oppression across the array of class, caste, communal, and gender oppressions. The year 1938 achieved the unity of the AITUC at the centre, the spirit of which was reflected in the mammoth May Day rally of 1939 of BPTUC under the presidentship of Mrinal Kanti Bose and the presence of all senior leaders from CPI, CSP, and other political minor parties.¹⁴⁸ The resolutions that were passed revolved around the watchwords of internationalism, anti-imperialism, and proletarian solidarity. Under the overreaching theme of the victory of the workers of the world and liberation from British imperialism, they pushed for the following demands. Firstly, they put forward the demands for a seven-hour working day, sick leave with pay, and free education and recreational spaces for working-class children. The demand for the release of political prisoners remained constant. Secondly, they condemned the Bengal Ministry's apathy towards the working class. They particularly denounced curtailing the civil liberties of the

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, Also, KPM/SB/00119/05, SB Reports and Notes from May Day celebrations in Calcutta from 1939-1941. Several parties floated Bulletins listing their demands on the occasion of May Day, putting a strong Anti-Fascist stance marking global proletarian solidarity.

¹⁴⁷ Mukherjee, *Bharater Communist Party O Amra*, pp. 152-53. In Bombay the Textile Mill workers were planning a strategy for a general strike throughout the country from April.

¹⁴⁸ KPM /SB/00118/05, Also see newspaper coverage of the event in : *Advance*, May 2, 1939. *Hindustan Standard*, May 2, 1939.

workers and polarising them on religious lines by forming ‘Black Flag’ unions or rival communal unions. They demanded the re-installment of the 500 ejected women employees of the Union Jute Mill, Beliaghata. On the national front, they criticised the police violence against Digboi Oil Company workers which resulted in fatal casualties and appealed to the Congress and Bengal ministries to adopt measures to quell heightening police atrocities against the labourers. Lastly, it appealed to the Indian and Ceylonese workers to ‘join hands’ and commence a joint struggle in the plantations of Southeast Asia.¹⁴⁹ This initiated what can be considered the groundwork for global proletarian solidarity and internationalism in the forties.

3.6 Lessons in Anti-Fascism: The War-Waged Forties and Significance of May, the 1st

The apparent unity of different leftist parties was crumbling down with the initiation of the Second World War and further factional parties were emerging. Several parties were active only during the war years, like M.N. Roy-led Radical Democratic Party (RDP).¹⁵⁰ Hence, the May Day celebrations became more extensive and the central theme and discourse now revolved around the Fascist onslaught of Germany besides the usual demands for war bonuses and the release of political prisoners. However, Secretary of AITUC, N.M. Joshi sent out official letters to the prominent trade unionists of the various factional parties, affiliated unions, and members of the general council requesting them to celebrate May 1, 1940, in the most ‘fitting manner’ to ‘demonstrate the unity and strength of the working-class movement.’¹⁵¹ Accordingly, leaflets were issued in Hindi and Bengali by BPTUC Secretary Mrinal Kanti Bose and Sudhin Pramanick in order to spread the news of the gathering to be held on the occasion of ‘May Day’ in the evening at the foot of the Ochterlony Monument (modern *Shahid Minar*). The BPTUC was to adopt three main resolutions in the meeting. First, it strongly condemned the detention of prominent trade unionists and leftists due to their anti-war stand. Secondly, it proclaimed that the British and

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Dasgupta, *Minor Political Parties*, p. 182.

¹⁵¹ KPM/ SB/ 00119/05, SB Reports on May Day: 1941.

French cry for waging war in the name of upholding the cherished ideals of democracy was a sheer gloss over its imperial designs. This war was unlikely to bring freedom to the Indians; neither would it benefit the working class anyway. Lastly, it resolved to make ‘immediate and vigorous efforts to secure a substantial increase in the wages of the working class’ to improve their real wages in the war-ravaged economy.¹⁵² The ‘anti-war’ sentiment is discernible because the communists were yet to adopt the People’s War line. May Day gatherings were germane as it was also an occasion where citizens cutting across class, communities, caste, gender, age, or professions used to come together. It became the epitome of Calcutta, brimming with anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist, and anti-fascist zeal. Bimala Pratibha Debi, who was an ardent nationalist associated with the terrorist groups in Bengal, with local Sikh Congress leader Niranjan Singh Talib arranged for a few Sikh women to join the victory procession from Hazra to Shradhananda Park post the BPTUC meeting.¹⁵³

In the 1940s, the May Day Pamphlets and their circulation became prolific. The pamphlets now had illustrations where the Red Flag of egalitarianism embraced the pages. The texts became more detailed, direct, and vivid. They were often printed in the form of booklets now with a cover page outlining their main demands in bullet points. Organisational pamphlets distributed on behalf of the various leftist parties, like that of CPI, differed from the general May Day pamphlets in terms of content and form. A Bengali pamphlet distributed on behalf of the Bengal Committee of the CPI on the occasion of May Day in 1941 is pertinent to this discussion.¹⁵⁴ The pamphlet is longer than the usual ones. It was divided into five comprehensive paragraphs, each emphasising issues that were germane for the working class during the grave crisis as the war raged in full swing. It opened up with the International premise of how the British and German imperialists dragged the workers and the peasants into fighting a war on behalf of their class enemies. It

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid. SB Reports on May Day dated between 30 April 1940 to May 1, 1940.

¹⁵⁴ WBSA 00119/05, KPM/SB/0019/05. Extract from the pamphlet in Bengali titled: *1941 May Dibosh, Bhed Nitir Biruddhe Ekotro Hou: Juddho Chai Na, Shanti Chai Na! Golami Chai Na, Swadhinata Chai!*, (May Day 1941, Unite Against the Diving Policy of the Colonisers: We do not War, We want Peace! We will not be Enslaved, We want Independence) C.P.I. Bengal Committee.

was certainly not their war, and they were at the receiving end of it. It harped on how the working class in England, America, and Germany had consolidated against the injustices meted out to them and outrightly denied any support to the imperialist war by opting for vigorous strikes. The workers in Bengal, in solidarity with them, should erect a united front against this '*Atyachari Judhya*' or the Oppressive War. It further expanded on how the British 'Evil War' or 'Shoytani Juddha' is responsible for the acute food crisis, and the severe rise in the price of essential commodities is a ploy by the Government to fund its imperialist war designs. It is to be noted that the adjectives in use like '*atyachari*' or '*shoytan*' are typically used for a person rather than an event or an object. Using the same for the war shows how they comprehended different forms of class oppression and projected it on the vehicle of repression. Hence, much like the Colonial government, the Colonial War occupied their opposition's position, their '*sreni shotru*' or '*class enemy*.'¹⁵⁵

A discernible departure of organisational pamphlets from available May Day pamphlets was how along with outlining their immediate demands they were also doing active propaganda against their rival socialist counterparts in the labour circuit. The piece dedicates a paragraph to how M.N Roy, whom they tagged as the '*dalal*' or the agent of the British, and the Royists headed by him were actively propagating and insinuating the workers against the communist-led All India Trade Union Congress.¹⁵⁶ The Trade Union politics in Bengal had been reeling under virulent factionalism since the 1930s, which got pronounced during the war years.¹⁵⁷ The pamphlet appealed to the workers to preserve their unity and defeat this active scheme of preventing a unified working-class struggle. Before the C.P.I. adopted the people's war line, it was particularly critical about parties that were lending their support to the British war efforts, Roy being the most prominent one. Often labour rallies led by the Royists had a strong anti-fascist rhetoric to it. Cries of *Fasibaad Barbaad* (Down with Fascism) or *Hitler Barbaad* (Down with Hitler), and posters and banners displaying messages like *Bharater Dike Hitler....Eder Binah Karun* (Hitler is on his

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Refer to Chapter 1 and Introduction of the first part of this Chapter.

way to India... Annihilate him) became a prominent feature of these gatherings.¹⁵⁸ Roy's stance concerning the war can be gathered from a resolution that was passed under his presidency in a massive rally of workers from unions ranging from the dock workers to the street vendor at Ochterlony Monument on 5 January, 1941.¹⁵⁹ It read,

*We, the Grand Rally of the trade unions of the city and the suburbs of Calcutta with the combined membership of one hundred thousand industrial workers hereby declare our sympathy for and support to the workers of the Continental countries fallen under the tyranny of Hitler's war machine and further we declare our determination to support the war efforts of the British and the allied Governments until Fascism and Hitlerism are crushed and suppressed and workers are liberated.... We condemn the Indian Labour Leaders who are still playing in the hands of the Congress and the reactionary parties for not supporting war against Fascism.*¹⁶⁰

Roy castigated the other left trade unions for making the A.I.T.U.C subservient to Congress.

The piece next addressed the underbelly of Bengal's contemporary society; Communalism. The Muslim-majority province of Bengal from the late 1920s and especially after the provincial autonomy of 1935 was plagued with virulent communal dissensions.¹⁶¹ The wartime crises and insecurity gave a fresh lease to these antagonisms. The ensuing communal riots threatened to disrupt the province's social fabric. However, the syndicate of capitalists and the state often harnessed these riots in the working-class ghettos, aiding their mutual interest in strikebreaking, reducing it into a mere clash of conflicting religious interests.¹⁶² The pamphlets appealed to the workers to actively work against this conspiracy and preserve communal harmony. These pieces which were categorically an economic

¹⁵⁸ KPM/SB/3172/05, Special Branch Report on Labour Rallies in Calcutta

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ KPM/SB/00047/05, Report on Communal Tension in Bengal/ Communal Disturbance: Hindu-Muslim Tension in Calcutta'. Also see, McPherson, *The Muslim Microcosm: Calcutta, 1918 to 1935*, Franz Steiner Verlag, Stuttgart, 1974, and Joya Chatterjee, *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and partition, 1932-1947*, CUP, Cambridge, 1994.

¹⁶² Ibid. Also Basu, *Does Class Matter?*, pp. 224-63.

critique of communalism, were noteworthy interventions in the contemporary discourse of communalism.

In 1945 May Day celebrations were followed by elaborate arrangements to commemorate the fall of fascist Germany at the hands of the Soviet army. On 4 May, 1945, in front of the C.P.I. office at the Lower Circular Road, a gathering was arranged to mark, 'The fall of Berlin- A death blow to Imperialism,'¹⁶³ Grand processions with communist flags and victory slogans for the communist triumph were taken out from tramway and bus workers *bustees*. Bankim Mukherjee hoisted the red flag and it was saluted in military fashion by several party members. In his address, Mukherjee commented, 'the red flag now installed in Berlin would usher into the world a new era based upon the political, social and economic emancipation for the people.'¹⁶⁴ He urged the Indians to rally around the Red flag to form a workers' government. Wellington Square from the evening was overcrowded with men, women, and party organisers carrying Anti-Nazi banners and posters. This was followed by a speech of Lahiri who while paying tribute to the Red Army for the capture of Berlin accused British Imperialism under Neville Chamberlain of encouraging and strengthening Hitler against Russia. He called for working-class unity and the unity of all political parties to espouse the country from the shackles of colonialism.¹⁶⁵

Hence, May Day, Spain Day, and Berlin Day were instrumental in not only educating the workers and making them aware of the international events around them but also making them aware of how their immediate needs are intrinsically tied to global politics. They were cultivating in them a sense of solidarity with the oppressed, wronged, and exploited people around the world imbuing in them a sense of class struggle. As the binaries of global and local were getting erased what ensued was a radical instance of 'Internationalism from below'.

¹⁶³ KPM/SB/ 02295/05, SB Report on May Day Celebrations (1945).

¹⁶⁴ Ibid. Excerpt from Mukherjee's speech as quoted by the S.B. officer in their Daily Notes, dated May 5, 1945.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid. Similar gatherings were held over the month of May where prominent Communists like Ranen Sen, Lahiri, and Mukherjee addressed the workers, students, and the general mass encouraging them to form a united front to seek complete independence .

Epilogue:

To conclude, it is pertinent to go back to the questions posed at the beginning of the chapter. This chapter delved into the very foundation of unionisation in late colonial Calcutta. The case studies of different trade unions operating in the city, ranging from major formal industries to smaller trades dominated by the petty bourgeoisie, are relevant in understanding the underlying political influences and stimuli that led to the radicalisation of the working class during the period in question. The narrative however was not just of unhindered success against imperialist oppression; several socio-political factors posed major hardships in organising a union, often leading to its premature disbanding. Notwithstanding, over the decades the change in the nature of demands, political affiliations and purpose, patterns of organisation, modes, and forms of protests proves beneficial in contemplating the quarry around consciousness.

To reiterate Marx, the workers first become conscious of sharing common interests and grievances against the capitalists forming a ‘class in itself’. Eventually, they start identifying as a social class against their common class enemy; the bourgeoisie leading to the development of the ‘class for itself’: the proletariat. In this context, one can trace this evolution in the unionisation process from the 1930s to 1940s in Bengal. Initially, the unions occupied themselves with basic demands concerning their employment: wages, bonuses, and pensions. As the years passed there was sophistication in praxis. Demands for the release of political prisoners became a major point in almost all political memorandums that were being floated by the unions irrespective of their political affiliations from the late 1930s. The process peaked during the Second World War; workers were striking, rallying fellow comrades, and collecting funds in the bid to erect a united front against fascism, a conspiracy of the most reactionary of the capitalists. They were extending their solidarity to workers around the world facing the wrath of capitalist exploitation. Hence, they identified as a collective, a single global class of proletariat against the fascist, imperialist capitalists. Proletarian Internationalism was the hallmark of labour politics in Bengal during the war years.

Another crucial intervention will be to propose that community and class consciousness are not necessarily antagonistic to each other. A sharp distinction between the two is virtually impossible, and the presence of the former does not necessarily attest to the

latter's absence. Agitation over Durga Puja bonuses or early departure for fast breaking during the holy month of *Ramzan* remained constant in the demands forwarded by the unions over the years. The broadening of the scope of demands in union politics, the incursion of more working-class men and women in leadership positions, and prompt responses to international predicaments and political developments, all signify the heightening awareness, political ageing, and consciousness of the workers in the closing years of the colonisation. This vibrancy of the movement was remotely self-contained. The passion and zeal for radical change and a sense of unity overflowed, impacting all aspects of city life and turning it into a symbol of resistance - a dynamic, living revolution.

Chapter Four

‘The Unholy Trinity,’ Syndicate of the Colonial State, Capitalists, and the Police: Repression, Strikebreaking, and Corporate Policing of Working-Class Radicalisation

*The British Imperialists had been making propaganda that for the last 200 years, the greatest contribution of the British Government in India was their law. But the true colour of imperialist law in India was now exposed. In the name of defending India the throats of workers were being cut by means of the Defense of India Rules which were never applied against profiteers, hoarders, and black marketers.*¹

In this speech given at a massive gathering of workers from several unions affiliated with the Communist Party of India on 2 February 1945, veteran Communist trade unionist, Indrajit Gupta was delivering a critical speech against the structural repression engineered by Imperialism. He took a dig at the most cherished of all British principles, the common law system. The British have been dissing and denouncing the traditional Indian legal systems due to their lack of codification to impart justice based on equity and fairness. However, the laws passed under the crown were far from ameliorating the glaring socio-economic inequality that prevailed in the colony.² Ironically enough, the legal façade could barely conceal the uncouth face of colonial capitalist exploitation.

The dialectical relationship between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat was never as pronounced as it came to be with the turn of the nineteenth century. The 1800s ushered in the era of a new awakening, set afoot crucial socio-political currents that culminated in the zenith

¹ Kolkata Police Museum files of the Special Branch, henceforth will be referred to as, KPM/ SB. KPM/SB/02295/05, SB Report on May Day Celebrations (1945). Excerpt from the speech of Indrajit Gupta.

² Ibid.

of the ‘Age of Revolution.’³ The institutionalised exploitation of the working class in the hands of the capitalist and corporate conglomerates is always inevitably linked with the state and its governance. In the twentieth century as the Western Bloc most zealously upheld the values of liberal democracy, brazen coercion, and open violence were not feasible. Instead, the capitalist bosses took recourse to constitutional means of repression. The crude application of force was replaced by a semblance of civility in the arena of struggle. The global wave of socialism further precipitated this legal turn in action.⁴ Now dissent was registered and issues were resolved through ballots but not bullets. However, an Imperial state whose interests are so intimately entwined with the bourgeois class is bound to adopt judicial sanctions and support parliamentary decisions which are pro-capitalist, if not outrightly anti-labour, often resorting to legal chicanery.⁵

The opening years of the twentieth century, especially followed by the First World War (1914-19) witnessed wide-scale working-class strikes and unrest. The resulting inflation from the war and the plummeting real wage made industrial disputes a common

³ The term ‘Age of Revolution’ became an academic jargon post the publication of Marxist historian, Eric Hobsbawm’s magnum opus, Four-volume series on development of modern world history through various stages, where it marks the first volume. (Hobsbawm, Eric. *Age of Revolution 1789-1848*. New York: Vintage Books, 1996. Typically the period between late eighteenth and mid- nineteenth century is referred by the term due to the significant numbers of revolutionary movements that erupted across Europe and Americas during the period changing the course of history.

⁴ Since mid- nineteenth century and especially after the Paris Commune Socialism have been used as a common term within Britain to spearhead cooperative movement in Britain by likes of Robert Owen. (Richard Gunderman. ‘Robert Owen, born 250 years ago, tried to use his wealth to perfect humanity in a radically equal society. *New Haven Register*, May 11, 2011. (<https://www.nhregister.com/news/article/Robert-Owen-born-250-years-ago-tried-to-use-his-16167787.php>), accessed on April 15, 2023.

The opening years of 20th century saw formation of several Socialist parties and cluster throughout Europe centering Russia. The Second International was already formed in 1889 and functioned till 1916 which was followed by the Russian Revolution in 1917 and Communism as an economic system was then streamlined and firmly established under Vladimir Lenin.

⁵ Eley, George. “Forward: Coercion at work, violence in politics: what changed between 1890 and 1930?” In *Corporate Policing, Yellow Unionism, and Strikebreaking, 1890-1930, In Defence of Freedom*, edited by Matteo Millan and Alessandro Saluppo. New York: Routledge, 2021, pp. XV-XXV.

phenomenon.⁶ The state responded by sanctioning several enquiry commissions scrutinising factory floor politics, labour settlements, and ancillary conditions. The official narrative was that the provisions passed after these enquiries made the working class population reconsider ‘strike as a tool of an effective bargain.’⁷ The announcement of the Whitney Commission or the Royal Commission on Labour was a crucial move in this regard.⁸ Whitney, when he submitted the report in 1931 did concur with the fact that it was British imperialism which perpetrated the vicious cycle of poverty in the colony.⁹ The Commission was an outcome of the brief stint of the minority Labour Party heading the British Parliament between 1929-31. An anomaly that was rectified quite swiftly in the following parliamentary elections.¹⁰ While Britain was riding high on the ethos of liberal democracy, the global economic crisis precipitated the burgeoning wave of conservatism in Europe.¹¹ A major trigger for right-wing political violence has always been the threat from organised working-class insurgencies threatening to revolutionise the prevailing unequal social order.¹² The fascist onslaught in Germany was aggravated by Adolf Hitler’s chancellorship from 1933 onwards.¹³ Italy was already reeling under Mussolini’s misgovernance.¹⁴ As anti-labour laws, open coercion, and seeking extra-parliamentary solutions to popular movements became the hallmark of these

⁶ For more information consult, Bagchi, Amiya Kumar. *Colonialism and Indian Economy*. New Delhi: OUP, 2010.

⁷ Industrial Disputes in India 1929-36, *Bulletins of Indian Industries & Labour*. No. 62, 1937, pp. 9-11.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ *Report of The Royal Commission on Labour in India*.

¹⁰ Thorpe, Andrew. *A History of British Labour Party*. Reprint 4th Edition. London: Bloomsbury, 2017, pp. 59-82.

¹¹ For more on the impact of the Great Depression on the colonies refer, Rothermund, Dietmar. *The Global Impact of the Great Depression 1929-1939*. London: Routledge, 1996.

¹² Eley, Forward.

¹³ For further, Shirer, William L. *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany*. London: Simon & Schuster, 1990.

¹⁴ Milan, Matteo. “From “state protection” to “private defence”: strikebreaking, civilian armed mobilisation and the rise of Italian Fascism.” In *Corporate Policing, Yellow Unionism, and Strikebreaking*.

regimes, the British continued to disguise its colonial vendetta beneath the veil of legalism and judicial civility.

Taking a legal course need not habitually translate to the protection of the workers from exploitation by the company bosses. It became certainly more nuanced, and by the 1930s comprised of an impressive repertoire of factory floor regulations, wage control, reduced breaks between shifts, extended unpaid hours, tighter control on unionisation, poor health benefits, and lowered pension and provident fund rates. In India, colonialism paved the way for the creation of an indigenous bourgeoisie class no different than their European counterparts. To further complicate the situation, these men were also a crucial part of the anticolonial discourse and practices in the colony.¹⁵ The INC's class composition was the main impediment to the erection of a mass movement, and the reason behind the disillusionment about the effectiveness of its praxis among youths in Bengal post the withdrawal of the Non-Cooperation Movement in 1924.¹⁶ Over the redundant and ample shreds of evidence about these men funding campaigns and being a crucial part of organisations like The Muslim League and the INC, from the period of provincial autonomy in Bengal these men also assumed pivotal positions in the elected assembly.¹⁷ The provision of an elected member from the labour constituency was an act of mere tokenism, and it was almost next to impossible to push through bills that were conspicuously pro-working class.¹⁸ The automatic latitude these capitalists (both European and Indian) had due to their proximity to the state power divulges the pitfalls of the colonial legal system.

¹⁵ For more refer, Chattopadhyay, Gautam. *Communism and Bengal's Freedom Movement*, Vol I (1917–29). New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1970.

¹⁶ Sen, Manaswini. "Mapping the Changing Notions of Inequality Among the Trade Union Leaders of Colonial Bengal (1920–1947)," *Global Intellectual History*. (<https://doi.org/10.1080/23801883.2022.2062416>)

¹⁷ Chattopadhyay, Gautam. *Bengal Electoral Politics and Freedom Struggle 1862-1947*. New Delhi: ICHR, 1984.

¹⁸ KPM/ SB/00075/05 (Spain Day Celebrations). In a massive meeting of over 2900 workers under the auspices of the Water Transport Union was held on April 13, 1937, prominent labour activist, Shibnath Banerjee, and then M.L.A. urged the workers to resort to strikes if their demands are not fulfilled as he saw the futility of his position in the assembly to push for effective labour reforms.

This chapter aims to contemplate this knotted relationship of the unholy trinity of the State, the capitalists, and the disciplinary wing of the State: the police and Intelligence networks, which particularly assumed dominance to curb the rising tide of working-class radicalisation in the period. It contemplates how labour laws were framed and utilised to contain working-class militarisation beneath the facade of a just and liberal judiciary in colonial India in general, and provincial Bengal in particular. Taking into account how the law framers were intimate bedfellows and even direct stakeholders in different capitalist enterprises it will probe the significance of such power dynamics which moulded the socio-economic realities of late colonial India. It will further reflect upon how and what legal and extra-legal means these capitalists: factory owners and managers were resorting to curb the heightening solidarity and radicalisation of the working class. It will address the disparities (if existent) between the functionalities of the European bourgeois owners and their Indian counterparts. The analysis remunerates on the ‘colonising’ attitude of the owners, irrespective of their European or Indigenous origin. It probes their impulses to suppress any militant unionisation, which is the resultant extension of the inherent class contradictions between them and the workers.

The intention is to expand the definition of colonialism to include the oppressive mindset of the capitalists in the equation. It intends to elucidate how multiple colonialism(s) were at play during the closing decades of British rule. How the colonial violence of the capitalist class overlapped and interacted with the larger imperial visions of the British colonial state? The chapter broadens to bring the law enforcement wing of the government into the equation. It assesses how the police and the intelligence departments of the state were dedicating their resources to launch an offensive against ‘bolshevism’ or ‘communism in the disguise of English liberalism’. According to the police, the Communists were utilising the heightening dissatisfaction of the working class to pose a threat against British Imperial ambitions.¹⁹ It will limit the discussion to an inquiry into this attitude of the colonial police in this chapter, the next chapter will be dedicated to the discussion of the itineraries of the colonial state’s surveillance apparatus against trade union activism. Finally, the chapter envisages addressing the interconnectedness and the collusion of these three forces to militant

¹⁹ KPM/SB/000158/05 (Communism & Violence).

trade unionism in the bid to comprehend how these factors can never be studied in isolation from one another to map the counter-offensive to a working-class revolution in a colony.

4.2 Colonial Government, Lawmaking, and Working-Class Agitation

There was a veritable change in the outlook of the colonial State from the closing decades of the nineteenth century concerning labour administration in its colonies. With the revolutions that changed the political landscape of Europe, especially in the second half of the 1800s, upholding the rights of the working class occupied the center stage of every political discourse.²⁰ Hence, it became a pre-condition for any state to engage, and considerably invest in legal sanctions regulating labour welfare and working conditions. Especially, for an Imperial state, where privatisation was well entrenched in almost all the trades and industries, vesting the responsibility solely on the employers' discretion was not judicious. Britain was seeing a full-blown working-class agitation and organised trade unionism in the period.²¹ It not only inspired the Anglicised educated middle class back in the colonies but also acted as a catalyst for greater government involvement.²² The years following the First World War posed the most formidable challenges to the state in this regard. The war-time inflation coupled with the deadly influenza plague and communal riots during the 1920s kept the Commerce and the Labour division busy.²³ The strike wave, notably among the government employees made the state sanction a series of enquiry commissions, culminating in the passing of the Trade Union's Act of 1926. In quite a snarky move, the state now demanded registration fees for recognition of organisations that could represent the workers' interests in front of the managing bodies. It underlined the exploitative modalities of the state whereby it yielded a greater control of the movement while alienating the radical grassroot elements from it. With the involvement of international institutions like the International Labour Organisation (ILO), pertaining to labour matters of the European colonies this trend was exacerbated. However, the global slump in the capital followed by the Great Depression, the

²⁰ Hobsbawm, *Age of Revolution 1789-1848*.

²¹ Refer, Thompson, E.P. *The Making of the English Working-Class*. New York: Vintage Books, 1964.

²² Refer to Chapter 1 of this dissertation. For further information, Saha, Panchanan. *Pioneers of Indian Trade Union Movement*. Reprint, Kolkata: Parul, 2014.

²³ *Industrial Disputes in India 1921- 1928*, No. 43, 1937.

raging dissatisfaction among workers, and the innumerable sporadic strikes pushed the authorities to announce the Royal Commission on Labour in 1929.²⁴ The historic Commission headed by one of the foremost British liberals, J.H. Whitley submitted its report in 1931.²⁵ Though the commission was lauded by many moderate Indian nationalists and a few labour activists, it reeked of imperial propaganda. The Government commemorated it as a milestone in labour welfare and legislation in the colony, as it led to a discernible reduction in strikes coupled with a notable decrease in the membership of the militant All India Trade Union Congress.²⁶ The moderate Congressites with their infinite faith in British justice and fair play found in Whitley, their perfect savior, the parallel of Gandhi in the metropole.²⁷ While the report did hold the recklessness of British employers culpable for the abject poverty of the working-class, ('An endeavor must be made to enhance the efficiency, to heighten earnings and to improve conditions of life. . . . Poverty leads to bad conditions and inefficiency, inefficiency and bad conditions to poverty.')²⁸ and encouraged collective bargaining through organised trade unions, it echoed the conservative pro-state liberal stance on the nature of unionisation. Stressing the desirability of unionisation among the colonial workers in the 1920s it stated, 'In the recent years trade unionism has had to face internal difficulties. For some time efforts have been made by communists in India and from beyond its border to capture the movement.'²⁹ Reiterating the colonial taboo against Bolshevism, which resounded the fear of an imminent working-class revolution, it was clear in defining

²⁴ Industrial Disputes in India 1929-36, No. 62, 1937.

²⁵ *Report of The Royal Commission on Labour in India*.

²⁶ Ibid. Industrial Disputes in India 1929-36, No. 62, 1937.

²⁷ In a report by the *Times* following the submission of the report in 1931 drawing a parallel between how Whitley's report echoes the opinions of Gandhi printed, 'Astounding to those Britons who think St. Gandhi a crack-brained fakir is the fact that the Royal Commission's conclusions are substantially those which the Mahatma has trumpeted for years. Mr. Gandhi has always said that the grinding poverty of India's half-starved masses is the root-evil of the whole Indian question. Last week the Royal Commission reported that "stark poverty" is the "major reason" for the Indian laborer's "comparative inefficiency." (Foreign News: St. Gandhi Yessed. Time, July 13, 1931, <https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,742004,00.html> , Accessed on January 24, 2023.)

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ *Report of The Royal Commission on Labour in India*, pp.318-19.

the legitimate bounds of the movement. The Royal Commission was followed by efforts made 'legislative administration to promote peace.'³⁰ Several laws followed including, The Employers' & Workers' (Disputes) Repealing Act (1932), The Trade Disputes Amendment Act (1932), The Factories Act (XXV of 1934), The Payment of Wages Act (IV of 1936) to list a few.³¹ Notwithstanding, all these provisions ultimately were pro-capitalist in their essence.

From 1937 the indigenous actors also started getting involved in the law-making and dispensation of laws governing labour. In the very Second session of the newly elected legislative Council in 1937, one of the foremost things to be discussed was the efficacy of the Trade Unions Act.³² The Commerce and Labour Department's representatives were posed with questions that revolved around the statistics of registered unions including whether they were submitting their returns on stipulated times and on failure to do so what legal actions were taken by the State against those unions. As answered by the designated member, the returns were filed duly by the registered unions, and no disciplinary actions were taken against the ones who applied for an extension on valid grounds. The registration of the unions which were unable to pay the fees had been cancelled. It added that the accounts of these unions were handled by professional auditors and hence diligently maintained.³³ The very tone of the member posing the questions, the scrutiny, and the ironclad terms by which the act was being bound divulge the anti-labour attitude of these native members. The state in the bid to have a tighter grip over working-class militarisation was sanctioning laws that were curtailing large-scale, vigorous unionisation. It was evident that the most radical of the unions led by the communists often remained unrecognised due to the failure to pay the returns as the party perpetually grappled with the paucity of funds.³⁴ The unions diligently paying their fees were mainly associations with strict hierarchical setup, minimum working-class

³⁰ *Industrial Disputes in India* (1929-36).p. 331.89.

³¹ Ibid.

³² The Council met on July 30, 1937, at the Legislative Chamber of Legislative Building, Calcutta. *The Bengal Legislative Council Debates (Official Report of the Second Session)*, Volume II, 1937, pp- 24-27.

³³ ibid.

³⁴ For more refer to autobiographies and memoirs of early Communists like, Ahmed, Muzaffar. *Somokaler Kotha*. Calcutta: National Book Agency, 1963.

representation in the prominent office-bearing positions, quintessentially pro-state and moderate in their operations. This attitude was discernible from the late 1920s onwards when British traders backed by associations like the Indian Jute Mills Association (I.J.M.A) were trying to establish their political presence in local constitutional bodies from the legislative councils to municipal bodies.³⁵ The tension post the First General Jute Strike (1929) was so acute that the merchants were constantly on the lookout to utilise existing laws to quell the dissenting workers. After the Second strike in 1937 several jute companies were filing cases of criminal trespass under the Transfer of Properties Act against the strikers who failed to vacate their quarters on the coolie lines.³⁶ It led to an extended legal scuffle involving employers, workers, and notable trade unionists like Deben (Debandranath) Sen.³⁷ This attitude persisted after the provincial autonomy. Despite the greater degree of assertion of the Indian voices, the stakeholders were primarily Muslim and Hindu landed magnates and white collar class. Remaining true to their core nature their collusion with law-enforcing forces and apparent control over constitutional machinery exacerbated the class dichotomy.

The 1940s saw major controversies and debates surrounding the Trade Dispute Act at the legislative assembly. As the war progressed there was a parallel battle being fought on the assembly floor. There was a general appeal by The Bengal Provincial Trade Union Congress (B.P.T.U.C.), urging upon the government of Bengal, in the best interests of the common Anti-Fascist war efforts, to persuade the employers to increase the rate of dearness allowance according to the astronomical rise in the cost of living.³⁸ Simultaneously, the assembly was flooded with petitions from a number of capitalist concerns.³⁹ The workers of Bengal General Motor Transport Workers' Union were at loggerheads with their employees,

³⁵ For more refer, Basu, *Does Class Matter?*, pp 236-238.

³⁶ WBSA, Home Political. Home (Pol.) 332/37 (Legal Position of Workers who remain in occupation of quarters provided by their Employees if they go on Strike and Refuse to Vacate on due Notice).

³⁷ *The Statesman*, 29 May, 1937.

³⁸ *The Hindustan Standard*, 31 January, 1942.

³⁹ This includes Messer French Motor Car Company Limited, Robert Hudson Company, etc. WBSA, Proceedings of Commerce Department, General Questions on Settlement of Trade Disputes Discussion with Bengal Chamber of Commerce, 65-62, B, 2353-2363 (December 1945)

The French Motor Car Company Limited from 1942 onwards.⁴⁰ The demand for a hike in wages and an increase in holidays was met by total insouciance by the management for several months. In the opening months of 1943, the Secretary of the Union filed a defamation case against the manager, Mr. Sheridan who bribed a clique of workers who were trying to insinuate fellow workers against the Union.⁴¹ After a bitter struggle, and the involvement of the Labour Commissioner and the Minister of Labour and Commerce, an order was issued in August 1943 under the ordinance (b) of subrule (1) of the Defence of India Act that,

*It shall not be competent during the continuance of the present war, and for a period of six months thereafter for the French Motor Car Company. Ltd., to make it a term or impose it as a condition of employment under the said company that the said person shall not be a member of the French Motor Car Company Workers' Union, a union registered under the Indian Trade Union's Act, and if any person holds any employment under the same company on such term and condition on the date of the commencement of this order, such term or condition shall have no effect.*⁴²

Despite taking a stand for the worker's right to unionise, neither the Provincial Government nor the Labour Commissioner actively got involved in resolving the issues put forward by the union. Also, the leniency on the part of the provincial Government can be attributed to the union in question being registered under the act and having no apparent leftist association. A better comprehension of how legislation was moulded to thwart militant trade unionism can be through an analysis of the nuances embedded in the politics of Adjudication courts.

⁴⁰ KPM 03063/05, French Motor Car Company Workers' Union.

⁴¹ Ibid. S.B. Report on Strike situation dated July 30, 1943.

⁴² Extract from *The Calcutta Gazette*, dated August 5, 1943.

4.3 Pervading the Legal Drudgeries: The Controversy Around Adjudication Courts as Legit Mode of Mitigation

The popularity of *Salishee* Courts or Adjudication Courts for the settlement of demands of the strikers was gaining ground by the end of the war. The fact that there will be an elected legal representative pushing the workers' cause and bargaining on their behalf was a tremendous achievement in the history of working-class struggle. It provided transparency in the procedure of arbitration which was monopolised by pro-state actors, the Labour Commissioner, and Company Lawyers.⁴³ As discussed in the previous chapter, the major general strikes post-war were withdrawn at the promise of expedited settlement of the workers' grievances. However, by the end of 1945, the Government started twisting the process, as frequently the Company bosses had to concede to the demands. The colonial state's pro-capitalist sympathies influenced the whole procedure. The tactic was to simply delay the hearing dates or to pass the final Reports. Often the state utilised intrigue, legal deception, and other subtle methods to influence the outcome of these cases. In October 1945, Wazid Hussian, the Secretary, on behalf of the Bengal General Motor Transport Workers' Union submitted a list of general demands to the management of the French Motor Car Company, for increment in wages, dearness allowance, bonus food allowance, bonus per week, provident fund and above all unscrupulous dismissal and retrenchment.⁴⁴ He also served a two-week strike notice on 17 October, but the period was subsequently extended due to a negotiation effort from a Labour officer. However, by early November not having reached any settlement, Wazid proposed to declare a strike with effect from 13 November.⁴⁵ The Union was in a bitter struggle with the company from 1942 over these demands and a case was filed with the adjudication court towards the end of that year.⁴⁶ In October, Mr. P. Nag, the claims officer of the war injury scheme was appointed as the adjudicator. The main bone of contention was whether the Company was justified in increasing with effect from 15 September 1942, the working hours in a week from 45.5 hours to 48 hours without any

⁴³ KPM/SB/03103/05. Braithwaite's Workers' Union (B.L.P).

⁴⁴ KPM/SB/03063/05, French Motor Car Company Workers' Union.

⁴⁵ Ibid. SB Report dated October 20, 1945.

⁴⁶ Ibid. Report dated September 15, 1945.

proportionate increase in wages. Although according to the Defence of India Rules, the adjudicator was not to adjudicate terms and conditions of employment unfavorable to the workers than they were enjoying anytime within three months preceding the date of the award, in this case, it was ruled in September 1945 by the adjudicator that the Company was justified in increasing working hours without increasing the wage rate. Most of the disputed issues were not addressed by the adjudicator. To further add to the insults, during the course of adjudication, the Company filed a reply that insinuated that the Secretary had no interest in the employees other than his own personal gain and that he had obtained in writing from the workers that he would be the beneficiary of a pecuniary share of any advantages he would gain from the proceedings utilising the predicaments of the war. Hence, the situation worsened by October 1945 finally culminating in the call for a strike.⁴⁷

Despite the union not being directly affiliated with the Muslim League, the case drew the attention and sympathy of the then Minister of Labour and Commerce of the Bengal Legislative Assembly, and veteran Muslim League trade unionist, H.S. Suhrawardy. Perhaps due to the underlying communal solidarity with Hussain, he in a letter to the Labour Commissioner at the beginning of 1943, advocated for the democratic right of the workers to unionise,

The Labour Commissioner and the Government have intervened often in cases of strikes where notices have not been given and this is one of those cases where the Government should uphold the cause of labour and prevent such oppression and victimisation. I would not like to say further at this stage. If Government does not intervene in the case of constitutional unions it becomes a direct encouragement to unconstitutional unions as well as an incentive to constitutional unions to become unconstitutional. ⁴⁸

Contemporary Dailies like *The Advance*, *The Statesman*, and *The Nationalist* irrespective of their political allegiances were publishing reports reprehending Government inaction. *Advance*, in an article published on December 1945, under the heading '*Adjunctors Findings Set at Naught*' conveyed the joint statement of Bankim Mukherjee, MLA and CPI

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid. Letter of H.S. Suhrawardy to A. Hughes, Commissioner of Labour, Bengal, dated 24 February, 1943.

leader and President of CEWU over suppression and delay of Adjudication awards in the Braithwaite strike case. It stated that nearly 2,500 engineering workers of the company called off their strike 42 days ago on the assurance that their demands would be referred to the Government adjudication whose findings would be implemented by the Government. The primary demands of a month's advance payment and the bonus were accepted as the Court ruled in favour of the workers. Yet the Government had been delaying the official reports to delay the awards. It added, 'This highhandedness measure is a direct threat to the future of the Trade Union Movement and elementary working-class rights. The award should be immediately published and the workers should agitate for it.'⁴⁹

The President of BPTUC, Mrinal Kanti Bose, condemning this move of the Bengal Government stated,

*It is an obvious endeavor to appease the bosses of the Clive Street and to strengthen their hands in inflicting unbearable conditions on their ill-paid and starving workers. If this policy is allowed to succeed, it will make a sheer mockery of the legal machinery for settlement of disputes and will only stiffen the workers' to resort to direct action.*⁵⁰

On the morning of the 28, 200 workers of Braithwaite left the factory to protest against the authorities to give effect to the awards.⁵¹ They intended to go to the Writers' Building but demarcated under 'prohibited area' were not allowed by the local Police. So, nine of their representatives including Juran Ganguli, Ranen Sen, and Mihir Basu went to meet M.K. Kripalani, Joint Secretary to the Government of Bengal at the Writers. He informed that by the policy of *lassies faire* the Government was not prepared to compel the Company to grant the bonus to the workers. Sen condemned the Government for its pro-capitalist stance. Basu was infuriated and mocked, that the Government chickened out at the sight of this small gathering, and deployed the police force. How will they manage a procession of 35,000 to 40,000 agitated workers? ⁵²

⁴⁹ *The Advance*, December 23, 1945.

⁵⁰ *The Nationalist*, December 27, 1945.

⁵¹ KPM/SB/03103/05.

⁵² *Ibid.*

The crisis over Adjudication was aggravated by January 1946 when the Calcutta Tramway Workers' Union organised several protest meetings under the leadership of conductor Abdur Rezzak denouncing the Government's delay in publishing the reports.⁵³ This entire episode divulges how the colonial state was utilising every tool at its disposal to keep the Capitalists in their pockets reeling under the severe post-war depression. The colonial administration was crumbling under the financial crunch and the Government was desperate. The situation further deteriorated as across the different sectors from Electricity to Transportation night shifts were being discontinued.⁵⁴

The growing labour unrest across the sectors made the Bengal Ministry seriously consider proposing a bill in the Assembly in 1946. It was understood that the bill would be quickly passed to settle trade disputes.⁵⁵ The bill incorporated all provisions provided by Rule 81 of D.I.A., under which the Government has the power to refer trade disputes to arbitration, and parties are bound to accept it. Legislation empowerment was the only way to counter working-class militancy. Around the same time in 1946, the Bengal Government announced its Labour Policy.⁵⁶ The wide-scale strikes across sectors, post-war, famine exacerbated by the cloth crisis, and rampant black marketeering, made them consider the terms. After a meeting with the European clique of the Assembly in the third week of August, it was determined that besides announcing a general increase in wages, minimum standard wages would be fixed for unskilled labourers.⁵⁷ As independence drew nearer and with the transforming equations in global politics, the government had little choice but to adopt apparently liberal policies concerning the working class.

⁵³ Ibid. Also, B.P.T.U.C. vehemently criticised the government over the same in coming months, *The Nationalist*, 16 April 1946.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ WBSA, Proceedings of Commerce and Labour Department, General Questions on Settlement of Trade Disputes, (File No: 65-62, B- 2353, December 1946) *Anandabazar Patrika*, August 10, 1946.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

4.4 Probing the Dialectics of Capitalist-Worker Relationship: Capitalists & Working-Class Radicalisation

The profit-driven mentality of the capitalist class pronounced with the entrenchment of imperialism in the country and especially in the province, has been one of the banalest focuses of enquiry for labour historians of working-class politics in South Asia. Did the socio-economic transformation and the contemporary global political predicaments in the closing decades of colonial rule trigger any perceptible change in their attitude? Did they resort to newer techniques to mitigate the dichotomy of workers-owners interests?

The propensity of the European investors in Bengal towards forming cartel-like organisations like the Indian Jute Mills Association (I.J.M.A) has been dealt with extensively by labour historians of late colonial Bengal.⁵⁸ This trend aggravated in the 1930s, and similar (often small-scale) merchant associations that safeguarded the interests of the capitalist class were coming up in other sectors too.⁵⁹ These associations in the organised sectors pitted themselves against the trade unions in the identical sectors, countering the claims of these unions on the parliamentary floor. The owners of these companies tactfully, in full cooperation with the police and their surveillance wings contained radical union work among the workers. For most of the bigger European concerns, they had an agreement with the Commissioner for regularly supplying the branch with personal data on the employees and their political activities. In turn, the police did the bidding of these capitalists in suppressing the rightful agitations of the workers.

The long-drawn struggle between the tramway workers and the agent of the Calcutta Tramways Company during the war-torn year of 1942, illustrates how the companies were employing multifarious ways to counter militant labour unionisation in the closing years of the colonial period.⁶⁰ There was a general dissatisfaction among the tramwaymen after their services were declared 'Essential Services' towards the end of 1941. With the rigid terms of employment and the panic post the initiation of the bombing and large-scale evacuation of

⁵⁸ See, Basu, *Does Class Matter?*

⁵⁹ *Report of The Royal Commission on Labour in India*, pp. 316-18.

⁶⁰ KPM/SB/03101/05(II), Tramway Workers' Union.

workers in Rangoon, the workers decided to push some basic demands to secure themselves.⁶¹ They presented the Company with a set of demands, primary among which was an increase in the dearness allowances and provision of extra leave and a bonus to keep their family back in the safety of their village homes.⁶² The involvement of the 'Red' Calcutta Tramway Workers' Union alerted the company agent, R.S. Purssell, who was in constant correspondence with the Deputy Commissioner of Police, J.V.B. Janverin, requesting him to depute an inspector as a liaison between the Company and the I.B. Department who instead of visiting the various depots to collect information could directly be in correspondence with him and the office which would furnish the department with a weekly report. Janverin in full agreement immediately appointed Inspector Burman for the purpose.⁶³ With the adaptation of the People's War Line, C.P.I.-led unions took a collegial stance with the state. A copy of a second demand memorandum was simultaneously sent to the Special Branch to keep them abreast of the developments.⁶⁴ However, the reply from the Commissioner's office to the Secretary of the Union was far from cordial. In quite a passive-aggressive tone it was informed that he was aware that, 'the Agent has issued a notice describing what is being done for the employees. The employees are being given every possible consideration. I wish to warn you that any effort on your part to stir up discontent among the employees of this Essential Service will be followed, as you say, by the worst consequences.'⁶⁵ This indirect threat was also influenced by an earlier letter from a hysteric Purssell, who after being served with the memorandum immediately wrote back to the Commissioner assuring that the Company had already agreed on granting the employees a month's advance. He was disconcerted that it was the unwarranted external influence of the communists that was instigating the workers. He complained, 'I gathered that most of the men were quite willing to accept this Rs. 10 in default of being able to get anything better, but from the indirect

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² KPM/SB/03101/05(II), Tramway Workers' Union, The demands were presented to the Company through a representation made on 7 January, 1942.

⁶³ KPM/SB/03101/05(II), Letter from Purssell dated 20 January, 1942, and Janverin's reply dated 27 January, 1942.

⁶⁴ Ibid. Memorandum sent to the Branch office dated 2 February, 1942.

⁶⁵ Ibid. Reply to the Secretary of CTWU by C.E.S. Fairweather, dated 5 February, 1942.

enquiries that were made today, I gather that these men have subsequently got at it, Now they reiterate the parrot cry that they want a month's pay, that Rs. 10 is of no use to them, and altogether it looks as if they may be going to cause trouble.'⁶⁶ It was beyond any doubt who was implicated by reference to 'these men'. The association of the words 'trouble' and 'violence' with the Red unions was frequent in the state's as well as the capitalist discourses.⁶⁷

The matter further deteriorated, and ultimately the Labour Commissioner, A. Hughes, had to intervene. Bankim Mukherjee, the communist M.L.A. was chosen as the union's and the tramwaymen's representative. By the middle of February, he submitted a petition to the provincial Assembly and the Labour Commissioner pushing the cause of the workers.⁶⁸ Not surprisingly, the Commissioner instead of meeting Mukherjee or the workers contacted the Agent and the Commissioner of Police to decide on the conflict.⁶⁹ The conflict raged on as various sections of the company staff resorted to occasional short-lived strikes over the span of three months. In May the recurring strike waves reached its climax, with several sections striking simultaneously literally bringing public transportation in the city to a halt.⁷⁰ The event drew perceptible press coverage. Irrespective of their allegiances the newspapers were critical of the State and the Company's response.⁷¹ The complicity and collusion of the three parties: the Company, the Police Commissioner, and the Labour Commissioner can be discerned from a letter that Purssell wrote to Fairweather during the strike on May 16. Purssell thanked him,

⁶⁶ Ibid. Purssell's letter to Fairweather, dated 3 February, 1942.

⁶⁷ The same opinions and tone has been presented later in the annual meeting of the company attended by the Commissioner himself. *Minutes of the Fifty-Fifth Calcutta Tramways Advisory Committee held on 8th July 1942*.

⁶⁸ Ibid. Mukerjee's petition was submitted on 18 February, 1942. It put forward the demands for a 25% increase in DA and permanence of service and provident fund among others.

⁶⁹ Ibid. Letter from the Labour Commissioner, Bengal to the Agent of CTC, dated May 8, 1942.

⁷⁰ Ibid. SB Report dated, May 6, 1942.

⁷¹ From February to May there were reports by leading dailies on the fiasco: S Upadhyay, "Workers' Needs," *The Statesman*, February 9, 1942, "Labour Commissioner Assures Enquiry into the Grievances," *Hindustan Standard*, May 4, 1942, "Premier and Ministers Addresses Strikes of the Tramwaymen," *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, May 23, 1942, Tramway Services to Be Resumed in all Sections To-Day," *Advance*, May 23, 1942,

*I was very grateful for your advice for your advice the other night. I have written to Hughes commenting on the men's demands, and have indicated the extreme length to which I feel that it is possible to go. In doing so I have been influenced by the necessity for not embarrassing the Government any more than is possible in this situation. Whether this will enable the staff to be placated or not remains to be seen.*⁷²

This episode also divulges how capitalist concerns were shrewdly utilising every predicament to their advantage, hence coming up with disparate ways of curtailing working-class militarisation. A very obvious way was taking recourse to the 'divide and rule' policy. As already discussed at length in the previous chapters, the labour circuit in Bengal was fraught with virulent factionalism.⁷³ An effective tactic of strikebreaking was pitting two rival unions against one another. In April the management agreed to pay an advance of Rs. 20 according to the deputation submitted by Nabajyoti Burman, who headed a union named, Calcutta Tramway Employer's Association, opposed to the CTWU.⁷⁴ The report reads,

*The Company appears to have recognised Burman as a check to the activity of the 'red' union and the latter has arranged to hold a series of meetings to organise the tramway men. At a meeting of drivers and conductors (150) held on 22.3.42 at the Tollyguange depot, the men formulated their demands... The Agent having agreed to pay more than the rate fixed by Government, the question of resorting to strike was not pressed in that meeting.*⁷⁵

In another instance, during the strike wave in May, just after calling off the first strike on assurance of the Labour Commissioner, The Company sanctioned a weekly day off for the depot inspectors and the case of *Zamadar* drivers (low-caste drivers) are being considered too. This was a Machiavellian move on the part of the company to win over the inspectors and the *Zamadars* creating a backup to keep the business up and running in case the drivers and the conductors decided to strike in the future. The union saw through the management's

⁷²KPM/SB/03101/05(II), Letter from Purssell to Fairweather, May 6, 1942.

⁷³ See Chapter 1, Section 1.5.

⁷⁴ KPM/SB/03101/05(II).

⁷⁵ KPM/SB/03101/05(II). SB Daily Notes dated, 6 April 1942.

intentions, and to completely paralyse the functioning of the Company were in talks with workers of the Engineering Department before organising the second strike.⁷⁶

The monopoly of the European and the later Anglo-Indian ownership of the most thriving industrial concerns in and around Calcutta was seldom challenged before the late nineteenth century. The colonial capitalist class precipitated the inception of an indigenous counterpart. This comprador class, though initially made their fortune through collaboration with the British, but the wave of *Swadeshi* that swept the province in the opening years of the 1900s, made them make steady strides in the provincial industrial space.⁷⁷ There was a discernible difference between the attitudes of these two categories of capitalists. It cannot be owed solely to the feudal roots of most of these native industrialists, but the intrinsic conundrum of being associated with a particular brand of nationalism. These capitalists, whether the members of I.N.C. or the Muslim League, often worked in close association with the Anglo-Indian lobby in the provincial assemblies as well as municipal bodies. Their mode of resistance and vision of decolonisation rarely addressed the political aspirations of the marginalised. Nevertheless, the broadening of the mass base of the Congressite-induced anti-colonialism inevitably stimulated certain changes in their praxis vis-a-vis their European counterparts. A personal correspondence exchanged between K. Kumar Birla and his much-celebrated father G.D Birla, is beneficial in elucidating this aspect.⁷⁸ There was a stay-in strike that was ongoing in the Texmaco factory of the Messers of Birla Brothers at Belgharia (an adjacent suburb of Calcutta) from 9 May 1946.⁷⁹ This was one among the wave of textile strikes that took over the city and greater Calcutta with the initiation of the Second World War. Despite the situation being under control with police posting and the strikers 'remaining peaceful,' the strike was anticipated to continue for another week, leading to the closure of the factory till the end of May. Despite the two Anglo-Indian managers, Das-Costa and Green

⁷⁶ Ibid. Statement of the Inspector, dated 15 May 1946.

⁷⁷ For more information on *Swadeshi* enterprises in Bengal post the partition in 1906 consult, Bhattacharya, Amit. *Swadeshi Enterprise in Bengal 1900-1920*, Vol-I. Calcutta: I.N.A Press, 1986. Bhattacharya. *Swadeshi Enterprise in Bengal 1921-1947*, Vol-II. Calcutta: Setu Prakashani, 2012.

⁷⁸ KPM/ SB/ 03136/05, Report on Textile Strikes in Calcutta (1938- 1946), This letter between K. Kumar Birla (Calcutta) to Shri. G.D. Birla (Delhi) was intercepted by the S.B. Branch of Calcutta on May 16, 1946.

⁷⁹ KPM/ SB/ 03136/05

constantly monitoring the situation Kumar preferred the counsel of his father to tackle such situations. In an erstwhile telephonic conversation before, Ghanshyam Birla advised Kumar to call the representatives of the strikers and make an effort to negotiate the situation by personally meeting them. This move was opposed by De Costa who felt the best course was to lay low and let the initiative come from the workers. Notwithstanding the multiple strikes in the jute mills around the vicinity strengthening the mettle of the striking workers, Das Costa was convinced that the strike could not be sustained beyond four to six days. Both Europeans saw it as an optimal opportunity to reduce the number of employed millhands. But Kumar however, was not convinced and was stuck in a moral dilemma which ultimately made him write to his father.⁸⁰ The stone-cold profit-driven pragmatism of imperialism was balanced by the curious strain of constitutional moderate nationalism of the indigenous capitalists preventing the brazen, unabashed exploitation of the working class.

4.5 Policing the Movement: Vigilance against the ‘Red Scare’ and Paternal Benevolence

The third and the most vital wing of the colonial repressive mechanism against trade unionism in Bengal constituted the colonial police and the paraphernalia of surveillance operatives under its control. While the capitalists were driven by their natural urge for profit maximisation in responding to the State’s imperialist designs, the police served a larger agenda of the British Empire in this arrangement. For the police, monitoring the working-class struggle was the extension of the State’s ideological crusade against Bolshevism.⁸¹ The crisis of liberal democracy was discernible post the First World War triggering this peculiar apprehension towards communism. The strong decolonial rhetoric of the Soviet’s foreign policy made the British apprehensive that the revolutionary tide would soon wash over its colonies in South and Southeast Asia, provoking the establishment of an ‘Oriental

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ For further reading consult, Chattopadhyay, Suchetana. *An Early Communist: Muzaffar Ahmad in Calcutta 1917–1929*. 2nd ed. New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2012.

Communist sphere of influence.’⁸² To establish what was the rationale behind the extensive policing infrastructure deployed to curb militant trade unionism, which spiked especially from the 1930s, citing a bureaucratic meeting held in July 1936 in Calcutta would be beneficial.⁸³

The year 1936, post the announcement of provincial autonomy in 1935, was a chaotic one with wide-scale peasant and working-class agitation across the country. In spite of their initial relief over the success of the Meerut trials against the communist trade unionists, the spearheading of the radical faction within the folds of I.N.C. with the Nehurivian intervention was disconcerting the upper echelons of the policing apparatus.⁸⁴ The meeting held on 12 July 1936, was attended by the officer in charge of the political department, the Director of the I.B. Branch, Home Department, the Commissioner of the Calcutta police, the Inspector general of C.I.D. in Bengal, the Deputy Commissioner of the S.B. Branch, and several others.⁸⁵ The meeting was called to revise the erstwhile decision of both Governments of non-implementation of any additional legislation against Communism. The Commissioner and the Dy. Inspector General of the police believed that the communist agitators were becoming increasingly 'vociferous and outspoken.' Particularly perturbing was the sharp increase in the number of their adherents. The situation in Calcutta, already susceptible to 'Communist nuisances,' might present further administrative difficulties if immediate action was not taken against it.⁸⁶

The state however, was in a tricky position; the introduction of new legislation would not just be a drain on the finances but also would put it in a tighter spot with the indigenous

⁸² Mukhopadhyay, Ashoke Kumar ed. (1997), *India and Communism: Secret British Documents*, Calcutta: National Book Agency, p. 30.

⁸³ KPM/SB/79/05 (Actions Against Communists, Public & Security Act.)

⁸⁴ Ibid. Also, see KPM/SB/73/05 (Adequacy of Existing Powers to Deal with Communism).

⁸⁵ KPM/SB/79/05.

⁸⁶ Ibid. 'Red Contagion' or 'the Bolshevik Contagion' or the 'Bolshevik Menace' or Communist Nuisance,' was the term used by British Colonial Intelligence officer in their propaganda materials and reports against the surging popularity of Communism in Europe and the colonies. Communism was compared with a contagion or virus which was notably spreading in the Crown colonies inciting the colonisers to rise in dissent against the exploitative colonial rule.

white-collar class and the landed magnates with whom it shared a delicate balance of power at the provincial level.⁸⁷ The state decided to adopt a 'wait and watch' tactic as the Commissioner reminded that the Government took no prosecutionary measures in connection to the recent May Day celebrations, as it was decided, 'to see whether people whose interests were threatened would become alive to the danger of the situation.'⁸⁸ The representative of the political department retorted, 'The Government was always left to pull other people's chestnuts out of the fire and to bear criticism which inevitably follows the measures taken for this purpose.'⁸⁹ Quite tauntingly he added, 'If the agitators were left alone for some time, people who had a stake in the country might get alarmed.'⁹⁰ But both the Commissioner and the Dy. Secretary cautioned against depending on their Indian collaborators citing that the public opinion is timid and that with further deterioration of the situation, the affected subjects would hasten to enter into a sort of an agreement with the agitators. They suggested stronger legal provisions that would embolden the Government's image and ensure a bolder public opinion. However, the Government official reminded them that under the new Constitution, theoretically, the Government would represent the views of the majority of people. The police were of the opinion that the new Constitution would further strengthen the agitators. The official was under the firm conviction that communism was just directed under certain interests. He recalled how some native businessmen in Bombay submitted a manifesto against Nehru's 'extreme policies.' The Commissioner pointed out the futility of attempting to rally the *Zamindars* and businessmen, and the Director of I.B. added that in his opinion there was no evidence that Bombay 'will show more backbone' than it did in 1930; recently two manifestos were submitted in Bombay and acceptance of Nehru was clearly on rise contrary to what the official had mentioned.⁹¹

The official was concerned that prosecuting the Communists might earn them public sympathy, especially in the Nationalist press. But both parties agreed that the sedition laws

⁸⁷ For more refer, Chattopadhyay, *Bengal Electoral Politics and Freedom Struggle 1862-1947*.

⁸⁸ KPM/SB/79/05.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

were the only weapon in the hands of the Government to curb these subversive activities.⁹² The Commissioner lamented that it was becoming trickier to bring the speakers within the ambit of the sedition laws. Taking the example of the failure of the 'first Red Flag' case against Niharendu Dutt Mazumdar of the Bengal Labour Party (B.L.P), he said that Dutt openly declared that he and his associates have 'complete freedom ' to engage in Communist propaganda.⁹³ The Bengal Criminal Law Law Amendment Act seemed to be their last resort. In this connection, the Commissioner added he was perturbed by the frequency at which Soviet flags were being displayed at the labour meetings and processions. It was discerned as an emblem of a 'violent revolution'.⁹⁴ It is pertinent to note how the notion of violence was made integral to any Communist activities to alienate them from the mainstream anti-colonial movement and for legally outmaneuvering it. The so-called 'policy of violence' of the Communists made them the central focus of the policing department. Simultaneously, keeping up with the spirit of British Constitutionalism, the Commissioner declared that he would refrain from taking actions against activists agitating for the 'redressal of the real grievances felt by the labour' but the people whose object is to exploit real or supposed grievances and provoke disorder,' the Communists.⁹⁵ However, the State's definition of 'real grievances' of the working class can be quite divergent. It is striking how the colonial discourse of the hapless, politically unconscious marginal class is reiterated here. The workers were denied any agency and easily pawned upon by the Communists inciting them to rebel against their imperial masters.

A much-related outlook to policing that echoed the overreaching ethos of utilitarian civil services in the colonies was shrouding the repressive policies under the veil of the 'civilising mission'.⁹⁶ They were responding to the established trope of the 'white man's burden' while struggling to counter radicalisation in young trade union activists drawn into

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid. Also see, KPM/SB/73/05.

⁹⁴ Ibid, Also see, KPM/SB/00158/05 (Communism & Violence).

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Watt, Carey A., and Michael Mann, eds. *Civilising Missions in Colonial and Postcolonial South Asia: From Improvement to Development*, London: Anthem Press, 2011.

the Communist fold. It can also be discerned as to how the lines between public and private were constantly blurred and breached in the colonial administration. The desperation or the obsession to curb the rapid dissemination of Communism within the dissenting population made them resort to the most unconventional forms of suppression. The I.B. and the police action against Sudhindranath Dhar, an erstwhile 'revolutionary terrorist' from Dacca (modern-day Dhaka), who was arrested in 1933 and on his release in 1939 decided to join the C.P.I., is beneficial in this regard.⁹⁷ After a brief stint with 'no tax' campaigns in the Jalpaiguri district of North Bengal, he got involved in the labour circuit of the city. By 1940 he was influential among the building workers and masons organising them under the banner of the Building Workers' Union affiliated with the CPI. The union was pushing for a rise in dearness allowance and to the police's utmost concern was conducting vigorous anti-war propaganda.⁹⁸

Sudhin was fairly young, being born in the historic year, 1917. The police highly alerted by his growing popularity among the workers in the aforementioned sectors, decided to send a letter to his guardian (most likely to be his uncle), who as can be assessed harbored perceptible pro-state sentiments, informing him about his political activities in the hope that paternal chiding might achieve what seven years of imprisonment could not. The notices served to Dhar warning him to back off from the ongoing tramway strike in May 1940, were also forwarded to his uncle on order of the Commissioner, C.E.S. Fairweather.⁹⁹ Narendranath Dhar, Sudhin's uncle wrote back to Fairweather towards the end of the month.¹⁰⁰ The letter divulges his colonial allegiance, praising the Commissioner for his conscientious handling of the situation. He informed him that currently, Sudhin was living with his father in Calcutta, who was diligently keeping a check on his revolutionary activities. Further, he added seeking counsel from him,

⁹⁷ KPM/ SB/ 03098/05, Unrest of Tramway Workers, A Short Note on Sudhindra Nath Dhar, C/O of Surendranath Dhar, Baidenbazar, Dacca of 68 A, DurgaCharan Das Road.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid. Letter forwarded through Superintendent of Police, I.B. Dacca, on orders of Fairweather dated May 21, 1940.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. Handwritten letter of Narendranath addressed to C.E.S. Fairweather, dated May 28, 1940.

What do you advise me of sending some young boys of my family to join the “Indian Coastal Defense Auxiliary” which is currently recruiting men? You being an experienced man know the difficulties of guardians of this province with their unemployed wards, and as I know you as a man I dared to ask you about your opinion. ¹⁰¹

Fairweather decided to reward his sincere reverence by personally replying to the letter. This reply is crucial since it mirrors not just the outlook of the police, but the general attitude of the colonial administrators towards the colonised and the larger anti-colonial struggle in the closing decades of British rule. Thanking him for his good judgment in 'warning' Sudhindra, and successfully alienating him from the movement, he penned down how the native struggle for independence was a far-fetched reality,

If there were such a thing as real 'Independence' in this world today, I would be the last to check any effort to secure it, but this illusionary independence is a mere will-to –the–wisp which is leading so many Indians into a morass where they will be destroyed.

Independence today can only be secured within the bounds of a strong Federation or Empire (much as this has been besmirched and ridiculed). It should be a matter of pride (especially today) for any country to be a member of the British Federation of Nations; a Federation which stands for and is prepared to die for, every ideal of true freedom and independence.

I speak as a practical man--- not as an idealist....I also believe that many millions of India's people are beginning to realise this fact and realise the dangers ahead. I most certainly advise you to send some of your sturdy relations to join up. ¹⁰²

Fairweather's response and this whole episode reflect the typecast outlook of the British civil servants in India. The sense of superiority: intellectual, racial, and civilisational was so incumbent that the erasure of the agencies of the colonised was inevitable. This is the reiteration of the similar mindset that was entrenched in the colonial gaze, which posed the working class as naïve, and gullible, hence conveniently manipulated by the communists. The

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² KPM/ SB/ 03098/05, Fairweather's reply to Narendranath's letter dated May 31, 1940.

Commissioner couched his actions within the ambit of paternalistic benevolence.¹⁰³ Here, Sudhin emerges as a metaphor for the entire protesting Indian population, who required rebuking and advising to keep them on the correct track in life being impotent of individual and logical thinking. For the Britishers and most of the metropole, the Indians, be the peasants, the working class, or the petty bourgeoisie were hapless, in dire need of direction, and incapable of self-rule, given the intrinsic lack of rationality; a major lacuna embedded at the very heart of the societies of the East. However, parents despite their benevolence breach the autonomy of their children often and the appearance of benevolence in such equations is pervasive too; glaringly true in this respect. Here, the breach of autonomy was two-fold. At the very micro-level, Sudhin's decision and free will to be a trade unionist was thwarted in the typical traditional manner through vigilance by his guardians. Holistically, this was the State's blow to the native struggle for autonomy and independence, whereby it was confiscating the 'free will' of several youngsters maneuvering given traditional mores and indigenous means of 'private' ordering, brazenly erasing the boundaries between the two spheres.

4.6 The Case of Communal Unions: Identity Politics or the Case of Yellow Unionism?

From the 1920s onwards Muslims in the city of Calcutta were asserting themselves politically, demanding separate representation based on their communal identity. While the 1926 riot was a litmus test of these burgeoning separatist tendencies within the community against the equally communally hard-lined Hindu counterpart, these traits peaked during the 1930s.¹⁰⁴ From agitating for separate electorates in the local governing bodies to the provincial legislative assemblies, by the mid-1930s this trend became apparent in the

¹⁰³ Paternalism is the interference of a state or an individual with another person, against their will, and defended or motivated by a claim that the person interfered with will be better off or protected from harm. (Dworkin, Gerald. "Paternalism", in Edward N. Zalta (ed.). *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2020 Edition), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/paternalism/>

¹⁰⁴ KPM/SB/47/05 (Communal Tension in Bengal).

working-class politics of the city.¹⁰⁵ There was the creation of several unions catering to the needs of workers belonging to a specific community. H.S. Suhrawardy, the veteran League politician, notoriously infamous for his conservative and communal attitude was taking an active interest in unionisation, especially among the dock workers, overwhelmingly Muslims.¹⁰⁶ He was instrumental in the formation of the foremost centrally connected 'white union' or the pro-state union in the city, the Calcutta Dockers Union by engineering a split in the leftist 'red union,' Calcutta Port and Dockers' Union.¹⁰⁷ The 'white unions' or unions which were formed as rivals to various Communists and Socialist unions were becoming a potent tool in the hands of the State and the capitalists to counter working-class radicalisation.¹⁰⁸ The unions established exclusively to cater to the Muslim employees' provided the anti-labour agencies a fertile ground to curtail the heightening class consciousness among the proletariat mass in the city. By late 1938 and especially after 1940, with the adaptation of the Pakistan resolution it pronounced manifolds. Most of these unions under the aegis of the Muslim League claimed that the interests of the Muslim workers or employees in a company are not adequately represented by the pre-existing leftist unions in these sectors.¹⁰⁹ In a province like Bengal with a delicate demographic composition exceedingly susceptible to communal discord, it had a two-fold implication. First, the foundations of these separate unions on communal lines by breaking up the larger unions was a great blow to the united working-class struggle aiding in strikebreaking or premature failure

¹⁰⁵ For more refer, McPherson, Kenneth. *The Muslim Microcosm: Calcutta, 1918 to 1935*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1974.

¹⁰⁶ A mammoth meeting was called by the B.P.T.U.C of the seamen at the foot of the in July 1938, condemning the anti-labour policies of the Bengal Ministry, especially the Labour Minister, Suhrawardy. Resolutions were passed demanding the release of trade unionists Niharendu Dutt Mazumdar, and the leader of dockworkers, Aftab Ali. The speakers also denounced the prevalence of rampant bribery among the seamen insinuated by the minister. (*Advance*, July 11, 1938)

¹⁰⁷ Agarwal, "In the name of constitutionalism and Islam :the murky world of labour politics in Calcutta's docklands." In *Corporate Policing*, pp. 138-142.

¹⁰⁸ 'Red Unions' and 'White Unions' are the two terms that were in frequent use in the official reports of the Special and Intelligence Branches of the police. Whereas 'Red Unions' was the term used to demarcate any unions under the aegis of the Communists or with Socialist inclinations, the 'White Unions' mainly referred to the unions under Congress, League, or Independent unions formed within the Company.

¹⁰⁹ KPM/SB/0071/05, Steamer Employees' Union (Muslim League).

of the movement. Second, these unions were emerging as platforms to push forward the separatist ambitions and aspirations of a distinct nation, comprising of 'a homogeneous Muslim mass', much against the cherished ideals of Hindu-Muslim unity, which had an overreaching bearing on the anti-colonial struggle. Even the director of IB confessed that the 'white unions' were sponsored by the Bengal Ministry. The 'White Union System' was devised to allow for 'concerted action' between the Labour Commissioner, police, and, the capitalists.¹¹⁰ An instance from the war-torn city in 1941 would assist in illustrating this better. A labour rally backing the British war efforts on the premise of it being against the larger fascist aggression was organised by principal pro-war labour leaders like Aftab Ali and M.N. Roy on 5 January, 1941.¹¹¹ Attended over by 7,000 workers across sectors like the street hawkers, vendors, rubber, leather workers, and seamen, it drew criticism from the Communist trade unionists as the C.P.I. was yet to adopt the *People's War* line. There were several processions of workers to the Ochterlony Monument; one was that of the 'Red Union', the *Dock Mazdoor Union*. About 60 to 80 men came to the rally holding the 'Red flag with the insignia of the hammer, sickle, and stars, and posters with inscriptions demanding the release of political prisoners,' protesting against war and the State's imperial designs. It was reported that it was not the police but the White unionists that chased them away.¹¹² The rationale behind the formation of these unions was never more palpable.

An analysis of the modalities of the functioning of All India Steamer Employees' Muslim League, would be beneficial in this context. The Union came into existence in 1938 and by 1940 the office was moved to Hastings Street. ¹¹³ The union got affiliated with the Bengal Provincial Muslim League (B.P.M.L.) in 1942 under the presidentship of ML activist and journalist, Mohammad. Walliullah.¹¹⁴ Formerly known as the Steamer Employees' Muslim League, Bengal, Bihar, and Assam, and was reorganised in the year 1945, with the

¹¹⁰ KPM, SB File, SM-572/40, Action under the Defence of India Rules against Communist and Labour agitation.

¹¹¹ KPM/SB/3172/05, Labour Rallies in Calcutta.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ KPM/SB/0071/05, Report on Steamer Employees' (Muslim League).

¹¹⁴ *Azad*, July 22, 1942.

AIML Council Member, Abdul Khaleque Chowdhury, assuming the post of the Secretary of the unit.¹¹⁵ The union explicitly declared its objective is to 'Safeguard the rights and interests of Muslim employees and to render social services and relief to them and the Muslim community in general.'¹¹⁶ Mostly existing in the paper it came to the notice of the Intelligence officers only in October 1945 when a complaint was lodged on behalf of the union to the Port Police Officer at Kidderpore against the oppression of one of its members by the 'other party' or the Communist-led Bengal Mariners' Union.¹¹⁷ The fact that their action was directed against the rival union but not the company owners, clarifies the nature and the larger ramifications of the motives of the union in question.

The tensions heightened during the riot on the Direct Action Day and post the formation of the Interim government by the INC in 1946 when the union became another platform of the lingering League-Congress feud. On September 11, 1946, all the Muslim staff on the steamer 'Yok' of the IGN and Railway Company was dismissed for showing their 'silent resentment' at the formation of the Congress Interim Government by hoisting a black flag on the steamer.¹¹⁸ This triggered a strong resentment from Khaleque, who took to the column of the *Star of India* and issued an official statement against the Company's decision. He commented,

*The joint program of the Hindu fascist Congress and British Imperialists aims at the positive destruction of the Indian freedom. The innocent steamer employees have also not been spared from their grasp. Is there no remedy of this sort of persecution and oppression that the Muslims are forced not to express their political sentiments?*¹¹⁹

¹¹⁵ WBSA/ IB/ 850-46. Labour Matters/ Association(All India Steamer Employees' Muslim League).

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ KPM/SB/0071/05, Letter from the Port Police Office (No. 1, Dumayne Avenue, Kidderpore) to Calcutta Police, Special Branch Office, enquiring about the union.

¹¹⁸ WBSA/ IB/ 850-46.

¹¹⁹ *The Star of India*, September 11, 1946. Extract titled, "Muslims Dismissed for Observing 'Black Day': Warning to I.G.N. and Railway Company." The INC formed the Interim Government on September 2, 1946.

The identity politics of the League and its vision for a separate Muslim-majority nation, which was at the heart of their anticolonial discourse by the 1940s, took precedence over the class struggle of the proletariats against their capitalist bosses in this instance. It could be further discerned from the statement. He threatened the owners of the IGN and Railway Company, giving them a healthy reminder that the Muslims composed over seventy percent of their employees, and how their fuss-free functioning is overtly dependent on their services,

the present status of the company is the result of so many years of service and sacrifices of these Muslims. Today, this is the outcome only as they wanted to show homage to the decision of their beloved national organisation, The Muslim League. To express our resentment towards this attitude of the British agency, we do not find a suitable language. The Muslims have grown impatient of this behavior.

It is learnt that some Congressite steamer employees of the Nimtala Ghat instigated the Marine Superintendent to discharge this Muslim staff....Mr. Stuart, Assistant Dock Yard Manager of Raja Bagan Workshop arranged a search of the 'Muslim' steamer employees by the police. But not a single looted property was recovered. We demand the immediate remedy of this oppression... The Congressite Hindus of Jagannath and Armanian Ghat and the Hindustani darwans come forward to prevent cow sacrifice in the Holy 'Eid'. Despite repeated requests, the Company has not taken any steps.¹²⁰

But Patience has a limit. The Muslims are no more ready to be hard-pressed. The call of 'Jehad' is now in full swing.... We urge upon the authority that these Muslim employees should be immediately reappointed. ¹²¹

¹²⁰ This has been a major issue often triggering communal riots in the working ghettos of Calcutta and its suburbs from the late 19th century. Chakrabarty, Dipesh. "Communal Riots and Labour: Bengal's Jute Mill-Hands in the 1890s," *Past & Present*. No. 91, May 1981, pp. 140-169. Also, Basu, Subho. "Strikes and 'Communal' Riots in Calcutta in the 1890s: Industrial Workers, Bhadrak Nationalist Leadership and the Colonial State," *Modern Asian Studies*. Vol. 32, No. 4, 1998, pp. 949-983.

¹²¹ Ibid. 'Jehad' or 'Jihad' have three different connotations and meaning in Islam. In general, it is the push or will of a Muslim to live out his faith properly and build a good society. In the post-2001 era with an increased intolerance towards the faith and the US-backed propaganda and association of it with the 'global war against terrorism,' the sole definition that dominates is that of the holy war against all other faiths. Here *Jihad* is applied in the former sense. These trade unions never advocated for violence explicitly in any of their propaganda materials.

The rhetoric with a strong communal overtone essentially polarised and pitted the two communities against each other, insinuating that INC upholds the political aspirations solely of the Hindus. Here being a 'Muslim' overwhelms their identity of belonging to the international class of the 'proletariats'. The identity and predicaments of belonging to the working-class is subsumed under the identity of being adherents of a particular religious faith. The premise of the grievance was that of being a 'Muslim worker' rather than being a 'worker'. Hence, the union served the mere purpose of a platform to forward the League's political agenda rather than addressing the immediate grievances of the workers against the 'capitalist exploitation'. Then is class struggle always antithetical to identity politics? In this instance, however, the union had quite a precise *modus operandi* to instigate separatist politics, while taking a very pro-state stance concerning genuine working-class demands. This can be attested by the unions' operations in late November. It was reported that Khaleque was making inroads amongst the Inland Waterways workers by instigating them against the Communist-led Bengal Mariners' Union (BMU), which represented 60% of the steamer employees in the city.¹²² Later that month the union issued a statement that appealed to its members as well as other mariners to put on hold their ongoing strike for war bonuses, led by the BMU. It mentioned that the union's office bearers have filed a report to the 'Indian Government' and the 'Company' demanding details of the war bonus, but the workers should resume work till a satisfactory answer is received. It should also be noted that the Muslim League and the Government had been the strangest of bedfellows as far as Bengal electoral politics was concerned. For most of the part after the League's formation and especially post the provincial autonomy of 1935, it has been in close association with the Anglo-Indian lobby countering the I.N.C. and regional party and close rivals, the *Krishak Praja Party* at the provincial legislative assembly.¹²³ Suhrawardy as mentioned earlier was particularly significant in this regard, concocting schemes to create wedge between the workers on communal lines leading to premature withdrawal of strikes, making under-table deals with

¹²² KPM/SB/0071/05, Report by Officer S. Karmakar, SB, dated November 20, 1946.

¹²³ *Praja Party* formed in 1929 was a council party that promoted the interests of tenants in the Bengal Council. In 1936 it was renamed *Krishak Praja Party* (Peasant-Tenant Party) and was headed by A.K. Fazlul Huq. It added a new dimension to Bengal politics in the late colonial period activating the rural hinterland and trying to politicise the rural base of Eastern Bengal. But the social revolution was never its ultimate agenda because the leadership class was primarily composed of the Muslim elites.

the company bosses ultimately fueling the state's imperial designs. However, by 1946 after assuming the post of the premiership of Bengal with the deteriorating League-Congress relation this equation was complicated. The demand for Pakistan did reign supreme in the League's agenda, but for Suhrawardy the possibility of a separate united Bengal with a Muslim majority was the most desirable outcome of the transfer of power. He was already cornered in the BLA, as Jinnah would not allow him to form a coalition ministry with the Congress, and the Nizamuddin clique within the assembly was proactively making efforts to evict him from League's provincial leadership.¹²⁴ Despite the animosity, Suhrawardy kept on approaching the INC and seeking their support much to the displeasure of his colleagues.

Then does this habitually translate to the fact that political assertion on the basis of religion is essentially irreconcilable with the revolutionary ethos of the international class struggle of the proletariat trade unionism? Were all the unions formed on communal lines a mere outlet to disseminate the League's propaganda, devoid of any rationality and capability of dispensing justice to the workers and responding to their demands? It is a perpetual conundrum that is encountered while profiling these unions. At the end of January 1947 at a meeting of 500 people at the Islamia College Hall, Calcutta a resolution was passed to form a Post and Telegraph Muslim Employees' Association (P&TMEA) within the existing union (Indian Posts & Telegraph Union "I.P.T.") in the department affiliated with the B.P.T.U.C. The goals were to demand adequate representation of Muslims in the higher posts, and going by the pattern, establishment of a Muslim Welfare Society under cooperative societies through a collection of loans, and framing of a constitution for the society.¹²⁵ From its inception, it had a pro-state orientation, as it announced and urged the Muslim employees of the department to not extend their support for any strikes declared by the B.P.T.U.C. A comprehensive letter intercepted at the Alipore Post Office on 10 March 1947, from M.A. Akhtar Hossain, General Secretary of the I.P.T (B.P.T.U.C.) addressed to the Joint Secretary of P&TMEA, R. Ahmad, on the formation of the new association sheds light on the nuances

¹²⁴ Moon, Penderel ed. *Wavell, the Viceroy's Journal*. Pakistan: OUP, 1988, p. 348.

¹²⁵ KPM/SB/01220/05, Post and Telegraph Muslim Employees' Association. A common feature of all these unions was creating a charitable body or fund along with the union in question to help fellow Muslims in distress. It was done in congruence with the Islamic tenant of Zakat: one of the five pillars of Islam where all Muslims are to pay at least 2.5% of their accumulated wealth for the poor and destitute--- *mustahik*.

entailing the operations of these unions and the overreaching queries under consideration.¹²⁶ Hossain, after an informal consultation with the members of the executive council of the association decided to write to Ahmad putting forward his views on its functions as a body to 'protect and promote' the interests of Muslim employees of the sector. His primary concern was a paucity of membership which threatens the 'real capture of power,' hence, 'does not bid fair for the prospective career of your association.' Though as the name suggested all Muslims of the P&T Department are welcome, the membership of the I.P.T Union was a prerequisite for being a part of the new association, 'the moral obligation for inclusion is evaded by constitutional disability, provided by articles of your association.' As the I.P.T. was a Government-recognised union, it is bound by several state restrictions which would automatically extend to the new association being in its fold constricting its operations. Neither individual cases could be persuaded nor industrial cases and most pertinently representation of communal cases was out of the question. Hossain retorts, 'We all agree that something should be done for the vindication of our natural honour but the line you have adopted is simply absurd to give any sort of result. We had to fight out these issues with a radical outlook.'¹²⁷

He advocated for the formation of an independent association with Muslim employees of both industrial and non-industrial departments with or without the prospect of immediate recognition to launch vigorous constitutional propaganda to safeguard Muslim interests. By its independent existence 'it will gain momentum and in the long run, will win the race. If we can remain sincere in our endeavor, and activise even a microscopic fraction we will surely make our position.' He further stressed, 'We are now consciously aware that nothing short of a Muslim organisation can satisfy our aspiration. By its special features, we will be an all-inclusive organisation for the Muslim mass in the sector. We can't spare their services in the interests of the Muslim nation.'¹²⁸ Hossain divulged his allegiance to his religion over his class when despite holding a portfolio in a secular union upholding the rights of the P&T workers he took a keen interest in the association promoting the interests of a specific

¹²⁶ KPM/SB/01220/05.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

community. However, though grossly overshadowed by the religious connotation it did concern itself with the redressal of the issues of the working class, hence legibly serving the purpose of a trade union. From 1946 the deep fissure between the two communities did not just find its outlet in the streets and bylanes of the city ravaged by the gruesome riot, the factory floors also bore its burnt.

With independence around the corner, these unions were openly endorsed by the state, to curb any radical action by the Communist-led unions in the same sectors. In a meeting of the P&TMEA held at the Calcutta Madrassa on May 5, 1947, and presided over by Mr. E. Ali, Deputy Speaker of Bengal Legislative Assembly and other M.L.A.s of the League, passed a resolution condemning various P&T Unions for their decision to observe a general strike on 23rd of the past month against the Bengal Ministry headed by the League.¹²⁹ The speakers condemned the 'Hindu unions' of the department for acting contrary to the interests of the Muslims, urging all the Muslim employees to join under their banner to realise their legitimate demands. The grievances revolved around the preferential treatment of Hindu employees by the management and authorities. From appointments in the competitive exams to the casualisation of their jobs, the Hindus were appropriating the lion's share. They denounced K.N. Ghosh, the Assistant Superintendent of Calcutta Telegraph Office for allowing 'Hindu employees' to assault one Nurul Islam, an employee in the postal department. It was riveting how this communal discourse also divulged racial prejudices and resentment against upcountry migrant workers. Another employee of the postal department, Matiur Rahman, was told to have sought refuge in the office of the association being chased by two 'Nepali' workers. Moreover, one of the resolutions passed was to authorise the managing committee to arrange for the entertainment of Khan Bahadur M.N. Khan, special officer along with other League leaders of Bengal as they were on a visit to Calcutta from Dacca.¹³⁰ In another meeting of the same Association in July 1947, held at Islamia College of Calcutta, President Gyasuddin Pathan declared their wholehearted services to make a success of the 'Pakistani administration'. The employees and the leaders are to make personal

¹²⁹ Ibid. Daily Report submitted on May 6, 1947.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

sacrifices and each member should contribute their one-day pay towards the Pakistan fund.¹³¹ The modalities and functions of communal, pro-state 'white unions' could not be laid down in more clarity.

4.7 Conclusion:

The varied instances cited and scrutinised throughout this chapter grounds the primary argument of how the counter-offensive to working-class radicalisation in Bengal was a collated enterprise of the Colonial Government, the Capitalists, and the policing forces. The three actors were intrinsically intertwined in their interests and motivation, hence a combined probe into their itineraries of coercion yields a far more nuanced analysis. The contemporary trade unionists and labour activists voiced the same discourse on collective oppression in local vernacular presses. The C.P.I. daily, *Swadhinata* (Independence) published a report titled, '*Kerani O Karmachari Andolonor Biruddhe Malik O Sarkarer Sharajontro*,' (Conspiracy of the Government and the Owners Against the Struggle of Clerks and Employees) in the December of 1946.¹³² The column took a dig at the collaborative efforts of the colonial bureaucrats (*Laaldighir Amla*) and the profiteering capitalist (*Clive Streeter Munafar Maalik*) to muzzle the voices of the working class. The report hinted that a sinister plan was being hatched with the labour Commissioner at the helm, whereby the right to form unions would be restricted just to factory workers. The reporter also insinuated that this was what was delaying the approval for registration of several new applicants under the Act. Moreover, the probe divulged that this legal move was the brainchild of none other than the official lawyer of the Birla group. The B.P.T.U.C. condemned the move, and by citing the Trade Disputes Act (1921) backed the 'right to form unions' by all sectors of the working class. 'No one deprives the millions of organised workers under the A.I.T.U.C. of their rightful prerogatives through utilisation of illegal means' (*Trade Union gothoner adhikar pichoner dorja diya horon kora Jaena*).¹³³ The Communists were always vocal about how

¹³¹ Ibid, Daily SB Report on the Labour Situation, July 3, 1947.

¹³² *Swadhinata*, December 16, 1946.

¹³³ Ibid.

these three actors functioned in collusion. From the 1930s there were several pamphlets, resolutions, and pieces by unionists in various left-oriented mouthpieces which engaged with this narrative. It was evident that despite disparate origins the politics of capital was always exploitative. Be the colonial or the indigenous capitalist, the propensity to maximise the profit margin at the cost of the welfare of the working class was constant. The police and the intelligence implementing these unethical oppressive strategies on the ground responded to the larger ideological warfare of Western Imperialism against Bolshevik Communism. The details would be a topic to be taken up in the next chapter. The multiple overlapping interests of the colonial state, the capitalist class, and the law enforcement forces not only augmented the glaring vertical inequality entrenched in late colonial society in general and within the working class in particular but also hindered the development of horizontal solidarity networks. The shrewd communal policies of the state, the schemes of funding rival yellow unions, and deliberate differential treatment of the workers from two communities, were massive blows to trade union unity in the closing years of the colonial rule, the one persistent handicap, which would plague trade unionism even in postcolonial Bengal. As the province got engulfed with communal violence on the eve of partition, the scourges of these ‘unholy’ alliances were sowed viscerally, haunting labour activism in the fractured province for the years to come.

Chapter Five

The Communist Menace: Surveillance and Trade Unionism in late Colonial Bengal

*Spies, watchers, and informers.... I wish to share your great advantages, and to study the philosophy of Dialectical Materialism in all its bearings...You are an exploited and downtrodden class---- scapegoats of Ministers for their faults, scorn of Civilians in their untutored pride, but of the public for your pedantry...An amalgamated Union of Spies, Watchers and Informers would quickly air your grievances in such a way as to redress your wrongs...I foresee a universal and confident spyarchy in this country.*¹

In this witty satire, written in 1937, on police espionage in Calcutta, Humphry House, a British citizen and an erstwhile professor of English in Presidency College, took a dig at the brazen vigilantism and monitoring that the colonial police were resorting to in the city. Writing in the first person singular, the author poses himself as a union leader, but of spies, watchers, and informers who are so well versed in the Marxist doctrines, aims at establishing 'Spyarchy' or rule of spies in the country, a distortion of the *Majdoor Raj* or revolutionary rule of the working-class.² The history of surveillance has been a story of power and authority abused by modern 'nation-states which can be traced back to the British rule across the

¹Excerpts of the review of the pamphlet by: Humphery House. "I Spy with my Little Eye." *The Hindu*. 21 November, 1937.

² The word *Majdoor Raj* have become commonplace in the anti-colonial discourse of the contemporary scenario, where a myriad of pamphlets and leaflets circulated by the communists as well as other socialist organisations were using it as a literal translation of the Marxist equivalent of 'dictatorship of the proletariat.' This utopia where the workers will rule the world was also utilised by House here to counter 'Spyarchy' or 'Rule of Spies' which became endemic in mid-1930s Calcutta regulating all the intellectual circles in the city. House was part of the *Parichay* Group, an intellectual circle run by Sudhindranath Dutta after his return in Calcutta from abroad in late 1920s. The group was frequented by stalwarts like physicist Satyendranath Bose, politician, Humayun Kabir; poet, Bishnu De and others. It was historian Sushovan Sarkar who introduced House to the circle. This adda or meeting was often infiltrated by police. Often there were non participating Britishers and commoners who attended the meetings. (House, Humphry. *I Spy With my Little Eye*, Introduction and Notes by Sajni Mukherji and Sujaan Mukherjee. Calcutta: Jadavpur University Press, 2018, pp.19-22.)

colonies that used "surveillance" as an indispensable tool to meet its hegemonic objectives.³ To sustain their colonial rule in India, the British deployed surveillance tactics effectively to curb popular dissent and the rising tide of anti-colonial sentiment in colonies like India.⁴ It aided in maintaining the status quo of the already lopsided power relations between the colonisers and the colonised and further exacerbated the sociopolitical and economic inequalities. The modern surveillance system was emerging as an essential tool in the hands of the colonial state to curb radical working-class agitation in Calcutta.⁵ While the extant scholarship produced voluminous writings on the history of sedition and censorship laws to clamp down the communist activities in the later British Raj, a crucial question is glossed over in these scholarly deliberations.⁶⁷ What fresh causes triggered the proliferation of advanced surveillance across the Indian subcontinent from the 1930s, moving beyond existing surveillance frameworks and infrastructure from the late nineteenth century onwards? To what extent did the colonial state's surveillance system work in curbing militant elements in colonial working-class organisations? This chapter will examine these pertinent questions by illuminating the changing dynamics of British colonial administration in the final decades of the *Raj*.

³ This can be attested by several primary reports left by the British officials, *Communism in India* (by) Sir Cecil Kaye with *Unpublished Documents (1919-1924)* by Roy, Subodh, (ed). *Communism in India: Unpublished Documents 1924-1927*, vol. II. Calcutta: NBA, 1997. (by) Sir David Petrie by M Saha. *India and Communism* (by) Sir Horace Williamson by M Saha. *Documents of the History of the Communist Party of India, 1926 (Volume IIIA)* by G. Adhikari.

⁴ Ibid. Also refer to works like, Bruckenhau, Daniel. *Policing Transnational Protest: Liberal Imperialism and Surveillance of Anticolonists in Europe, 1905-1945*. Oxford: OUP, 2017.

⁵ For Surveillance of Communist activities from late 1800s to early 1920s refer, Chattopadhyay, "The Bolshevik Menace: Colonial Surveillance and the Origins of Socialist Politics in Calcutta," *South Asia Research*, vol.26, issue 2 (2006): 165-179. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0262728006066490>

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⁷ Works that can be consulted dealing with Surveillance and Sedition, Chattopadhyay, Muzaffar Ahmad, Dossal, Mariam & Ruby, Maloni, eds. *State Intervention and Popular Response: Western India in the Nineteenth Century*, Mumbai: Popular Prakashan, 1999.

As already demonstrated in the previous chapter, the colonial state, the capitalists, and the police closely worked together in checking the burgeoning working-class unionisation in Calcutta. Surveillance became integral to the 'everyday policing' that formed the backbone of the *Police Raj* in the provinces. Taking a cue from Rajnarayan Chadravarkar's insightful work on policing the textile mills in Bombay city during the 1910s and 1920s, this chapter will try to elucidate the historical nuances of policing at the grass-root level in colonial eastern India.⁸ Through this enquiry, the study aims to suggest how the 'colonial state's repressive power can be matched to the fragility of its control.'⁹ Suchetana Chattopadhyay, in her book on the infamous *Komagata Maru* incident of 1914, refers to a Japanese ship bound for Vancouver, which also had a significant number of Indians on board.¹⁰ After being denied entry into Canada, the ship returned to Calcutta port, and subsequently, the Calcutta police decided to lodge cases against the leaders, mostly Sikhs. Chattopadhyay's work illustrates the racial prejudices of the British colonial government and the growing stigma against Bolshevism, and how the surveillance infrastructure in Calcutta was built from the early twentieth century to control any form of dissent.¹¹ This study expands on these arguments by addressing the existing historiographical void in the British administration's role in regulating communist activities and working-class agitation in late colonial India.

5.2 The Canard of Bolshevism

It should be noted that a rudimentary surveillance infrastructure was already in place from the end of the nineteenth century itself, given the rise of nationalist extremism with different waves of the mainstream anti-colonial struggle under the leadership of the Indian National

⁸ Chandravarkar, Rajnarayan. *Imperial Power and Popular Politics: Class, Resistance and State in India*. Cambridge: CUP, 1998

⁹ Ibid., p. 181.

¹⁰ Chattopadhyay. *Voices of Komagata Maru: Imperial Surveillance and Workers from Punjab in Bengal*. New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2018.

¹¹ Ibid.

Congress (I.N.C.).¹² In the Bengal province, the colonial government felt it necessary to strengthen the surveillance system due to the rise of Indian revolutionary terrorist activities post-partition of Bengal (1906).¹³ However, the Russian Revolution of 1917 in the post-First World War (1914-1919) triggered a pervasive hysteria in the West, especially in Britain. Subsequently, countries like Britain launched a stringent surveillance operation against what they termed as the 'Bolshevik menace'.¹⁴ The Bolshevik Revolution and its spread of radical ideas worldwide exposed the ideological hollowness of colonialism and imperialism. Global powers like Britain became vulnerable to this revolutionary tide, spreading to colonies like India. As a result, the Indian subcontinent increasingly became the hotbed of anti-colonial movements. In a speech delivered at the United Wards Club Luncheon in London in 1920, Winston Churchill, the then British War Secretary, expressed his concerns regarding Russian propaganda that was radicalising the trade union movements in the country and disrupting the long-cherished ideals of British constitutionalism. He commented thus:

The danger at the present times does not exist only, or even mainly, in these islands (meaning Britain). What of India, Egypt, and Ireland? Do you not think it possible that there is some connection between all the revolutionary and subversive elements by which we are now being assailed? When we see all these movements from so many different quarters springing up simultaneously, does it not look as though there is a deadset being made against the British Empire?.... We know intense efforts are being made to disturb India, and that similar efforts

¹² Laushey. David M. *Bengal Terrorism & the Marxist Left, Aspects of Regional Nationalism in India(1905-1942)*. Calcutta: Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1975. Also, Rowlatt Report, *Sedition Committee, 1918 Report*. Calcutta: Bengal Secreteriat Press, 1918.

¹³ Laushey, *Bengal Terrorism*. Also, Ghosh Durba. *Gentlemanly Terrorists. Political Violence and the Colonial State in India, 1919–1947*. [Critical Perspectives on Empire.] Cambridge:Cambridge University Press, 2017.

¹⁴ 'Red Contagion'; 'the Bolshevik Contagion'; or the 'Bolshevik Menace' was the term used by British Colonial Intelligence officers in their propaganda materials and reports against the surging popularity of Communism in Europe and the colonies. Communism was compared with a contagion or virus that was notably spreading in the Crown colonies inciting the colonisers to rise in dissent against the exploitative colonial rule. See the famous speech of Winston Churchill, *Bolshevik Menace speech* of 11 April 1919, published in Robert Rhodes James's volume, For more, "Bolshevism: Foul Baboonery....Strangle at Birth," *The Churchill Project*, 11 March 2016, (<https://winstonchurchill.hillisdale.edu/bolshevism/>)

*are being made to cause great breakdown of trade and industry at home in the hopes of creating unemployment and consequently suffering and discontent.*¹⁵

This anxiety manifested in the empire's attempt to strengthen surveillance networks in the colonies, including India. In Calcutta, the office of the Intelligence Branch was directed to maintain 'Weekly Bolshevik Reports' from the late 1910s, and a post of 'Bolshevik Officer' was created to monitor revolutionary activities in the province.¹⁶ British secret reports from the intelligence bureau officials like Cecil Kaye attest to the far-reaching impact of communism in some parts of India, as his report informs that, 'In UP and Bengal, the *Kisan Sabha* and *Ryot Sabha* are frankly pro-Bolshevik.'¹⁷ From the late 1910s and especially in the 1920s, the city of Calcutta emerged as a site of militant cosmopolitanism with multiple revolutionary networks, which included the Pan-Islamists to the *Gadharites* and the Socialists conducting an intensified activity.¹⁸ The British colonisers' ideological war against these threats was often laced with racial prejudice, as evident from its counter-propaganda. Foreigners and natives with particular facial features were tracked and heckled as alleged Russian spies, which incontrovertibly made the Muslims and the Sikhs more vulnerable to these repressions.¹⁹ There were apprehensions about the *Ghadarites* who were primarily Sikhs, and the Pan-Islamicists; both at the period were drawing their inspirations from

¹⁵ Churchill 1920, "Bolshevism and Imperial Sedition", United Wards Club Luncheon, Cannon Street Hotel, London, 4 November, 1920. (<https://winstonchurchill.org/resources/speeches/1915-1929-nadir-and-recovery/bolshevism-and-imperial-sedition/>), Accessed 5 December 2021.

¹⁶ Intelligence Bureau File No: 273/21(Henceforth will be referred to as IB), Chattopadhyay, *Komagata Maru*, p.119.

¹⁷ Kaye Cecil, *Bolshevism in india* (1919).

¹⁸ Chattopadhyay, *Komagata Maru*. Also see, Ray, Rajat. *Urban Roots of Indian Nationalism: Pressure Groups and Conflict of Interests in Calcutta City Politics 1875–1939*. New Delhi: Vikas, 1979 .

¹⁹ Chattopadhyay, *Komagata Maru*, Chattopadhyay, " The Bolshevik Menace." The Chattopadhyay, *Komagata Maru*.

Marxist-Leninist thought. The aim was to paint both the leftist ideologies fueling dissent, and the men as 'aliens' estranging them from the indigenous anti-colonial struggle.²⁰

The Great Depression of 1929 and the resulting crisis of capitalism provoked renewed efforts at control and repression of the anti-imperialist and anti-colonial elements as working-class agitations accentuated due to resulting economic hardships from the crash.²¹ The decade of the 1930s saw the inurement of the existing surveillance apparatus through the implementation of several anti-communist legislations.²² Far from being sympathetic, strikes were increasingly becoming a powerful economic and political tool for the working-class population in colonial India. The whole country witnessed a wave of industrial strikes in the wake of the global depression.²³

The culmination of the Great Depression further exasperated the already fragile working conditions of mills and factories in colonial Bengal. The deplorable working conditions in the jute mills of Bengal gained a notorious reputation.²⁴ The ongoing hardships, coupled with new crises, culminated in the historic first general jute strike from July 1929,

²⁰ Post the Russian Revolution (1917) the British Government was extremely susceptible that the tide of Communism would soon wash over its colonies which were already brimming with colonial sentiments. In a bid to carry out a thorough anti-Bolshevik propaganda it brought out several publications (Edmund Candler wrote, *Bolshevism, the Dream and the Fact*) against the Bolsheviks. Some charges were as bizarre as that of indulging in cannibalism. Laws were enacted and leftists and Communists adherents were charged as 'Spies from Moscow', painting both the ideology of Communism as well as the activists as foreign implants, their interests being far from forwarding the indigenous call for decolonisation. For more refer to, Adhikary(ed.), *Documents of Communist Party of India*, Vol.1, pp. 69-70.

²¹ Several new legislatures were passed by the colonial government to oppress growth of Communism and Labour agitation in the province, especially hardening of existing laws like the Sea Customs' Act and others. Kolkata Police Museum, Special Branch Files, henceforth will be referred to as KPM/SB. KPM/SB/00074/05 (Adequacy of Existing Powers to Deal with Communism); KPM/SB/ 00084/05 (Action Against Communism meeting held at Government House); KPM/SB/ 00085/05 (Action Against Communists & Labour Agitators in Calcutta)

²² Ibid.

²³ Industrial Disputes in India 1929-36, *Bulletins of Indian Industries & Labour*. No. 62, 1937, pp. 9-11. Bagchi, Amiya Kumar. "Wealth and Work in Calcutta 1860-1921". in Sukanta Chaudhury (ed.) *Calcutta: The Living City*. Vol. 1 (pp. 212-223). (Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1995).

²⁴ KPM/SB/98/05 (General Strike Advocacy of Legal Opinion).

under the aegis of The Bengal Jute Workers' Association, mainly headed by pro-communist labour leaders like Kalikumar Sengupta, Bankim Mukherjee, and Prabhabati Dasgupta²⁵ To manage the deteriorating situation, the colonial government responded by announcing the Royal Commission on Labour, which published its report in July of 1931 to win over the moderate labour leaders of the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC).²⁶ This trend continued throughout the early 1930s as the colonial government kept passing several provisions like The Trade Disputes Amendment Act (1932), The Factories Act (1934), The Payment of Wages Act (IV of 1936), and others.²⁷ The rationale behind the promulgation of these acts was that the British Indian government anticipated a psychological effect on the working class, which might make them 'reconsider strike as a tool of the effective bargain'.²⁸ The official sources claimed a marked decrease in labour unrest from 1936 onwards as the industrial depression reduced labour demand, making them hesitant about striking. The infamous Meerut trials against thirty-two trade unionists between 1929 and 1934 were also boasted as a success, which led to a marked reduction in the activities of the extremist leaders²⁹ Why did the British Raj's investment in the empire's surveillance system in Bengal skyrocket in the 1930s if it was sanguine that it got the dissenting population under control? The possible answer is intimately entwined with the general attitude of the empire towards the nature of the colonial working class. The evolution of class consciousness among the Indian proletariat was incomprehensible. The colonial discourse consistently depicted the workers as naïve, ignorant, and gullible, enticed and radicalised by the socialists and the communists against the government. In a meeting held on 21 July 1936, attended by all the higher officials from the Special Branch (SB) and Intelligence Branch (IB), L.H. Colson, the then Commissioner of Police, drafted a report which expressed deep concerns about 'the

²⁵ For more on the Association, Intelligence Bureau, henceforth IB 320/1928. On the strike , WBSA Proceedings, Commerce Dept., file 3C-1, April 1930, Nos 13-18.

²⁶ *Bulletins of Indian industries and labour* ,no 43, Industrial disputes in India 1929 -36.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ KPM/SB/00073/05 (Adequacy of Existing Powers to Deal with Communism). From Memorandum: In Reference to note on 27/4/36 on 'Action Against Communism'

pace and nature of developments in the labour movement' in the communist circles.'³⁰

Colson observed that 'There are many genuine grievances affecting labourers to be exploited. Particularly the forms of extortion by *Sirdars* and underlings, who pinch portions of what is rightfully the labourers' earnings.'³¹

Further, he writes, 'Any labourer will be fully justified in accepting a Gospel promising him better things, and moreover, one which has a practical programme with established successes to its credit (emphasis particularly on Russia)'.³² Colson's report concludes that there is an attractive climate for communist propaganda, technique, and tactics, and every effort is now underway to exploit the working class populace entirely: 'I believe, generally, that radical reform of conditions of labour is overdue and that while conditions remain as they are there is a fine opportunity for the Communist organisers. Our law of sedition is out of date and needs recasting so as to include the Communist propagandist and organisers unmistakably.'³³ The British Raj was fighting an ideological war against what they perceived as a growing 'communist menace' across the country. Due to ideological and strategic implications between the emergence of Bolshevism and the survival of their own colonial rule, Raj's government undermined concerns of labourers agitating for their 'rightful' grievances until it aligned with their assigned definition of 'rightful'. The denial of agency to the workers was so glaring that the word 'labourer' never transcended to become 'working-class' in the colonial reportage.

4.2 The Schema of Imperial Surveillance

To better understand how the paraphernalia of the colonial state's surveillance system functioned in Bengal, and especially in Calcutta, one needs to examine how different strategies were under operation during this period. The fundamental aim of the post-Bolshvik surveillance mechanism was to wipe out the 'red contagion' which has infected the minds of

³⁰ Ibid. Report of Colson dated, 31 July, 1936.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ KPM/SB/00073/05. Report of Colson dated, 31 July, 1936.

the subject population.³⁴ The fundamental facets of the early twentieth-century colonial surveillance set-up and mechanism can be broadly categorised under the following heads: legal surveillance, sedition and censorship, searches, and interceptions. It also included extensive manual surveillance through undercover agents, watchers, shadows, and other tactics deemed adequate. In the following sections, it will be discussed how the colonial government effectively used these aspects of surveillance but, most interestingly, in what way the trade union leaders found ingenious ways to evade the new surveillance system. This discussion will shed light on the magnitude of surveillance networks, which help us to decode how colonial governance and policing operated under British rule and how it transformed towards the closing decades of the 1930s and 1940s.

4.3 Legal Surveillance

The British government had been invested in promulgating various legal provisions from the end of the nineteenth century onwards to deal with the rising tide of the nationalist movement.³⁵ The surveillance process was accelerated as soon as the threat of the militarised terrorist movements in Bengal became a nuisance to British colonial rule. As Peter Robb fittingly points out, the professionalism of the police force in colonial India was directly proportional to the exigencies of the empire.³⁶ Hence, despite existing primary laws like The Defence of India Act (DIA) (1915) or The Bengal Police Act (1866), new legislation needed to be introduced and the existing ones to be renewed, reconditioned, and nuanced.³⁷ From 1928 itself, the anti-colonial terrorist networks in the province became overtly active. Mass detention was not effective in curbing organisational activities, because the revolutionary

³⁴ Refer to note 13.

³⁵ For more refer to, Laushey, *Bengal Terrorism and Marxist Left*.

³⁶ Robb, Peter. "The ordering of rural India: the policing of nineteenth-century Bengal and Bihar." In *Policing the Empire: Government, Authority, and Control, 1830-1940*. Edited by David. M. Anderson and David Killingray, 126-150. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991.

³⁷ KPM/SB/00079/05 (Actions Against Communists, Public and Security Acts).

terrorists were imbibed in communist ideology and literature in the prisons.³⁸ The British colonial government understood the clear demarcation between the functioning of the erstwhile nationalist terrorist organisations and the revolutionary communists. It soon realised that an offensive on the latter needed to be orchestrated more on the ideological lines rather than solely using the brute force of police and military tactics.

The opening years of the 1930s witnessed the promulgation of several new laws to get a tighter grip over the communist propagandists across India. Acts like the Indian Sea Customs Act (SCA) of 1878, Indian Post Office Act (1898), and The Bengal Criminal Law Amendment Act (BCLA), 1925 were followed by The Bengal Suppression of Terrorist Outrages Act (BTSO), Bengal Public Security Act, and The General Communist Notification (GCN), all passed in 1932.³⁹ At a conference of police officers of IB held in Shimla in 1934 on the rising tide of communist activities, the Government of India decided to drop a proposed 'Revolutionary Movement's Bill', which was considered non-essential 'as the existing powers were, on the whole adequate to cope with the situation'.⁴⁰ Concerning the provincial government's policing powers, it was decided that the existing legislation was adequate. This conference concluded that there was no point in obtaining new powers as the amended BCLA Act of 1930 could be utilised against communists 'who advocate violent or terrorist methods'.⁴¹ However, there was a drastic change in this view by 1936 as the Deputy Commissioner of Police, CES Fairweather, in a letter pointed out, 'The present political situation has altered greatly since the Government's original decision was taken...the arrival of Jawaharlal Nehru has made grounds enough for taking stock once more'.⁴² Other high officials and lawyers voiced similar concerns that the DIG (IB) 's views 'that the existing

³⁸ For more on consolidation of communists in colonial prisons in Bengal refer to autobiographies like, Pakrasi, Satis. *Agnijuger Kotha* (Burning Times). Calcutta: NabajatakPrakashan, 1982. Also see, KPM/SB/00121/05 (Socialism and Communist and Terrorist Consolidation in Jail).

³⁹ KPM/SB/00079/05.

⁴⁰ KPM/SB/00073/05, Conference held in Simla in November and December, 1934.

⁴¹ KPM/SB/00073/05

⁴² Ibid. Statement of Fairweather, dated, 12 May, 1936.

powers are adequate are not fitting justification in practice.'⁴³ Nehru's 1936 visit to Europe was a watershed moment for the INC and the mainstream nationalist movement. Imbibed with the new ethos of Marxism and socialism, as the newly elected president of Congress in the 1936 Lucknow session, he called for a boycott of the elections in 1937.⁴⁴ The burgeoning popularity of Nehru from the latter half of the 1930s ushered in a radical phase of Congress politics which had an overreaching impact on the militant trade union movement in Bengal.

Virulent anxiety erupted during this period around the movement of humans and materials across the Indian Ocean. The docks and ports around Calcutta attracted the highest vigilance from the colonial authorities.⁴⁵ The sea was seen as the carrier of the 'red contagion' and not just the communist revolutionaries but also imported materials, especially various leftist and communist newspapers, books, and other propaganda materials.⁴⁶ This new genre of imported material was considered a lethal tool for communist indoctrination in the hands of labour agitators. As the CP of Bengal, Colson, remarked, 'The technique of Communist Revolution is now well understood and well established. The textbooks are in the hands of local Communist agitators, and their contents are rapidly being implanted in the minds of the labourers as a class whose grievances are genuine and are not redressed.'⁴⁷ Accordingly, efforts were made to amend the existing Sea Customs Act (SCA) and PO Act.⁴⁸

Most importantly, the implementation of GCN increases the efficacy of these laws to withhold and prevent the circulation of these objectionable materials.⁴⁹ The extensive correspondence between the SB branch and high police officials involving public prosecutors

⁴³ *ibid*

⁴⁴ Metcalf, Barabard.D, and Thomas R. Metcalf, eds. *A Concise History of INDIA*. Cambridge: CUP,2002, p. 172.

⁴⁵ Chattapadhyay, "The Bolshevik Menace."

⁴⁶ *Ibid*.

⁴⁷ KPM/SB/00073/05

⁴⁸ *Ibid*.

⁴⁹ KPM/SB/00074/05 (Procedure in Dealing with Prohibited Publications which come to notice otherwise by Interception).

attests to this apparent reform urgency.⁵⁰ For example, in 1936, the police faced difficulties applying search warrants for foreign parcels and mail coming under GCN owing to the word 'secreted' used in Section 172 of SCA.⁵¹ A junior prosecutor initially advised using the Calcutta Police Act as a solution.⁵² However, another senior prosecutor refuted that the act's scope was not wide enough to cover prohibited literature listed under GCN, which shopkeepers might openly sell as 'unlawfully obtained.'⁵³ An amendment was advised to have the word 'secreted' substituted by 'lodged' in Section 172 of the SCA to broaden its scope.⁵⁴

The demarcation, confiscation, and withholding of literature under the above laws involved a tedious legal and administrative process that was in no way frugal, financially or temporally. correspondence between the DC of Police and the Collector of Customs, Calcutta, which occurred on 17 September 1936, would be helpful to understand the mood of this period.⁵⁵ The DCP, W.J. Cottam, wanted the Custom Collector to be vigilant of some seditious literature that might enter the city, citing the upcoming catalogue of a book dealer in Esplanade of Calcutta named the Messers Thacker Spink and Company.⁵⁶ The 'The Bookshelf-Books of the Month' catalogue for September 1936 advertised the following titles: *World Politics: 1918-1936* by British Communist leader and the editor of *Labour Monthly*, R.P. Dutt, and *France Forces the Future* by Ralph Fox. DC informed that these publications were 'liable to confiscation' under GCN.⁵⁷ This incident led to a formal notice from the customs officers to the dealers with a request to hand over all the copies of the books mentioned above.⁵⁸ However, the company reverted in a letter on 25 September, notifying

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

that they had 'duly delivered' the copy of Fox's France that they received to the Customs representative.⁵⁹

Regarding Dutt's book, they clarified that they 'cannot trace' having received it. In the meantime, they solicited a copy of France to be returned so it could be sent back to London for credit.⁶⁰ Within four days, the Customs Collector, A.E. Wright, informed the DCP about the detention of the book and sought advice on the further course of action.⁶¹ On the fifth of the following month, Wright was sent a letter of advice from a public prosecutor on behalf of the SB Branch over the agenda of returning the seized property to the proprietor.⁶² Citing an identical case from 1930, the prosecutor argued, 'We intercepted certain prohibited publication in the post, the Government of Bengal ruled that a book so confiscated should not be returned but be disposed of by government representatives.'⁶³ So, it advocated against the return of the book, and the Collector finally wrote back to Spencer and Thacker on 11 November, notifying them that the book was confiscated under Sec 167(8) of SCA. ⁶⁴ The adamant legal process for confiscating a single piece of prohibited literature spanning over a month indicates the overreaction of the surveillance operation in colonial Bengal, which was brassbound, time-consuming, and economically onerous.

Various historical factors propelled the operation of new surveillance systems to be more stringent and robust by providing extra-governmental powers to the police officers on the ground. The main aim of bestowing extra powers to the colonial police was to further the vigilance manoeuvre without getting entangled in legal drudgery in colonial India. Notes from the office of the SB in 1937 reveal prolonged discussions on 'the possibility of improving liaison between the Police and the Customs.'⁶⁵ Concerns were expressed over the speedy attainment of warrants, the supply of warning circulars issued by the IB to the

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid, also see, KPM/SB/00100/05 (Publications Objectionable Before 1936).

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ KPM/SB/00074/05.

Collector of Calcutta Customs for withholding packages, and the legality of searching stockings in the bookshops for 'objectionable' literature, which slips the customs department's scrutiny. It was concluded that 'The powers of the police under the Sea Customs Act are circumscribed, and it should be understood that they have no authority to detain and confiscate prohibited literature without obtaining the formal orders of an officer of Customs having jurisdiction.'⁶⁶

The SCA's scope was extensive, and its efficacy was augmented with the Post-Office Act.⁶⁷ Parcels from Inward Foreign Mail suspected of carrying seditious literature were confiscated. The Bengal Presidency's office of Post-Master was constantly kept in the loop by the public prosecutor from the DHCP's office at the SB regarding the logistical and legal steps to be adopted for withholding anti-imperial propaganda.⁶⁸ In 1937 a package containing two copies of *Political Economy: A Beginners Guide* by A. Leontiev was confiscated at the Bowbazar post office.⁶⁹ A publication from the Soviet Union triggered the then DCP of Calcutta, M.K. Johnston, to send an emergency manual, voicing particulars of interception technicalities to the Presidency Post-Master. It read, 'The contents of the package were confiscated as they contained literature, the entry into India is prohibited by the Govt. of India under Sec 19 of the Sea Customs Act.'⁷⁰

Further, some packages were partially opened and confiscated, and the rest released for delivery should be extracted, and details should be recorded in writing. Even multiple packages can be withheld together.⁷¹ However, despite several changes and amendments being made, the legal constraints plagued the vigilance wing of the Bengal police till the closing years of colonial rule. The 1940s witnessed the outbreak of several crises, including the Second World War and the famine, which further escalated the colonial government's predicament. As the working-class resistance became widespread across colonial Bengal,

⁶⁶ *ibid*

⁶⁷ KPM/SB/00089/05 (Instructions to the Postal Department regarding publication withheld in the post.).

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ KPM/SB/00089/05 (Instructions to the Postal Department Regarding Publication withheld in the Post).

accompanied by the further hardships of the war, the surveillance networks also expanded. One significant contravention during this period was that the British Indian Empire had fallen into a tight spot with a significant financial drain, and the Police Department felt the brunt of it. The fact that the upper echelons of the British administration in India feared communism with continuous apprehension could be demonstrated by the nature of the literature, which was generally denied entry by customs officials.⁷² A notification released by the Government of India in 1932, prohibited 'the import of certain documents issued by or emanating from the Communist International or any organisation affiliated to or controlled by or are in council with it.'⁷³ The GCN list of proscribed publications in 1936 stands as testimony to it.⁷⁴ A total of 220 copies were withheld till January 1937.⁷⁵ So, *The Communist*, which was professed as an integral part of the Communist Party of India (CPI), by extension, was withheld. Apart from it, documents and books of the Communist Party of Great Britain or British Communists like Ben Bradley's *Indian Politics*, several leftist journals from London, Canada, and Paris, and publications of the *Young Communist League of America* met a similar fate. There were instances of a whole depot of books being monitored, and all publications sourced from it were withheld, for example, in the case of Giu Guo Publishing Depot in Paris or The Left Book Club of London, organised by Victor Gonzalez.⁷⁶ In the 1940s, a substantial number of socialist newspapers and journals were barred entry into the province by the colonial government under the SCA. A list issued by the Finance Department and signed by the Joint Secretary of the Government of India in August 1940, demarcated papers like *The Daily Worker*, *Action*, *The Week*, *Russia Today*, *Russia Today Newsletter*, *Challenge*, *Moscow News*, *The British News Quarterly* to be confiscated by the Customs.⁷⁷

⁷² KPMSB/2582/05. (Proscribed and Prohibited Publications).

⁷³ Ibid. Also see the following files on proscribed and prohibited literature. KPM/SB/2583/05, KPM/SB/2584.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ KPM/SB/00074/05.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

**BOOKS AND PUBLICATIONS WITHHELD BY THE GOVT. OF BENGAL
THROUGH SCA AND GCN (1936).**

NAME OF THE BOOK/ NEWSPAPER/JOURNAL	PARTICULARS OF THE PUBLISHER	ACT UNDER WHICH IT IS WITHHELD	ACTION TAKEN REGARDING IT
1. <i>La Lumiere du Marxism</i>	Communist Party of France	GCN	22 copies withheld.
2. <i>Champion</i> , 'The Newspaper.'	Young Communist League of America	GCN	15 Copies withheld.
3. <i>Coolie</i> by Mulk Raj Anand	Lawrence & Wishart Ltd. London	GCN	22 copies withheld.
4. <i>Ten Days that Shook the World</i> by John Reed	Lawrence & Wishart Ltd. London	GCN	-----
5. <i>Discussion</i>	CPGB	GCN	Marked as Bolshevik literature.
6. <i>Empire of Nabobs</i> by Lester Hutchinson	-----	GCN	22 copies, to be sent to the Bureau for examination and Disposal
7. <i>Indian Politics</i> by Ben.F. Bradley	-----	GCN Section 25 of the PO Act	63 Copies. To be disposed.
8. <i>Left Review</i> (Organ of British Section of Revolutionary Writers)	-----	GCN	23 Copies withheld.
9. <i>Russia Today and Tomorrow</i> (Pamphlet) by Maurice Dobb.	Leonard & Virginia Woolf Hogarth Press	Passed on the 16 copies that were received	After examination, it was passed
10. <i>The Third International After Lenin</i>	Pioneer Publishers	GCN	
11. <i>Sunday Worker Dially Worker</i>	Communist Party of America	GCN	

Source: KPM/SB/00074/05

The constant apprehension of the British Raj around the ocean - the main driving force behind its vast surveillance network, was reaffirmed by prominent trade unionists as they reminisced about their experiences with it in later life.⁷⁸ Jyoti Basu, who played a prominent role in working-class politics in Bengal during the 1940s, offers one example. Basu recounted how after completing his law degree when he returned from London to Calcutta in 1940, he was interrogated by Scotland Yard and subsequently by IB officers from Bombay and Bengal.⁷⁹ He carried many Leftist books and journals which were proscribed in British India. His suspicion of the colonial surveillance system made him hand over his copy of *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks) (CPSU)* to a fellow woman passenger, whom he weighed the Indian detectives would not check, given their vested principles of modesty.⁸⁰ His apprehension proved inevitable. On reaching Bombay, all the books were confiscated by the customs officials. He sighed that the only relief for him was managing at least to secure the copy of the history of CPSU, which he collected later from the woman.⁸¹

5.5 Surveillance as a Cultural Tool? Of Seditious and Censorships

Surveillance was gaining pertinence as a 'cultural tool' as it astringed much of the indigenous intellectual innovations and significant interventions into the tenets of socialism and communism and their local adaptations and receptions. The 1930s were turbulent as the liberal world faced the most formidable challenge ever in the form of the vicious trend of

⁷⁸ Several activists who went to England for the I.C.S. training or law, and got converted to communism in the 1930s, attests to this, including Jyoti Basu, Bhupesh Gupta, Renu Ray, and others. For more, British Library, India Office Record, Public and Judicial Records, henceforth will be referred to as BLIOR, BLIOR/L/P&J/12/4. (Indian Students at Oxford and Cambridge, Also Annual Indian Conferences, 1936- 1946.).

⁷⁹ Basu, Jyoti. *Jata Dur Mone Pore* (Till How Long I can Reccount). Calcutta: NBA, 1998, pp.14-15, NMML Oral Interview Transcripts. Interview of Jyoti Basu, by Shikha Mukherjee and Mrs. Usha Prasad. Kolkata, 18 December 2001.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

fascism originating from the acute crisis of capitalism post the First World War.⁸² The rise of Mussolini in Italy, the racial apartheid in Nazi Germany, and particularly the Spanish Civil War of 1936 inspired discourses at various intellectual circles or *addas* in the city of Calcutta.⁸³ These *addas* or intellectual gatherings were generally the nuclei of the quintessential middle-class intelligentsia, with a discernible leftist orientation. The *Parichay* group was prominent with leading Bengali stalwarts, like historian Sushovon Sarkar, poet Bishnu De, theoretical physicist Satyen Bose, and others.⁸⁴ These men launched a scathing attack on imperialism, nationalism, fascism, and materialism. This collective group also issued a journal by the same name.⁸⁵ At times visited by labour activists, the *Parichay* club created apprehensions in nurturing anti-colonial propaganda. The colonial government's panic against Bolshevism made the police infiltrate these *addas*.⁸⁶ As the myth of liberal democracy shattered and the appeal of communism within the revolutionary anti-colonial circles gained momentum, the colonial propensity of launching ideological warfare on the cultural front escalated.

Sedition laws were introduced in India in 1870 through IPC 124 (A), though its root lay in Macaulay's Draft Penal Code of 1835.⁸⁷ Sedition laws become unreasonably repressive when the state gets apprehensive of losing grip over public opinion, a spectacle of surveillance replicated in late colonial Calcutta. Print in every form came under the purview of vigilance. The notorious duo of 124 (A) and Prejudicial Report of Class & Rule 34 under the Defense of India Act (D.I.A) were used indiscriminately and ruthlessly to stifle anti-

⁸² For information colonial economy post the First World War leading upto the Great Depression refer, Bagchi, Amiya Kumar. "The Great Depression and the Third World with special reference to India," *Social Science Information*. Vol. 18, No. 2, 1979.

⁸³ Refer to Footnote 2 of this chapter

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ House, Humphry. *I Spy With my Little Eye*, Introduction.

⁸⁷ Skuy, David. "Macaulay and the Indian Penal Code of 1862: The Myth of the Inherent Superiority and Modernity of the English Legal System Compared to India's Legal System in the Nineteenth Century," *Modern Asian Studies*. Vol. 32, No. 3, pp. 513-557, 1998.

imperialist or anti-capitalist criticism as seditious.⁸⁸ The colonial state was preying on every avenue of dissent, notably print, which comprised of the press, both commercial and party organs, literature, books, journals, weeklies, and pamphlets associated with communism or can be utilised to carry out propaganda within the working class.⁸⁹ There were restrictions imposed on labour rallies and processions, trade union meetings were closely monitored, and speeches by the labour leaders were often identified as seditious. Even slogans, placards, and banners were coming under colonial surveillance. Blanket surveillance was a reality in late colonial Calcutta as a modicum of cultural resistance like folk songs were either censored or banned altogether.

5.5.1 Choking Dissent in Print: Popular Press, Literature, Journals, and Weeklies

The decades of the 1930s and the 1940s witnessed inexorable curtailment of press freedom. The wave of strikes in the wake of the Great Depression sharpened working-class resistance. Editors of commercial dailies like *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, reporting on labour affairs, were regularly summoned to the police station and had their contents proscribed. Calling out the colonial state's offensive on press freedom, the Calcutta-based daily, *Bangabasi* (*Citizens of Bengal*), on 14 December 1929, lamented that:

*Shall we really give up journalism? It has of late become a very risky affair to write freely and fearlessly in any newspaper or to speak at any meeting. Indian newspapers are also the public speakers who are the indispensable friends of the administration. Sifting enquiries should be made into every case from scarcity of food to water to epidemic. If the authorities are convinced that the prevailing seditious spirit which is born of discontent cannot be suppressed without such arrests and punishments, we should like to ask most humbly whether the institution of seditious cases which have enormously increased in number during the last four years is really allaying discontent in country?*⁹⁰

⁸⁸ KPM/SB/00192/05, (Action under the defence of Indian rule against Communist and labour agitators).

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ *The Bangabasi*, 14 December, 1929.

The bogey of sedition was also not sparing fairly pro-state, Hindu magnate-run newspapers, like *Anandabazar Patrika*, which faced proscription in the opening months of 1930.⁹¹ In a reasonably witty editorial couched in sarcasm, it took a dig at the government: ‘The Government of Bengal have for some time past been applying Sec 124 (SA) with unwarrantable and almost puerile glee. Notices, placards, books, speeches, processions. Thanks to the intricacies of law and good graces of the authority, nothing is easier than victimising newspapers.’⁹² The report rightly illustrates the dubious nature of the colonial rule. A few days before the publication of the above press critique, the Secretary of State for India declared that ‘it is not only desirable that we should have the most unrestrained expression of opinion in India, but at present, it is the most helpful thing.’⁹³ Despite advocating that a free press is a necessity for liberal democracy under British colonial rule, the government could not tolerate press criticism and apprehensive opinions on everyday politics. The stiffening of the surveillance system and curtailing of press freedom went hand in hand even as the Indian nationalist movement gained mass momentum. Utilisation of sedition laws became recurrent during the war years. In 1940 The Chief Presidency Magistrate issued summons against editors and printers of *Anandabazar Patrika* and the ‘*Dainik Basumati*’ under Defence of India Act for publishing two articles, ‘Odds and Ends’ and ‘The Leftists,’ respectively glorifying the revolutionary struggle of working-class.⁹⁴ The strain on the economy, coupled with the hardships faced by the citizens - predominantly the working class, government's negligence causing a manufactured famine and the resultant food and cloth shortages, saw even the most loyal news outlets vehemently criticising the British colonial government apparatus of corruption and mismanagement. *Dainik Basumati*, one of the most prominent nationalist dailies in Bengal published by Sashibhushan Dutta, was blacklisted by the Bengal government in 1940 under the Defense of India Rules.⁹⁵ Even

⁹¹ *Report on Native Newspapers*, 1930.

⁹² *Anandabazar Patrika* 14 January, 1930.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ *The Indian Annual Register*. Vol 1, Jan-June, 1940, pp. 250-255.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

widely circulated newspapers like *Hindustan Standard* were added to the prohibited list of over 200 proscribed publications and withheld from public circulation.⁹⁶

The colonial authorities dreaded books upholding socialist ideals. The pervasive fear of importing communist literature from Russia, Britain, Europe, or any transcontinental exchange led to constant vigilance.⁹⁷ The legislation of SCA and GCN applied to overseas mail and inland exchanges.⁹⁸ The nature of the books withheld is already established from the previous list.⁹⁹ Trade unionists like Saumyendranath Tagore, a prolific writer, often had his books and articles banned or pulled out of circulation because they were sharply critical of the British colonial government and its anti-labour policies.¹⁰⁰ The decade of the 1930s stands witness to the conversion of a significant number of revolutionary terrorists into communists or other ancillary creeds of socialism.¹⁰¹

The prisons, overflowing with young, dedicated, and patriotic men, were slowly drawn towards the revolutionary principles of class struggle rather than the creed of isolated violence. These prisons became bastions for producing would-be communists, labour leaders, and activists, which prompted the police to regulate the inflow of literature in these prisons. Extensive records of correspondence between the Deputy Commissioner of Calcutta Police and the Superintendent of Presidency Prison in the opening years of the 1930s deliberated which books and newspapers should be allowed for the revolutionary prisoners in the city jails.¹⁰² A 1934 letter of communication mentions that 'There is no objection to the books mentioned there in being given to the detenues to read with the exception of the following on which no opinion can be expressed unless they are sent to this department for

⁹⁶ KPM / SB/ 02581/04 (Prohibited Publications, C.P.I).

⁹⁷ KPM/SB/00074/05.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Refer to the list of the prohibited books in 1936 provided earlier in this chapter.

¹⁰⁰ Chattopadhyay, ed. (1975), *Against the Stream: An Anthology of Writings of Saumyendranath Tagore*, Vol.1, Calcutta: The Technical and General Press.

¹⁰¹ Refer to Chapter One of the thesis. Also, Laushey, *Bengal Terrorism and Marxist Left*.

¹⁰² KPM/SB/00062/05 (List of Books & Newspapers Allowed for the Perusal of Detunes)

examination.'¹⁰³ The books in question were *Capital* (2 volumes) and *Historical Materialism* by Karl Marx, *Essays of Tolstoy*, and *Anna Karenina*.¹⁰⁴ The colonial administration's apprehension about Marxist literature being circulated among the prisoners was well-established. The prejudice towards Tolstoy can be justified by the fact that he was a zealous defender of the anti-imperialist struggle in Asia, especially in India, given his inextricable link and cultural dialogue with Gandhi during the latter's stay in South Africa.¹⁰⁵ However, it was the fear of communism and the inflow of communist literature in the prisons that preoccupied the state's surveillance apparatus during this period. A substantial number of Russian books were prohibited in Bengal jails, which include *Capital*, *Crime and Punishment*, *Letter from Underworld*, *Prison Life in Siberia*, *Through Russia*, and *Portrait of a Spy*, to name a few.¹⁰⁶

There was an intrinsic fear of any books remotely associated with Soviet Russia. The Intelligence Bureau Department often sought help from local publishing houses in reviewing the contents of the books requested by the detainees.¹⁰⁷ In reply to a confidential letter dated 26 November 1934, from the DCP enquiring about the suitability of allowing access to certain books in the prison, the advice from the IB department read as follows:

*In order to facilitate the disposal of such references, I would suggest that provided you see no objection to this course, local firms and booksellers of repute such as Hacker Spink, Newmans, Oxford Bookshop etc...might be consulted in the first instance as to the nature and contents of the publications ordered by detainees, etc. This should, I think, avoid the delay which often occurs in many cases by referring matter to this Bureau.*¹⁰⁸

¹⁰³Ibid. Note from SB to The Superintendent, dated 13 May, 1934.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Moulik Achala, *A Hundred Years of Lev Tolstoy and Indian Connection*. (New Delhi, Har-Anand Publications, 2010).

¹⁰⁶ KPM/SB/00062/05, Notes from SB, dated 11 December, 1934.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

In 1935, Dinesh Chandra Dutta, lodged in Alipore Jail, requested a copy of *Changing Man, Soviet Education System* by Beatrice King, the cultural Secretary of the Society of Cultural Relations and a Committee member of Congress for Peace and Friendship with the USSR.¹⁰⁹ It ensured a detailed examination of the book's contents by the IB department officers. A report finally submitted in January 1938 concluded, 'The appendices to the book contain information relating to the activities of the Russian Communist Party and subsequent to the Bolshevik Revolution...Although the title seems innocuous, the book is not suitable for reading by the detunes.'¹¹⁰ This corroborates the paranoia of the colonial government officials regarding seditious literature and the rigorous surveillance procedures placed across the prisons. Moreover, the lengthy procedure of the whole exercise, spanning over three years from the time the book was requested and a decision was reached, indicates the volume of such requests.¹¹¹

The Calcutta Committee (CALCOM) of the CPI, despite being banned throughout the better part of the 1930s, was actively bringing out successive journals and weeklies to propagate the cause of the proletarian working class. Journals in Bengali like, *Sarbahara (Proletariat)*, *Dinmajur(The Day Labourer)*, and *Chashi Majur(The Peasant & Worker)* were launching a scathing attack on the Indian government in general and the Bengal ministry led by the Muslim League under Fazlul Huq for their anti-proletariat legislature.¹¹² Leading trade unionists like Somnath Lahiri and Saroj Mukherjee wrote fiery editorials and insightful pieces urging working-class unity and militant action.¹¹³ After the party reorganisation in 1933, the committee brought three more papers: *Marxsbadi (Marxist)*, *Marxpanthi*, and *Ganashakti (Masspower)*. These publications were seen as lethal tools in fuelling hatred

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. Report from Superintendent of Alipore Jail, dated, 13 February, 1935.

¹¹⁰ Ibid. Report to SB, dated 4 January, 1938.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² On Behalf of the Calcutta Committee Report of the Calcutta Committee of the Communist party of India from Sen, Ranen. *Bharater Communist Partyr Itibritttyo*(An Account of the Indian Communist Party). Calcutta: Bingsho Shatapdi, 1996, Appendix, p. 40.

¹¹³ Ibid.

against the government and were proscribed and straightaway banned.¹¹⁴ *Chashi Majur* (Peasant Worker), in circulation from December 1931, met with a favourable response, selling over 1500 copies per week. The burgeoning popularity of the paper alerted the police, and post the publication of the 7th issue, the editor, printer, and publisher of the paper, a party member, B. Mukherjee, was prosecuted and sentenced to nine months of imprisonment.¹¹⁵ The paper was asked to furnish a hefty amount of 1500 rupees as a security deposit or to cease the publication. Given the constant dearth of funds the party faced, the latter became inevitable.¹¹⁶ Publishing weeklies were becoming exceedingly difficult due to the rigidification of the press ordinances and the interdicting the press liberty through police threats to the printers. CALCOM could hardly find a printer for *Din Majur* (Daily Wage-Labour).¹¹⁷ The police maintained meticulous records of all the publications on a weekly basis.¹¹⁸ This print material was being brought out for anti-imperial and anti-capitalist propaganda within the working class. The police records reveal a particularly intriguing feature of colonial surveillance operations. A closer look at this period divulges how tactfully the police encouraged moderate labour papers, particularly anti-communist press, to incite left factionalism and ultimately hinder a united working-class struggle. In 1939 a new rival union headed by the Royists named the Calcutta Tramway Employer's Association was formed against the CPI-led Calcutta Tramway Workers' Union.¹¹⁹ The General Secretary of the Union, Nabajyoti Burman, with another party worker, Debandranath Mitra, initiated the circulation of a new weekly called *Sramik (The Worker)* to promote the union among the workers from 7 June 1939.¹²⁰ The contents revolving around the continuation of strikes,

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ The endemic paucity of fund had been elaborated by communists like Ahmad and Halim. Ahmad, Muzaffar .*Somokaler Kotha*. Kolkata: National Book Agency Private Limited, 1963. Halim, Abdul. *Nabajibaner Pathe* (Towards a Road to a New Life). Calcutta: NBA, 1966.

¹¹⁷ Report of the Calcutta Committee of the Communist Party of India, Appendix page, 40.

¹¹⁸ KPM/SB/00125/05, KPM/SB/00126/05, KPM/SB/00127/05, (Socialism: -- Socialism: -- Communist Publications.).

¹¹⁹ KPM/SB/03067/05, Publication Entitled —SARMIK weekly Edited by Nabajyoti Burman.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

critically seeing modes of protests, caste or *Harijan* problems, and Hindu-Muslim unity were often passed through the intelligence department as ‘nothing of interest or objectionable in this time.’¹²¹ A report by sub-inspector Juan Das Dutt filed on 15 June 1939 reveals the wider politics at play behind these interesting changes. It stated, ‘The object of the paper is to wage for the consolidation of the labourers through constitutional means. The paper discharges ignorant working-class playing into the hands of the ‘insurrectionists and self-seeking agitators and Communists.’¹²² Two words are significant here, ‘constitutional means’ and ‘self-seeking agitator or Communists’, as it clarifies the colonial state's attitude. The red unions were, militant in their ideology and functioning, and hence way more efficient in rallying the workers for their cause. Hence, eventually became the target of the state's repression. This can be further elucidated by probing into the official reports maintained on the Bengal trade union committee of CPI's organ, *Janajuddha or The People's War*. *Janajuddha* was a Bengali periodical issued by the party in 1942.¹²³ It became an indispensable agitprop tool during the years that witnessed ravaging war and devastating famine.¹²⁴ A report filed in January 1944, referred to an article titled *Janajuddha naki Janagoner Biruddhe Juddho* (People's War or War Against People), which was propagating 'bitter anti-British propaganda.'¹²⁵ This aspect debunks the allegations made by the INC that the police and the state suppression of the communists receded after the adaptation of The People's War line from 1939. From 1942, after the party was legalised, undeniably, there was a greater degree of cooperation with the British government, noticeable till the closing of the war years. It is perceptible that the party took formal permission to host labour rallies, meetings, or processions. It provided the state's vigilantism with a sense of greater control in mitigating the radicalisation of party policies concerning the ongoing working-class agitation. In a report filed on an issue of *Janajuddha* from July 1944, an article titled, *Sawa Panch Seer Rationer Dabite Sarkari Bandha* (Government ban on the demand of all five Seer Ration),

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ KPM/SB/02208/05, *Jana Juddha*, a C.P.I. Publication.

¹²⁴ Ibid. Also, KPM/SB/01233/05, “*Janajuddha*”--- A Bengali Newspaper.

¹²⁵ KPM/SB/01324/05, —*Janajuddha* – Sub: -- Bengali Newspaper of C.P.I.

was marked as it waxed eloquent against the Police Commissioner of Calcutta for intervening in the peaceful and legitimate agitation of the communists for increasing the quota of the rations.¹²⁶ The report further stressed that in taking aggressive action against a peaceful agitation, the Commissioner directly prompted the workers to resort to strikes to air their grievances publicly.¹²⁷ Seen as a passive-aggressive threat, the report came with a note verifying the control it yielded on the communist party's activism, given its adherence to constitutional means of agitation:

*A provision is being inserted in all letters granting permission to the CPI to hold public meetings that nothing unusual or provocative is said or done which may affect public order or tranquility or encourage discontent or agitation This action is being taken on the strength of a government press note which explained that the quotes had been settled only after careful consideration of all factors and criticism would be both unproductive and harmful.*¹²⁸

5.5.2 Pamphlets: the Most Potent Tool of Agitprop?

The British colonial officials expressed open apprehensions regarding pamphlets and leaflets, which gained potency as instruments of mobilisation among the workers. These pamphlets, written mainly in simplified colloquial register, and in vernaculars such as Bengali, Urdu, and Hindi, are couched in revolutionary jargon. The colloquialism and use of vernaculars were aimed at arousing the workers' social and political sentimentality. No wonder fanatic efforts were made to confiscate leaflets carrying appeals for organising strikes and gatherings in the working-class ghettos.¹²⁹ Pamphlets or handbills appealing to the workers to engineer strikes proved notorious enough, which resulted in the prolonged imprisonment of those distributing such materials. A 1930 leaflet, '*Hartal, Hartal, Hartal*' (Strike! Strike!), proposed a public demonstration on May Day, which led to a raid by the detective department at Jugabrata

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ KPM/SB/00074/05.

Press on Harrison Road on 29 April.¹³⁰ The leaflet jointly issued by six unions, including the All Bengal Motor Workers' Union and the Calcutta Tramway Workers' Union, resulted in the arrest and rigorous imprisonment of Nripen Chowdhury, a jute trade unionist, for two years.¹³¹ The dissemination of pamphlets, often anonymously distributed and circulated, can be seen as a coping mechanism against the colonial state's repression. While filing a report concerning a leaflet titled '*Banglar Yuba Bondhu o Sramikbhai Shob*' (Youths and Workers of Bengal), in May 1930, a Sub-Inspector wrote, 'The leaflet was found affixed to a post in front of Padda Pukur Road. It is a seditious leaflet issued probably by the Communists. It had no name of the printer or publisher or the press. It excited the workers and youth to revolt against the British.'¹³²

The police charged the defenders of these pamphlets for inciting anti-British feelings among the labourers. The composer of such salacious leaflets, on being charged and questioned often in their defence, illuminated that the use of the English language as the medium of writing, stood against this claim, as it was not the language of the masses. In 1930, Abdul Halim, a communist trade unionist, was charged under IPC 147 for publishing and printing a leaflet, *Citizens and Workers of Calcutta*, which allegedly stirred up the workers and the proletariat mass to indulge in striking and rioting.¹³³ Halim disagreed with the charges on the grounds that the leaflet's circulation was limited, and being in English, it was not meant for the illiterate workers at large.¹³⁴ The Chief Magistrate of the District Court of Twenty-Four Parganas dismissed Halim's appeal and sentenced him to a year of rigorous imprisonment. His ruling stated, 'As to the first contention, the accused was merely saved by the promptitude of police in making the search. As to the latter, there are plenty of 'citizens of Calcutta' who can read English and help to propagate the sentiments expressed in the leaflet among the illiterate.'¹³⁵

¹³⁰ KPM/SB/00013/05, (Leaflet named *Hartal* for May Day).

¹³¹ KPM 00013/05.

¹³² KPM 00012/05, Leaflet in Bengali, '*Young Friends of Bengal & Brother Workers*.'

¹³³ IPC 147, is used for punishing offenders against rioting. IB 210-27, IB Dossier of Abdul Halim.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

Monitoring of these leaflets, however, had broader political implications. A leaflet titled, *Organisation Putting Forward Their Demands a Fight of Jute Workers Where War Situation Presented*, in Bengali and Hindi, was circulated in the name of Bankim Mukherjee.¹³⁶ He was a Member of the Legislative Assembly of Bengal and a veteran trade unionist from the Communist Party of India (CPI) in 1939. It was issued on behalf of the Bengal Central Jute Workers' Union, Mukherjee being the union's president, amid the turmoil of the Second World War.¹³⁷ The abovementioned leaflet appealed to the workers to agitate against the cartel's (Indian Jute Merchants' Association) decision to add extra working hours to meet the increasing demand for jute during the war: 'The jute workers have been fighting for their demands since 1937, but owners lent a deaf ear to their representations. The time has now come to assert themselves for their demands. With the outbreak of war, prices of rice, dal, etc. have been increased.'¹³⁸ It stated that the demands entailed a twenty-five percent increment in wages as war bonuses, non-containment of their rights to form trade unions, and reinstatement of all jute workers whose services were dispersed under the new ordinance.¹³⁹ The so-called 'Red Leaflets' triggered anxiety as they appealed to the workers to rally for the red flag and push for their demands under the pretext of the war. It was marked as a 'prejudicial report any person printing, possessing, or distributing the leaflet were ordered to be arrested and all copies to be seized.'¹⁴⁰ It led to raids at eight places in total, including the union office, the office of the National Printers which printed it, and Mukherjee's residence culminating in his arrest under the DIA.¹⁴¹ Warrants were issued for searching Basanta Joshi and Nripen Chakravarty's houses, both listed as ex-convicts and responsible for printing and

¹³⁶ KPM/SB/00768/05, (Leaflets – Red – in Bengali and Hindi leaded organisation putting forward, their demands a fight of jute workers when was situation presented issued by Bankim Mukherjee and printed national printers, 1, Narayan Babu Lane).

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Ibid.KPM/SB/00768/05.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ KPM/SB/00769/05, Search at the National Printers Press at 1, Narayan Babu lane on 05.10.39 for Red Bangali and Hindi leaflets by Bankim Mukherjee (Property seized)

distributing the leaflet.¹⁴² The colonial police believed this evidence could be filed in court as ‘information likely to assist the enemy.’¹⁴³ The case was built based on detailed testimonies of four employees, including the machine man at the press of Narayan Babu Lane, Calcutta.¹⁴⁴ The investigation saw Mukherjee denying any connection to its issue and implicating Sisir Roy, another leader from the Bengal Labour Party (BLP) and Assistant Secretary of the *Chatkal Mazdoor Union* responsible for it, to expose the CPI members within the organisation.¹⁴⁵ Surveillance often exposed the underbelly of the movement and the most severe problem plaguing it, the bitter factional squabbles. BLP, which was one of the ‘open platforms’ of CPI after it was banned in 1934, was trying to consolidate separately from the 1939 Tripuri Congress itself, as significant ideological differences emanated from the CPI leadership's propensity to be ‘dictated upon by Britain (CPGB) and Moscow.’¹⁴⁶ The fanaticism over this leaflet was due to the fact that the empire was already hardpressed with the initiation of the war and the anxiety stemming from the nationalists taking advantage of that vulnerability. The possibility of imprisoning one of the most influential leftist labour leaders was also quite alluring.

5.5.3 Monitoring Words: Seditious Speech and Meetings in Colonial Calcutta

The labour leaders or workers' representatives delivered their speeches at organisational meetings, processions, or union rallies, and frequently got booked under section 124(A).¹⁴⁷

¹⁴² KPM/SB/00770/05, Search at the office at Chatkal Majdur Union at 2, Munshi Bazar Road on 05.10.39 for red Bengali & Hindi leaflets by Bankim Mukherjee (property Seized)

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ KPM/SB/00771/05, Search of the office of the Bengal Chatkal majdur union at Narkeldanga Branch at 98, Narkeldanga Main Road on 05.10.39 for red Bengal and Hindi Leaflets by Bankim Mukherjee (Property Seized).

¹⁴⁶ NMML Oral Interview Transcripts. Interview of Niharendu Dutt- Mazumdar by Hari Dev Sharma, Calcutta: 27 February, 1984.

¹⁴⁷ 124(A), Sedition: Whoever by words, either spoken or written, or by signs, or by visible representations, or otherwise, brings or attempts to excite dissatisfaction towards the Government established by law in India. (India Code, Digital Repository of All Central and State Acts.).

These gatherings were generally infiltrated by plain-clothed detectives and inspectors, who took down detailed notes on which charge sheets were prepared, and the cases were filed. The apparent disenchantment with Gandhian mass politics from the 1920s led to the formation of a committee called 'League Against Gandhism' by the members of the underground CPI party in 1934.¹⁴⁸ It was the perfect legal mechanism to forward its organisational agenda among the workers. There were frequent meetings held under the aegis of this committee, which was closely monitored by the police.¹⁴⁹ Generally, there were no confrontations between the party members and the detective inspectors in these meetings, as they went incognito and were instructed to remain passive observers. A platoon of uniformed police officers was generally stationed near the meeting places, and they would be called upon in case the need arose.¹⁵⁰ The trade unionists' meetings were often dispersed by force and declared 'unlawful assembly.'¹⁵¹ However, situations often spiralled out of control at times. In 1934, a case was filed against eighteen labour activists under Sections 143, 323, and 506 of IPC (all unlawful regulating assemblies) for organising and attending a meeting of the League Against Gandhism at Albert Hall, Calcutta, on 14 July 1934.¹⁵² This public gathering had a good turnout of over 1000 audiences, as most eminent labour leaders from various socialist parties were scheduled to address the crowd.¹⁵³

The public gathering initially started lively. However, there was discontent among the audience when Rajani Mukherjee, a veteran socialist trade unionist, began delivering his speech in English.¹⁵⁴ As the crowds became unruly and attempted to climb up the dias, one of the plain-clothed inspectors, Khagendranath Mukherji, jeered at the leaders for failing to regulate the crowd.¹⁵⁵ This did not sit well with the communist leader, Ranen Sen. Soon, an

¹⁴⁸ KPM/SB/00101/05, Government Enquiries in Communist, and Labour Affairs.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Ibid. Report on the case by S.Sen, Chief Presidency Magistrate, Calcutta, dated 23 November, 1934.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

altercation followed. Sen was accused of losing his temper: 'clenching his empty fist in a manner as if he had a pistol in his hand waving it vigorously,' he threatened, 'I will shoot the Police.'¹⁵⁶ This 'rather disparaging reference to the police' did not sit well with police inspector Mukherjee, who responded, 'If you repeat this, I will have you arrested.'¹⁵⁷ Before the situation further deteriorated, Niharendu Dutt Mazumdar pulled Sen back and shoved him out of the hall's back door. Soon the audience was riotous, and there was 'absolute pandemonium in the hall.'¹⁵⁸ The situation was reviewed by the inspector in charge, B.N.Sengupta, who declared the meeting an 'unlawful assembly' and booked all the accused under section 143A.¹⁵⁹

All the accused pleaded not guilty. The defence put forward the matter as a 'culmination of the high-handedness of the police' and arraigned the prosecutor and witnesses of distorting Ranen's statement, who denied ever uttering those words.¹⁶⁰ The Chief Magistrate judiciously ruled that it was a simple case unnecessarily blown out of proportion by both the prosecutors and the defence. It was a disorderly meeting followed by altercations between two organisers and a few policemen, and nobody was hurt or assaulted.¹⁶¹ The witnesses, the judge ruled, had no brassbound evidence of Ranen's threat, hence have 'exaggerated the affair and magnified its seriousness to a great extent.'¹⁶² He had little reliance on the 'clenched fists,' 'big rolling eyes,' and 'the angry attitude,' as to him it was all a highly coloured story of 'petty rowdyism,' which is quite a common feature of specific meetings.¹⁶³ In short, he opined that the prosecution was ill-advised and uncalled for. The judge concluded:

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ KPM/SB/101/05.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

I have already observed the threat was ridiculously histrionic one at best and it would have been best to have taken no notice of it at all. After all Inspector Khagen was there only to watch the proceedings and not to champion or uphold the prestige of the Police force. By interfering with the proceedings (however disturbed they may have been), he directly brought on its ultimate dispersal and was thus deprived of the opportunity of duly discharging his duties, viz. reporting and watching the proceedings of an apparently important political meeting.

Once the police had made their presence known and annoyed the organisers by threats to arrest Ranen and so forth, it is natural that a feeling of resentment should arise against them in an assembly of this nature...I do not believe, however, that it came to anything like a concerted attack on them.¹⁶⁴

Hence, it is evident that despite the implementation of arbitrary repressive measures of the colonial state, ensuring a conviction remained a tricky issue within the British Indian legal system. This dichotomy of the colonial administration, where the rhetoric of liberalism often came in confrontation with the inherently oppressive nature of the colonial state, was one of the hallmarks of British imperialism in India.

In the year 1937, Calcutta witnessed a wave of popular uprisings. The city was already reeling under virulent communal tension from the decade's latter half.¹⁶⁵ The first provincial government under the Muslim League further precipitated it.¹⁶⁶ The Second General Jute strike was around the corner, and there was a countrywide uproar for the unconditional release of the Andaman prisoners.¹⁶⁷ The state responded by heavily coming down on activists of all shades. The use of 124A of IPC has become more indiscriminate than ever. In a public meeting of CSP held on 8 April, Dayaram Beri, a senior trade unionist, was booked under section 124A and served nine months of imprisonment while addressing a labour

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ KPM/SB/00107/05, Reasons for Strong Measures Against Communism.

¹⁶⁶ Refer to Basu, Does Class Matter?, pp. 223-267.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid. pp. 243-247. KPM/SB/00091/05, Ref: -- Brochures entitled –

(1) Andamans

(2) Repression in Chittagong

rally.¹⁶⁸ Under similar circumstances, veteran socialist labour activist Shibnath Banerjee's speech titled, '*War on Labour*' delivered around the jute belt of the city's northern suburb, was deemed seditious. The colonial authorities proposed persecution of Banerjee under 124A. Banerjee was held responsible for fomenting hatred against the state through 'bitter Anti-British propaganda'.¹⁶⁹

5.5.4 Politics of Optics: Ban on Banners, Placards, Flags, Slogans, and Processions.

The politics of visual representation has always been a key to political communication. Optics is a metaphor for visual perception in political events. Collective memory is moulded, manipulated, or erased according to changing power dynamics in state policies. The British government erected colossal, majestic, and ceremonious buildings at the city's heart to express its domination and authority over the subject population. At the same time, it was assiduously partaking in implementing provisions to root out any insignia of any dissenting culture or ideology, which worked as visual inducement for the public memory.¹⁷⁰ The colonial authorities dreaded the red flag with or without the symbol of 'the hammer and sickle' as an intimation of demur, defiance, and insubordination, whereas for the colonised workers, it embodied a vision for an egalitarian future. The colonial government's paranoia of the Bolshevik menace mushroomed to an obsession as detailed reports on strikes or processions noted the precise number of red flags being carried, the inscriptions on the banners, the slogans hurled, and the exact time of the calls or its frequency.¹⁷¹ So, visual mediums of protest came directly under the ambit of the colonial state's vigilance.

In an extensive letter addressed by the Superintendent of Police of IB in Jalpaiguri district Intelligence to The Deputy Inspector General of Police IB CID Calcutta in September

¹⁶⁸ Home (Pol.) 297/37. Case under Dayaram Beri under 124 A.

¹⁶⁹ Home (Pol.) 236/37. Proposed prosecution of Shibnath Banerjee under 124 A or 153 A for a speech, "war on Labour." Also, Home (Pol.) 390/37, Proposed Prosecutions in respect of Speeches delivered in Calcutta on 4th, 5th, 9th, August.

¹⁷⁰ McGary, Aidan, Itrir Erhart, Hande Eslen-Ziya, Olu Jenzen, and Umut Korkut, eds., *The Aesthetics of Global Protest: Visual Culture and Communication*. Amsterdam: Amstrerdam University Press, 2020.

¹⁷¹ KPM/SB/07310/05, General Strikes.

1929, it was ascertained that a uniform policy regarding carrying of revolutionary banners and placards during a procession throughout Bengal needed to be adopted.¹⁷² The Superintendent marked that in recent processions, the participants may carry the usual banners of 'Up with the Revolution' and 'Down with Imperialism.'¹⁷³ In his opinion,

*this is not an occasion for a notice U/S 30(2) of the Police Act calling upon intending processionists to take out license, under which, of course, the carrying of banners could be forbidden. There are two reasons for this conclusion:- that there is not a slightest apprehension of the breach of peace, and (2) that we do not want to give the processionists an exaggerated idea of their own importance. At the same time, the carrying of purely revolutionary banners in public constitutes an offence under section 124 A of the Indian Penal Code. This sanction is of course, non-cognisable, and any prosecution under its provision needs the sanction of the Govt.*¹⁷⁴

So, a sanction that would assist in regulating the use of seditious posters or banners during a procession was sought. The main concern was not to divulge the anxiety that was intrinsically brewing within the surveillance operatives which would translate to a display of weakness, and also frugality in policing administration. The concluding remarks in the letter echo this concern, 'We do not wish to stop orderly and lawful processions provided there is no apprehension of a breach of peace, but we must deal with any breach of the law.'¹⁷⁵ This ensued in a general memorandum issued from the office of Deputy Inspector General of Police, IB to all the Additional Superintendents in charge of District Intelligence branches regarding action to be taken in respect of processions where 'revolutionary banners and placards are carried and in which revolutionary cries or songs are shouted or sung.'¹⁷⁶ The government directive read, 'The names of those organising or leading the procession and those carrying banners or taking any other prominent part should be taken down and embodied in a report. This report should be submitted to the District Legislature, who will

¹⁷² IB 178/1929 354/29.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

consider whether a prosecution under section 124A, IPC, is adequate and then report to the government.¹⁷⁷ The regulations were thoroughly exploited to curb militant trade unionists in the early 1930s. At a public meeting at Sradhanand Park on 10 May 1934, addressing a gathering of match workers against the government's insouciance regarding the general well-being of the working-class, prominent labour leaders Ranen Sen, Somnath Lahiri, and Genda Singh hurled the slogan, '*British Raj Barbad*'. The slogan was deemed seditious and resulted in their conviction under section 124A of IPC.¹⁷⁸

From 1936 the Public Security Act assumed a draconian shape, as it acquired the status of umbrella legislation, and almost all aspects of popular and mass agitations were brought under its direct orbit.¹⁷⁹ In 1936 The Commissioner of Police issued a draft notice to be sent to the president of the prominent unions organising protest meetings in the presidency town of Calcutta and the adjacent suburbs, where restrictions on slogans, posters, and placards with specific inscriptions were imposed. It distinctly stated, 'flags or banners with the emblem of the hammer, sickle, and star or other combinations that were displayed are now, therefore, under the power conferred upon by the Bengal Public Security Act (xxii of 1932), is punishable by law.'¹⁸⁰ Painstaking lists of slogans, banners, and inscriptions on flags were compiled and circulated across police stations to keep vigilance. Over seventy-one slogans were deemed seditious. The hurling of *Majdoor Hukumaat ki Jai* (*Hail! To A Working Class Government*), *Duniyaan ka Majdoor Ek ho* (*Workers of the World Unite*), *Majdoor Raj Zindabad* (*All Hail! The Rule of the Working Class*), and notably '*Majdoor Raj ka Jai*' was treasonous.¹⁸¹ *Majdoor Raj*, or '*The rule of the Working Class*', was a phrase that provoked a frenzied panic among the authorities as books, pamphlets, and other propaganda tools encompassing it were prohibited promptly.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Roy, Subodh, ed. *Communism in India: Unpublished Documents 1925-34*, Vol III. Calcutta: National Book Agency, 1997, pp 332-346.

¹⁷⁹ KPM/SB/00079/05, Actions against Communists under Public Security Act.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

Public processions were either wholly banned or allowed at certain places and at particular times with prior permission from the colonial authorities, given they were labour rallies not tainted with any political vendetta or associated with any communist faction.¹⁸² An order issued from the Commissioner's office on 7 August 1937 instructed that in the interest of preservation of 'public peace and public safety, any procession or public assemblies is prohibited in the area bound by Strand Road, Canning Street, Radha Bazar Street, Chowrangee Road, Ochterlony Road, and Auckland Road in the exercise of the power conferred by the sub-section 4 of Section 62A of The Calcutta Act.'¹⁸³ 1937 saw the Second General Jute Strike, coupled with innumerable public outcry against the detention of Andaman prisoners. The two often overlapped, and rallies, processions, and meetings took the city by storm. The areas mentioned above were associated with the most militant of working-class activities and were particularly prominent in the city, the nerve centre of colonial administration. These were office *paras* (office colonies), dotted with numerous clerical agencies, and as a bustling business hub, were an obvious choice for holding public processions.¹⁸⁴ It was a straightforward strategy to keep these areas out of bounds from the trade union activities instead of depriving them of petty bourgeoisie support and the unwarranted attention of the masses.

5.6 Interception

Interception of communication via inland channels and posts was one of the most notorious organs of colonial surveillance infrastructure in Bengal. Huge sacks of letters were taken from prominent and most active post offices of the city, like Park Street and Bowbazar, associated with international communications.¹⁸⁵ The process was labour intensive as mail and packages were opened or partially opened, copies were kept, and they were either

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ KPM/SB/00739/05, KPM/SB/00740/05. (Communist Party of India Post Boxes).

delivered or withheld.¹⁸⁶ It entailed a two-pronged onslaught on the movement. First, it inflicted a significant blow to the unionists' organisational efforts because intelligence about secret union meetings and programs relating to strikes was often leaked. However, perhaps the most deleterious impact of uninhabited interception was depriving the movement of its much-needed financial aid. In his memoir, veteran trade unionist Muzaffar Ahmad, often recollects how at the movement's inception, there was a constant paucity of funds for working-class organisations as monitory help from the international fraternity sent via M.N. Roy was withheld by the police.¹⁸⁷ Saumyendranath, while on his sojourn in Europe in the late 1920s and early 1930s, arranged funding for the party organ, but on enquiry later, Secretary Abdul Halim informed that not a penny reached him.¹⁸⁸ Despite money being sent through various channels, the colonial state's surveillance interception proved to be a stumbling block for party organisation. There were severe implications of cutting down the sources of the strike funds, the appeal for which was made from small clusters of jute or cotton mills from various places in East Bengal, like Narayanguj and Barisal, to secretaries of established trade unions in the same sector at Calcutta.¹⁸⁹ In the hope of intelligence, the colonial surveillance system intercepted letters to editors of leading dailies like *Anandabazar Patrika* appealing for better press coverage for strikes in industrial belts of Eastern Bengal.¹⁹⁰

The police reports demarcated certain post-boxes as 'Communist Post-boxes', controlled for a certain period or at least three months on receiving intel from anonymous tips. ¹⁹¹ A sample memorandum issued in 1941 from the office of the DCP to the Under Secretary of the Postal Department and forwarded to the officers of IB and SB for particulars of arrangement of Interceptions stated, at Cossipore Road Calcutta, a post-box of Communist Party is detected, and the examination of the correspondences was likely to yield results

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Ahmad, *Somokaler Kotha*.

¹⁸⁸ IB 316/26 320/26. (Bengal Peasants' Workers Party).

¹⁸⁹ KPM/SB/01003/05, Kesoram Cotton Mill Sramjibi Sangha.

¹⁹⁰ KPM/SB/03122/05, Hosiery Worker's Union (With Secondary Folder).

¹⁹¹ KPM/SB/000531/05, C.P.I. – Interceptions.

which would be helpful to the department.¹⁹² The DCP added, 'I would therefore request that an order be issued for the interception of all correspondence to address at Cossipore Road post-office for a period of three months. Articles intercepted in the post should be delivered to me or to an officer deputed by me.'¹⁹³ Notably, the interception did not just entail tracing correspondences exchanged via mail or post offices. It was aimed at tracing out every possible channel the trade union activists utilised to share organisational intel. The word 'Communist Post-Box' was applied even to activists or party members physically exchanging important messages.¹⁹⁴ The term has been in official use since the early thirties. A report released by the Government of India and compiled by IB in 1933, *India and Communism*, intended for officers of the Crown, who needed a general knowledge about the working of communism in and around India to be efficient in their vendetta, attests to this fact.¹⁹⁵ While discussing foreign aid and funding, it mentioned a Ram Charan Lal Sharma, often referred to as the 'comrade from Pondicherry' in secret correspondences between Ahmad and revolutionaries from abroad,

...mention must be made of a system of post boxes which was operating at the other end of India. In Pondicherry there was the late Ram Charan Lal Sharma....For several years (almost up to the time of his death in 1931) he acted as Roy's main channel of communication with India. He is known to have handled, in the course of duties in this connection, letters, propaganda material, and funds amounting to several hundred pounds sterling. ¹⁹⁶

In the 1940s, the CPI gained unprecedented popularity among college students in the city as these educational institutions emerged as hubs of radical mass politics. In 1941, the police were tailing Jnanen Dhar, a student of Ripon Law College, who was suspected to be the 'link and courier' between Dhiren Mullick, Benoy Bagchi, Lily De, and Dhiren De.¹⁹⁷ All

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ KPM/SB/00739/05.

¹⁹⁵ *India and Communism*, Revised up to 1st January 1935, Compiled in IB Home Department GOB, 1933, India and Communism secret British Document edited by Ashoke Kumar Mukhopadhyay, NBA, 1997.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid, p. 128

¹⁹⁷ KPM/SB/00531/05.

were listed as ex-detunes and were engaged in organising workers at the Narkeldanga labour centres.¹⁹⁸ Another resident of Harrison Road (in the vicinity of the party office), Prodyot Kar, an erstwhile student, and a good musician, was marked as a party sympathiser entrusted with the safekeeping of party letters and literature by Mullick.¹⁹⁹ For Usha Dhar, a medical student of Campbell Medical School, the report used the words, 'employed as a Communist Post-Box of Benoy Bagchi and Mullick.'²⁰⁰ So, the 'Communist post box' was a metaphor for an extended scope of vigilance through interception, transcending its literal meaning.²⁰¹

Particularly riveting were the measures that the trade union activists in colonial Bengal were taking recourse to counter interceptions. From using secret aliases to writing in code languages, cypher letters, and invisible ink, they embraced every possible avenue to evade vigilance. Letters intercepted were often filed as illegibly signed or riddled with phrases like 'you know who' or 'as the place of the meeting decided before' to conceal the identity of activists and safeguard organisational information from the repressive authorities.²⁰² An IB report filed in the CID Department of Calcutta in June 1941 discloses a unique phenomenon. The inspector monitored a Punjabi Hotel opposite Gunja Store at no. 23, Cossipore Road. He reported, 'I have come to know that party absconders sometimes take their food in this hotel and use this as a post-box for communication with other suspects'²⁰³ This testifies how modern democratic consciousness and proletarian solidarity were soaring in the closing decades of colonial rule, from the union offices tucked in the lanes of North Calcutta to the vendors in the street, from the petty bourgeoisies feeling the brunt of post-war recession to the cooks and bearers in dingy eateries, multifarious aspirations, anger, and hopelessness collated to give way to a distinct language of the class, brimming with the spirit of anti-imperialism and egalitarianism.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Petrie, *Communism in India 1924-27*.

²⁰³ KPM/SB/00531/05.

5.7 Searches:

Sudden, unannounced raids and searches, with or without a warrant, were emerging as a helpful weapon in the toolbox for the colonial crusade against the burgeoning radicalisation of the working-class population from the late 1920s. Irrefutable, concrete evidence was the bedrock of making solid cases against the trade unionists, which resulted in sure-shot incrimination. The primary targets were trade union offices, party offices, factory floors, bookshops, book depots, and printing presses. The memoirs of prominent trade unionists, like Muzaffar Ahmad or Saumyendranath Tagore, reveal the apprehensions of booksellers and dealers of central Calcutta when they approached them for communist literature. Ahmad recounted an incident from his earlier days of activism when he was trying to acquaint himself with the 'language of the class,' whereby he paid a visit to the shop of Chakraborty Chatterjee and Co. at College Square of Calcutta.²⁰⁴ His usual attire in those days comprised *Sherwanis* and *Pajamas*. However, he donned a *dhuti* and a shirt that day.²⁰⁵

The enquiry regarding literature concerning labour issues set off a wave of alarm among the employees at the shop. After a string of muffled discussions and exchanges of unnerved looks among themselves, they anxiously asked about Ahmad's whereabouts.²⁰⁶ Sensing the apparent apprehension of him being an SB agent, Ahmad clarified his position by taking the reference of a mutual friend.²⁰⁷ It ensured his tryst with the communist intellectual practices and a lifelong association with Chakraborty and Chatterjee, who were among the first book dealers to engage in the precarious exercise of importing communist literature from Britain in the face of rampant harassment from the intelligence bureau officers.²⁰⁸ A surprise raid resulted in the apprehending of Ahmad, Philip Spratt, Shamshul Huda, and Ayodhyaprasad in the Meerut Conspiracy Case in March 1929 from the WPP office at 2/1 European Asylum Lane. Around dawn, the residents were woken up by loud thuds on the door, what they thought would be the delivery of an urgent telegram. Halim opened the door

²⁰⁴ Ahmad, *Somokaler Kotha*, p.20.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

expecting a postman but was cornered by constables and officers of the Special Branch instead.²⁰⁹ The 1930s saw fresh debates on the acquirement of warrants,' the legality of searching bookshops about stocking objectionable literature for sale', and 'seizure of literature which is suspected to be objectionable by the police'.²¹⁰ The SB and IB officials were pushing for new legal provisions that would expand the scope of the existing laws (The Police Act or The Sea Customs) in this regard. The Chief Magistrate, however, ruled out that the existing arrangements were sufficient and 'no further action is necessary'.²¹¹ Nevertheless, there was apparent discontent concerning the issue among the police officials, as they expected a greater degree of legal flexibility which would ensure a greater degree of power in the hands of the police.

With the level of repression escalating through the 1930s, the party offices became vulnerable to frequent and unannounced raids by intelligence officers. A report filed by an Inspector of SB in 1934 discloses that since 1932 the Bengal Committee's office of CPI at 41 Zakaria Street was routinely searched in the hope of confiscation of propaganda materials.²¹² The materials confiscated ranged from flags to literature, comprising pamphlets, manifestos, translations of standard Communist literature, and other books on labour mobilisation written by trade unionists, which were printed and circulated on behalf of the party for not only propaganda purposes but also for raising funds. A search of the office on 18 July 1934 resulted in what the official reports delineated as 'A large number of proscribed books, Communist leaflets and literature, etc.'²¹³ The list of the confiscated materials included a flag of The Soviet Union, a copy of *Communist Istihar* (*Communist Manifesto*) translated by Halim, three copies of *Aprakashito Rajnoitik Itihas*(*Unpublished Political History*) by Dr.

²⁰⁹ Ahmad, Muzaffar. *Amar Jibon o Bharater Communist Party* (My Life and The Communist Party of India). Calcutta: NBA, 1969, pp 458, and pp. 509-11.

²¹⁰ KPM /SB/ 00074/05

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² Majundar, Manju Kumar and Bhanudeb Dutta, eds. *Banglar Communist Andoloner Itihas Anusandhan* (Search for a History of the Communist Movement in Bengal), Vol 4. Calcutta: Monisha, 2006, pp. 77-78.

²¹³ Ibid.

Bhupendranath Dutta, which was proscribed, and six copies of *the Communist Bulletin* among other materials.²¹⁴

Based on these historical shreds of evidence, we can ascertain the fact that it was chiefly the Communist party-affiliated properties and the trade unionists which were at the receiving end of the colonial state's suppression. However, raids and searches at Congress-allied or INC-leaning labour organisations, like the Congress Socialist Party (CSP), spiked in the years following the Quit India Movement (1942). CSP's militant role during the Quit India agitation in the absence of high command of INC was the apparent reason behind such repression.²¹⁵ The CPI post its adaptation of the People's War line was at a substantial level of concord with the British government, which made the police divert its concentration to the other socialist and nationalist organisations.²¹⁶ Several properties, including residential buildings linked to CSP, were subjected to raids on 27 November 1943 at an IB requisition.²¹⁷ At an address of 147 Harrison Road occupied by Sher Singh Bhatia and Bholanath Sharma, the following things were seized and filed under the heading 'Mischievous Anti-British Propaganda.'²¹⁸ Listing a few of them would assist in comprehending the nature of literature or the properties deemed seditious or liable to confiscation.

1. A copy of *Hindustan Humara*, a nationalist Hindi daily, quoted the alleged remark of Sir John Lort Williams, ex-judge, Calcutta High Court, 'The police in India are capable of vindictiveness as long as no one has the power to hit back.' It was flagged as 'intended to incite hatred towards police.'

2. A pamphlet titled, '*Who will reap the Whirlwind?*', by Sir John Herbert, ex-Governor, accused the present Governor of Bengal, the ex-viceroy, and the present Secretary of the State of India of ignoring the food problem in Bengal.

3. Translation of Communist Manifesto

4. Tribute to Gandhi.

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ KPM/SB/03103/05, Braithwaites Workers Union.

²¹⁶ Ibid.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ Ibid.

5. One cyclostyled piece of paper containing questions and answers characterises Mr. Fazlul Huq as a modern 'Mirzafar'. The Muslim League-led provincial Bengal government was perceived as nothing but colonial collaborators. Hence, a parallel between Mirzafar and the betrayer at Plassey was drawn.

6. *Must not Happen Again*, another CSP-sanctioned pamphlet suggesting that there should be no more volunteer support during the subsequent uprising and that revolt should be widespread. It condemned the alleged bribery by high officials in India and described CPI men as hired agents of the government.²¹⁹

The Congress- CPI feud and interparty factional rivalry took an extremely bitter turn by 1939, as mutual suspicion rose over CPI's allegiance to the cause of Moscow at the cost of national independence. During the Quit India Movement, the communist trade unionists were labelled as collaborators of the imperialists betraying the nationalist cause.²²⁰ In another raid at the office of Mahalaxmi Mills, the union of which had a CSP affiliation, a bank account slip used for disbursing funds across Port Trust Unions, Bird & Company, Cox and King, and the Braithwaite Union was found.²²¹ It led to a few arrests and the freezing of the account. So, besides providing evidence for incrimination, it also led the police to strike at the movement through disruption of its financial channels.

As independence drew near, the anxiety of partition and the communal riot of 1946 loomed over the city. Strikes became more vigorous, and working-class radicalisation was at its peak; not surprisingly, the police repression escalated.²²² The popular press vehemently admonished the police and the administration for causing extreme inconvenience and harassment to senior and respected trade unionists. *Swadhinata*, the CPI mouthpiece, covered the search of the Bengal Provincial Trade Union's (BPTUC) office on 8 February 1947 at 249 Bowbazar Street.²²³ A general strike was called on 5 February; backed by BPTUC, scores of

²¹⁹ Ibid. List provided in the File.

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² *Nationalist* 31 January, 1947.

²²³ *Swadhinata*, 9 February, 1947.

workers took to the streets against the bourgeois-driven colonial Raj.²²⁴ What followed was the merciless quelling of the movement on the part of the state. The BPTUC office search yielded nothing substantial, as the daily reported, ‘the police did not get anything relevant,’ but it divulges the desperation of the colonial state at the closing years of its rule.²²⁵ The fact that the office of the most docile, law-abiding, moderate labour federation was searched testifies to how the state was grasping at straws with legal measures to achieve successful convictions.

However, often the searches yielded no substantial results because, in the face of mounting state repression, the activists were devising ways to move and store pamphlets, handbills, and other seditious propaganda materials dispersed at places that would be outside the purview of surveillance. Original manuscripts were burnt immediately after the first type in the printing press was prepared. For example, a raid at Shani Ranjan Press, 25/2 Mohan Bagan Row, in August 1942 led to the confiscation of over 3850 copies of a prominent pro-Marxist Journal, *Shanibarar Chhithi's* (Saturday Letters) *Bhadra* issue.²²⁶ However, despite combing the place for the original manuscript, the police could not get a hold of it; hence framing a case became impossible.²²⁷ Mentions have already been made of young college students whom senior Communist activists employed for exchanging intel.²²⁸ These men and women often used to house a substantial amount of propaganda materials, which lay in plain

²²⁴ Ibid

²²⁵ *Swadhinata*, 9 February, 1947.

²²⁶ KPM/SB/02584/05, Proscribed and Prohibited Publications.

²²⁷ Ibid.

²²⁸ KPM/SB/00531/05.

sight in their houses. A significant increase in raids at ordinary residential quarters across the city was noticed in the 1940s.²²⁹ This was the primary reason fuelling the paranoia of the Raj.

5.8 *Goyendatantra* or Spyarchy: The Facet of Manual Surveillance

In October 1937, Humphry House, an erstwhile professor of English literature at Presidency College, published a 24-page pamphlet titled *I Spy with my Little Eye*, which was a satirical take on the ‘police administration’ in Calcutta and the absurdity of the espionage network regulating every sphere of public existence.²³⁰ House's take was a direct reflection of the exasperation that the citizens, especially the intellectuals and the political activists, had about the unbridled vigilantism of the police that they were being subjected to. From Union offices to the workshop floors, the police were on qui vive for any Anti-Empire activities. Popular contemporary daily, *Jugantar*, while reviewing the book, urged the readers to contemplate, ‘In the future, whether we are headed towards a rule by detectives in our country?’ The word *Goyendatantra* roughly, translating to ‘spyarchy,’ was becoming the steadfast reality of the province in the late 1930s.²³¹ Manual surveillance was the most competent and effective wing of colonial surveillance. From shadowing the trade union leaders at their every step, keeping meticulous travel and meeting records across the province to maintaining painstaking details (their physical appearance, demeanour, attire) about visitors frequenting the union office, joining the meetings, or even keeping distant communist links, the state ensured that no aspect of their lives escapes vigilance.

²²⁹ KPM/SB/00781/05,

Search at: ---

1) Hardinge Hostel – Room No.36

2) Haripal 2nd Lane 5/1

3) Nepal Neogi Street 3

4) 68/A Mayer Pore Road

5) 3/B, kebal Krishna sen street

6) Ashutosh College

For a white Bengali Leaflet entitled Samrajyabade Juddha O Communist Partyr Ghosona. (Nothing Seized)

²³⁰ Refer to Note 2 of this Chapter.

²³¹ *Jugantar*, 7 November 1937.

Spies, watchers, and informers formed the bedrock of this all-embracing, exhaustive, and substantially extensive network, which was closely monitored by the British colonial state in India. The availability of a cheap workforce has been a hallmark of surveillance operations in the Global South, the origin of which can be traced back to logistical arrangements of colonial surveillance infrastructure. The office of SB tapped in young, unemployed, and needy men to work as informers. They often approached the Communist trade unionists in the guise of individuals dedicated to the revolutionary cause.²³² Though by the 1930s, the communists were increasingly cautious before incorporating individuals into the inner circle of the party and giving out crucial intelligence about their grassroots activities.²³³ The police and capitalists were bedfellows in this regard. The Manager tracked and singled out workers on the factory floor who could be lured to betray their colleagues for monetary favours from the authorities. Often workers referring to themselves as ‘your most faithful servant’ in correspondence with the manager *Raj* proved their allegiance by spying on the striking co-workers.²³⁴ They took the membership of the unions to attend the meetings to report the police about the course of future action. The success rate of strikebreaking was directly proportional to the strength of insider intelligence.

This gruesome constant monitoring process transpired into inevitable arrests, grilling interrogations, and even convictions. Citing a case against two trade unionists in 1940, Ahmad and Lahiri would assist in illustrating the vastness of these networks.²³⁵ Lahiri and Ahmad, both senior communist labour activists, were sentenced to two months of rigorous imprisonment each under the Defence of India Rules on 29 February 1940 by Mr. R Gupta, the Chief Provincial Magistrate.²³⁶ They were charged with having to defy an order of the Government of Bengal, issued under Defence of India Rules on 14 February, directing them to quit Calcutta and its suburbs (comprising of the central jute belts) within 24 hours from

²³² Refer, Tagore, *Jatri*, pp. 81.82.

²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ KPM/SB/03114/05, Indian Transport Workers Union.

²³⁵ KPM/SB/00194/05, Cases against: --- 1) Muzaffar Ahmed
2) Somnath Lahiri for violation of Govt. Orders (DI rules).

²³⁶ Ibid.

when they were being served the notice.²³⁷ They both pleaded non-guilty and, in their testimonies, rigorously and zealously stressed their right to stay in the vicinity of their place of employment.²³⁸ The Magistrate, in his judgment, found them to have flouted Section 21 of DIA and ruled against them. However, he observed that a heavy sentence was uncalled for as the accused had broken such an order for the first time. ²³⁹

After their release from prison, every effort was made to keep them out of the critical factories, ‘exterminating them from certain industrial areas in Bengal.’²⁴⁰ A restraining order was served to Ahmad under Section 26 of DIA rules from the office of CP of Calcutta. It read, ‘Muzaffar Ahmad shall reside and remain in the area comprised in the following limits, namely, the area bounded by Colootola Street on the north, Wellington Street, up to Dharmatala Street and College Street up on the east, Dharmatala Street, on the south, Bentinck Street and lower Chitpur Road upto Colootola Street crossing on the West.’²⁴¹ In addition, he was prohibited from communicating or associating with any person who might not comply with the order and was not allowed to participate in the dissemination of news or propagation of opinions, either through the press or platform.²⁴² Some watchers were deployed near his residence to ensure compliance with the order. However, Ahmad and Lahiri left for Krishnanagar on 5 April before being served the order.²⁴³ Upon receiving the urgent telegram from IB, the DIB watchers were deputed to the Sealdah Railway station. Two watchers, Assistant Superintendent (ASI) Mohammad Musa and W.C. Nirode Kumar Bose, were vested with the job.²⁴⁴ The report filed by the IB officer, Hemchandra Dey, elucidated, ‘I beg to report that I, along with Gobinda Sanyal, shadowed the suspect Muzaffar Ahmad and Lahiri from Sealdah to Krishnanagar. At 7:30 hours, they left Sealdah by Up Chittagong

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ Ibid.

²³⁹ *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, 5 March 1940.

²⁴⁰ KPM/SB/00194/05.

²⁴¹ Ibid.

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

Mail, and at 10:30, they reached Krishnanagar Railway Station, where we pointed them to ASI Musa and Bose. They further followed them and reported to the District IB, Nadia.²⁴⁵ They were tailed through East Bengal as they headed for Barisal to address a political gathering on labour issues at Ashwini Kumar Town Hall on 21 April 1940.²⁴⁶ A note from SP of Khulna to the Deputy Inspector General of Police, IB, Calcutta, on 13 April mentioned, 'Lahiri(JL 114) and Ahmad (JL 138) left this district on the night of 12.4.40 for Barisal by the Barisal Express Steamer under surveillance.'²⁴⁷

These interrogations also divulge a society that was steeped in communal and caste bias. As autobiographies of leaders like, Ahmad reveal how often upper-caste Hindu *bhadrolok* inspectors insinuated the possibility of him converting his Hindu comrades into Islam and instilling in them sacrilegious habits like the consumption of beef.²⁴⁸ Though in the garb of sheer tomfoolery, it discloses Raj's long-established policy of Islamophobia and suspicion towards a particular community forming the erstwhile ruling gentry.²⁴⁹ Others like Saumydranath Tagore, with an established pedigree, were often castigated for representing the interests of these lowly lives betraying his upper-class ethos and pristine upbringing.²⁵⁰ The casual comments on his adorning *khadi* and sporting long hair had an implicit tone of moral policing engrafted in these officials' psyche.²⁵¹ Going through the police and intelligence records, it becomes apparent that the Muslim-majority areas in the city, especially the ghettos, were under tighter vigilance. However, solely attributing it to the communal mindset of the police force would be stretching it overly far since the force had a significant number of Muslim officials on duty. These areas were the nucleus of militant labour activism. The port areas around Kidderpore were dotted with the most radical trade

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ *Hindustan Standard*, 21 April, 1940.

²⁴⁷ KPM/SB/00194/05. Also see, KPM/SB/00195/05, Action under the defence India Rules against Communist and Labour agitators.

²⁴⁸ Ahmad, *Amar Jibon*, pp. 74.

²⁴⁹ Ibid. Also see Chattapodhyay, *An Early Communist*, pp. 125-232.

²⁵⁰ Tagore, *Jatri* p. 43.

²⁵¹ Ibid.

union offices, mainly headed by the CPI.²⁵² Also, the port workers' unions were one of the most organised and liveliest in the city, which explains the intensified monitoring of these areas.

5.9 Epilogue: Was Colonial State's Surveillance Ironclad?

To conclude, it is pertinent that we contemplate the efficacy of British colonial surveillance in curbing working-class belligerence and the extent to which it could channel its ordering resources to uphold the official propaganda of the Bolshevik menace in Bengal in the period mentioned above. The existing scholarship in the field often illustrated how the nascent leftist parties withstood the stiffening state and capitalist oppression and often thrived because they garnered a significant mass base among the working-class population. The much-publicised Meerut trials in 1929 against thirty-two trade unionists brought unprecedented publicity to the communists, much to the state's dismay, instead of blowing steam into the official canard of the Communist Menace. Nevertheless, given the initial setback, the decade after, the Second General Jute strike in 1937 was the first significant challenge in Bengal under provincial autonomy for the Fazlul Huq government. However, what this discourse fails to acknowledge is addressing the other side of the coin. How competent, how potent, was the apparatus of Surveillance in Bengal?²⁵³

Several factors plagued the surveillance apparatus of the British colonial state in Bengal throughout the 1930s, and the majority of them were resilient enough to persist throughout the closing decades of colonial rule. Firstly, the vexed issue of legality, with which we initiated the chapter, needs further contemplation. The reason behind the real obsession of the colonial state with legality is the crux of decoding its drive for surveillance and governing principles. The futility of using brute force to curb any revolutionary upsurge was already established by 1930 while countering the 'terrorist menace,' and a proper legal

²⁵² Unions of the Dockworkers.

²⁵³ Here I draw the framework of my argument from Jon Wilson's argument of how Britain have projected themselves as heroes and conquerors for 300 years, but beneath the veneer of pomp and splendour, British rule in India was anxious, fragile and fostered chaos. Wilson, Jon. *India Conquered: Britain's Raj and the Passions of Empire*. New Delhi: Simon & Schuster India, 2017.

solution was sought. In a letter of 1936, the then DCP of Bengal Police, CES Fairweather, to J.R. Blair, another senior official, expressed his paranoia over the burgeoning connections of the revolutionary terrorists with the communists and the urgent need to review policies regarding it.²⁵⁴ Referring to recent weekly reports and arrests of IB, he was stressing that the Communist impact on terrorism is so explicit that he did not wish to 'labour' it. He writes, 'The real point is whether Government are to recognise this 'new movement' as a serious menace or whether we have to look on helplessly while these people are undermining the whole constitution.'²⁵⁵ The formulation of a Government policy similar to 1932, one regarding revolutionary terrorism, is what he sought regarding the 'Communist menace.'²⁵⁶

Either the government must be convinced that this new movement is serious, or we should leave it alone to develop. The latter is dangerous for several reasons:

- 1. The situation may get beyond control necessitating extremely violent methods to restore order.*
- 2. The police machine will get rusty, and officers indifferent, not to say cynical.*
- 3. The minds of the people will be poisoned rendering the government irresponsible.*

If each case is individually treated without referring to the conspiracy, we shall repeat the mistake of 1930. This new movement can't be dealt in terms of "bombs and revolvers". The "bomb and revolver" test failed in 1930 even with the terrorist conspiracy as a consequence it spread like wildfire. It is only when these movements would be treated as a conspiracy, that a check could be imposed.²⁵⁷

He added that they should remember that, unlike the terrorist movement, the new movement depends a lot on open activities, which will require legislation to bring them within the ambit of the law.²⁵⁸ Moreover, it was conceived that the moral effect of the

²⁵⁴ KPM/SB/00073/05.

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

²⁵⁶ KPM/SB/00158/05, Communism and Violence.

²⁵⁷ KPM/SB/00073/05.

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

knowledge that the government was declaring war on Communism 'root and branch' would be a psychological blow to the party's effort to organise an armed rebellion from below.²⁵⁹ However, as already demonstrated throughout the chapter, legality remained a significant impediment to the surveillance wing's smooth functioning.

The bogey of 'agents of Moscow' was ubiquitous, and anxiety around British officials acting as a 'mole in the crown' was mounting.²⁶⁰ Individuals like Micheal Caritt, who served as an undersecretary to the Government of India, was ardent Communist and members of CPGB.²⁶¹ Throughout his posting during the better half of the 1930s in Calcutta, he collaborated with Communist leaders of AITUC like P.C.Joshi, supplying them with vital official information.²⁶² As the enticement with the invincibility of liberal democracy was waning, many British, as well as Indian officials within the police and the army, were coming under the influence of the revolutionary tide. The apprehension of socialist parties tampering with the loyalty of the army and police was overwhelming, particularly during the war years.²⁶³ A report from the War Department of 1944 mentions serious indiscipline within the Indian Coast Battery, composed entirely of Bengalis from June 1940. It culminated in almost a mutiny, and according to the official enquiry, strong Forward Bloc and CSP elements were exerting their influence within the battery. ²⁶⁴

Besides these, there were fundamental logistical problems that proved to be a handicap for the policing of the movement. The inspectors were ignorant about the content of literature that fell under the purview of proscription (most of which was picked based on the titles). Despite assistance from major publishing houses, they had inordinate difficulty discerning which books should be proscribed. An inspector on duty notes, 'I have been to the three mentioned firms who say that they have nobody who can give an opinion on books in French,

²⁵⁹ Mukhopadhyay, *Communism in India*, p. 171

²⁶⁰ Caritt, Micheal. *A Mole in the Crown: Memories of a British Official in India who Worked with the Communists Underground in the 1930s*. New Delhi: Rupa Publishers, 1986.

²⁶¹ Ibid. Also his handwritten notes available in the Manuscripts section of the IOR, BL.

²⁶² Basu, NMML Oral Interview.

²⁶³ KPM/SB/02581/05, Tampering with the loyalty of the Army.

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

German, and Russian.²⁶⁵ These complexities aggravated manifold during the war years, as the intelligence department was overburdened with proscriptions related to ‘publications that might be misused by the enemy.’²⁶⁶ For safety issues, custom records printing names of vessels on ports were proscribed to sell maps that might reference significant railway routes in the province as the Newman's Indian Bradshaw, a map showing a large-scale inset of Calcutta.²⁶⁷ The vast accumulation of mindlessly collected material transpired in problems, like paucity of space in the stations and even property disposal-related legal truffles. A search conducted post the arrest of Bon Behari Barman, a labour activist, led to the seizing of over 3,581 copies of books.²⁶⁸ Due to insufficient space in the Amherst Street police station, the DCP was pressing for early disposal of the books. A Magistrate's order was obtained to return the books to him after his release. Barman, who left for Meymensingh after his release was sent several notices from the Department (almost requesting him) to come to Calcutta to collect the property. ²⁶⁹ The opinion of public prosecutors was even sought regarding the mode of disposal of properties that were seized and classified as proscribed, objectionable, or innocuous. ²⁷⁰

The system suffered from a lack of coordination between various departments at play. Complaints were launched in 1936 against IB inspectors at Barisal for irregular interception procedures by the provincial postmaster as it disrupted the normal functioning of the postal services in the area.²⁷¹

²⁶⁵ KPM/SB/00062/05, List of Books and News Papers allowed for the Perusal of Detenus.

²⁶⁶ *Calcutta Gazette*, 20 August, 1942.

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

²⁶⁸ KPM/SB/00067/05, Opinion of the Public Prosecutor, Calcutta regarding the mode of disposal of properties seized and classified under the following heads: --

- (a) Literature which are proscribed
- (b) Literature not proscribed but objectionable
- (c) Literature which are Innocuous

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

²⁷¹ KPM/SB/00089/05.

The heavy reliance on local informers used to backfire at times, as false intel would drain the department of its resources. It was notified to the police towards the end of February 1943 that Ahmad, Ranen Sen, Humayun Kabir, Wahiduzaman, and Habiban Rehman Chaudhuri were residents of Barisal from East Bengal, had organised a union of Muslim cooks at 16 Amin Ali Avenue, Calcutta.²⁷² The association of prominent names with the union made the SB officers follow unanimous tips for over five months, but much to their dismay, the union office at the said address was non-existent.²⁷³ Interrogation of several persons from the locality and the house yielded no results, as none could give any definite answers. On further enquiry, it was ascertained that CPI had not formed any such unions. The matter was perused till January 1944, after which it was concluded that it was merely a 'shadow union,' and the tips were dispensed to mislead the police and harass them.²⁷⁴

There is little room to question the web of manual surveillance and its potency. The considerable amount of diligently maintained paperwork attests to it. However, how far had all this knowledge translated to praxis? To what extent were knowledge and power complicit here? According to this assessment, the infrastructure was very much in its infancy, disorganised, and intrinsically flawed to counter ground-level labour radicalisation. What lay under this crusade against communism was unprecedented chaos that showed natural resilience, and it was not until the late 1940s that it got straightened out to an extent. So, despite an impressive stint with 'soft power' countering labour radicalisation in general and anti-colonialism in particular, it could never utterly overcome its initial deficits.²⁷⁵ Hence, it failed to suppress the militancy of the working-class movement in its initial days. Probably, its most enduring and significant impact was providing a veritable structure for postcolonial Surveillance in India. The uncanny resemblance between colonial and postcolonial surveillance establishes the temporality of state supervision and control on its subject or

²⁷² KPM/SB/00996/05, Muslim Cooks' Union.

²⁷³ Ibid.

²⁷⁴ Ibid.

²⁷⁵ Soft Power is the ability to obtain preferred outcomes by attraction or not involving into open wars or altercations. Refer, Nye, Jr, Joseph S. "Soft Power," *Foreign Policy*. No.80, 1990, pp. 153-171.

citizen activities from an era where it wanted to discipline them to an era where it concerns itself with regulating and restricting their access to resources.

Conclusion:

How Intrinsic was Class Struggle in the Struggle for Freedom? Working-Class Protests, Class-Consciousness, and Envisioning Trade Unionism for the Postcolony

Babu Shibnath Banarji, C.S.P. Calcutta delivered a speech in Town Hall, Calcutta, March 1947. Delivered in his speech that he recently returned from England and America and he had an opportunity to attend the House of Lords and House of Commons etc. He realised that the British shall have to quit India very soon as they have got no such power to rule over a country like India. But they were trying to make some pockets in India by creating trouble in several provinces so that they would be able to take shelter in the pockets in the future. But the Indians would not allow them to do so. He instructed all the workers of all political organisations to be on readiness for the last fight.¹

Banerjee's observation in this regard was correctly placed, as by the opening months of 1947, it was certain from the contemporary predicaments that the transfer of power was a forgone conclusion. The Labour government had just assumed office in 1945, inheriting the the mayhem left by Churchill, and public opinion in the metropole too took a discernible pro-independence turn. Clement Attlee, in February 1947 declared that under his premiership, the British Government would grant full 'self-government' to British India by 30 June 1948 at the latest.² The colonial government lost even the last shred of credibility following the abominable violence that engulfed the province during the D-Day violence.³ 1947 was a

¹ The excerpt of the speech from the I.B. Report on a meeting held at Town Hall Calcutta on 14.3.47, under the presidentship Banerji of the Congress Socialist Party (C.S.P.). The meeting was called to protest against the ill-treatment of Mr. Smith (Dy. Director of Agriculture, Bengal) towards Abdul Kader, a clerk of I.G.N. (Steamer Company). (File of West Bengal State Archives, Intelligence Department, henceforth referred to as IB. IB 308 850-46, Report of the District Intelligence Branch, Comilla, 23 April, 1947.)

² Ghose. Sankar. *Jawaharlal Nehru: A Biography*. New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1993, p. 151.

³ Sengupta, Debjani. "A city Feeding on Itself: Testimonies and Histories of 'Direct Action Day,'" in *Turbulence*. Vol, 6. Edited by Monica Narula, 288-295. New Delhi: CSDS, 2006.

turbulent year, and while Calcutta was already reeling under wide-scale communal riots, there was a strike wave in the city from the end of 1946 itself. The strikes affected over 50,000 workers across disparate sectors, which gave the much-needed momentum, and that was the ultimate nail in the coffin of British imperialism.⁴ Initiated by the workers of the Bengal Enamel Works on 11 November 1946, the protest against retrenchment soon spread to other fields: 3,000 striking workers at five cotton mills across Calcutta, a whopping 20,000 in just four jute mills, 4,000 or more in different engineering and iron works concerns, hosiery, plywood, pottery, confectionary firms, and even suburban municipality workers.⁵ The headliners were of course the Calcutta tramwaymen and the workers at the Kidderpore docks. As it came up in several instances throughout the thesis, the workers were way past the stage where their demands remained confined to seeking redressal for their economic hardships. State brutality was the catalyst for two of these strikes. The other was the police firing at student protestors on the occasion of Vietnam Day. Radicalisation surpassed class, caste, vocation, and geographical borders. Solidarities were forged on the foundation of shared experiences of colonial oppression; spearheading a curious strain of very locally triggered international proletarianism.

Repressive measures were retrograded in desperate attempts to crush working-class militarisation from 1946 onwards. The workshop of the Braithwaite Company at Garden Reach was transformed into a battlefield on the morning of 16 January, 1946.⁶ Over 500 workers went on a stay-in strike against the retrenchments of 300 hands including a few union workers. By the count of local dailies, two packed lorries of police constables and sergeants were deployed to monitor the situation. As the day progressed, the situation became particularly tense and the management asked the strikers to vacate the premises so that the willing men might work. On refusal of the strikers to do so, the police intervened to break the strike. The situation turned chaotic as the strikers moved out and sheltered across the railway line near the port. Brickbats and missiles were rumoured to have been thrown, the police retaliated by unleashing tear gas bombs over unorganised, mostly unarmed workers

⁴ *The Nationalist*, 31 January, 1947.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Anandabazar Patrika*, 1 January, 1946. IB 55/38 (B.P.T.U.C Correspondences).

numbering around 500. The precarity of the situation made Mr. Doha, Deputy Commissioner of Police, and Assistant Commissioner of Police, R.N. Gupta visit the spot. Allegations were made against the police for having resorted to firepower and blatant use of force (*lathi charge*). The charges were unsurprisingly officially denied. Later a meeting was held in the evening at Shradhananda Park where Bengal Provincial Trade Union Congress President, Mrinal Kanti Bose, demanded an open enquiry into the matter.⁷

The 1946 riots and the ensuing communal upheaval further heightened the tension within the working class of the city as strikes and lockouts became the order of the day. The riots had an adverse effect on working-class mobilisation. In an official report issued by the Communist Party of India (C.P.I.), Calcutta Committee in September 1946 it was stated, ‘the labour front of the party has received considerable set back as a result of the Calcutta Riots. Most of the unions have become inactive. The party organisers were finding it inordinately difficult to approach their contacts in the labour areas at the present moment.’⁸ Workers’ solidarity served as a direct counter-discourse to the sharp communal rhetoric of contemporary provincial politics. The workers formed volunteer groups to combat the communal menace and foster communal harmony. The most notable one was the drive of the tramway workers led by Somnath Lahiri, Mohammad Ismail, Gopal Acharya, and others to actively contain communal unrest among the workers in various working-class ghettos across the city.

It was a recurrent theme that was highlighted, promoted, and harped upon by trade unionists across parties, especially after August of 1946. In a province like Bengal that was marked by a volatile demographic, further exacerbated by the constant influx of uptown laborers in the city, riots and violence across religions, communities, and castes were not rare. Neither was the anti-communal discourse that was so zealously advocated to be the backbone of the working-class struggle, but post the Direct Action Day it became essential and very central to the anti-colonial, and anti-capitalist imaginings of these trade union leaders. In December 1946, at a meeting of the Bengal Assam Railway Workers’ Union at Sealdah, prominent communist leaders and then M.L.A., Jyoti Basu called for the unity of the workers

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ KPM/SB/03101/05. Report of Calcutta Committee of C.P.I. dated 27 September, 1946.

to struggle for their rightful demands or else would take recourse to strikes.⁹ He seconded the president of the union, Abdul Hussain, who remarked that the communal troubles ‘were the creation of the British Government which seeks to divide the Hindus and the Muslims.’¹⁰ In a classic move, the company maneuvered the communal disturbances as an effective weapon for strikebreaking. In the murder case of an employee, Jagananda Mitra, the police arrested a fireman of the company, Abdul Aziz. However, the tactic backfired, and as a show of solidarity more than 500 workers from the loco department sealed the railway station, which stopped the plying of trains, paralysing the entire transportation network.¹¹ The C.P.I. circulated pamphlets, and their dailies were printing pieces promoting communal unity among the working class during the period. In a pamphlet printed at Ganashakti Press in April 1947, titled *Hindu Musalman Bhaiyo Hushiyar* (Beware You Hindu & Muslim Brethrens), an appeal was made to the workers around the northern suburb of Calcutta (Baranagore) to not fall prey to the ‘wicked conspiracy’ of the capitalists to create a wedge between the two communities and overcome this menace through a concerted effort.¹² The generation of a public sphere that was democratised to incorporate voices from the margins stimulated the formation of a unique decolonial discourse that combined anti-communalism, proletarian internationalism, and anti-imperialism, anchored in communism.

The years leading to partition and independence proved particularly challenging to the united working-class struggle in the province. As discussed in the initial chapters, the 1930s were marked by virulent dissensions among the Leftists in the labour circuit. Disparate socialist groups were formed and the personal and ideological frictions manifested directly in their union politics. While the insinuation of yellow unionism by the Government and the resultant communal factionalism proved a hurdle enough for successful mobilisation, especially post the adaptation of the Pakistan resolution, the long-drawn tussle between the

⁹ KPM/SB/0315605, Bengal Assam Railway Workers’ Union (C.P.I). The meeting was held on 30.12.1946. Report dated 1 January, 1947.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid. A strike ensued from 6 May, 1947. Report dated, 21 May, 1947.

¹² IB 55/38, B.P.T.U.C. Correspondences, The leaflet in question was found circulated by C.P.I. workers around Baranagore from 4 April, 1947.

communists and congressites was never more acute. In 1945 the Gandhians of the I.N.C. formed the *Hindustan Mazdoor Sevak Sangh* to counter according to 'violent ways of resolving trade disputes.'¹³ The Sangh's Bengal branch had veteran Congress leader, Maitrayee Bose as its convener along with Kiran Shankar Ray, Dr. Prafulla Chandra Ghosh, and others.¹⁴ Erstwhile as mentioned in the third chapter, Bose was actively trying to insinuate fractures within various 'Red Unions,' but by the end of 1946, the rivalry augmented.¹⁵ In a gathering of workers of the *Sangh* in Bombay, the national working committee leader and then Home Member, Government of India, Vallabhbhai Patel, vehemently criticised the communists

They are very active workers but their methods are based on violence. The workers have lost confidence in them because they always looked to Russia for inspiration and as also they had not guarded the interests of the workers in the last war when they allied themselves with the Government..... They had always advocated a path diametrically opposite to that of Congress and was trying to mislead the workers. The Communists raised the slogan of the people's war and asked the people to cooperate with the British in war efforts. But, now, when the British were preparing themselves to hand over power to Indians, the Communists were clamouring for launching a struggle with the British Government.

"The Communist Party," Sardar added, '...is advocating a path of violence and strikes and disruption of industries to achieve their end.'.... These strikes were neither in the interests of workers nor the people. The only result of these strikes was a big fall in industrial production and a great loss to the industries.¹⁶

Sardar was not being entirely preposterous with his remarks on the dwindling following base of the C.P.I post adaptation of the People's War line. By 1947, reports were being circulated in Calcutta that the supporters of the Kidderpore and Metiaburuz front were losing

¹³ IB 223.45 (*Hindustan Mazdoor Sevak Sangha*).

¹⁴ Ibid. A letter from Bose to Ghosh dated July 30, 1945 stating I.N.C. members who would be part of the committee and deciding the venue of their first meeting .

¹⁵ KPM/SB/02163/05 (C.P.I. T.U, S.B. Branch Report on Communist Party led Trade Unions).

¹⁶ Excerpt from *The Nationalist*, 5 December, 1947.

confidence in C.P.I. due to the failure of several strikes in the opening months of the year including those at the Port Lever Brothers, Brooke Bond, and other factories. The attendance at the union office had been discernibly low and the subscription amount was in a slump.¹⁷ To restore the confidence of the workers in the party, it was decided to hold regular ‘political study circles’ at various party communes. Classes were generally held at the party office on Harrison Road where party leaders like Kumud Biswas, Jolly Kaul, and Mihir Basu delivered lectures stressing contemporary issues, like the Bengal partition. The classes had been effective as the commune became an every Sunday affair.¹⁸

The endemic factionalism which haunted the labour circuit of Bengal was further pronounced when Red Unions in the province had a direct confrontation with the M.N. Roy-led Indian Federation of Labour, which he had founded in 1941, splintered from the Trade Union Congress to support the British war efforts. However, by mid-1946, Roy lost the confidence of the British, and in August of that year, the colonial government decided to withdraw its support as well as official recognition of the organisation.¹⁹ A report in a popular daily stated,

*It may be recalled that the Federation was being given through Mr. M.N. Roy Rs 13,000 a month during the war to maintain “morale” among Indian workers...Eventually at the instance of the International Labour Office the Government of India undertook to institute proper inquiry in regard to the representative character of the two bodies. It now appears that the Govt. of India has discovered that The Indian Federation of Labour did not represent Indian workers as much as the Trade Union Congress did.*²⁰

Though the Roy-led R.D.P or Radical Democratic Party could not make much of a difference and did not achieve any significant success at garnering workers' support, yet, it was a setback for the united working-class struggle towards the close of the colonial era.²¹ It

¹⁷ KPM/SB/03054/05 (Lever Brothers’ Soap Factory Workers’ Union) Report dated 22 May, 1947.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ IB 587-46 (Labour Matters/ Indian Federation of Labour, 30 Faiz Bazar, Delhi.)

²⁰ *Hindustan Standard*, 22 August, 1946.

²¹ IB 587-46. For more information on the R.D.P. led drives to entice the workers from the communist Unions

became evident at the All Party meeting of B.P.T.U.C., called to observe the Basic Demand Day.²² The various stakeholders in the labour circuit of Bengal mulled over calling a general strike to put pressure on the Government. However, no consensus could be reached on the topic. They adopted resolutions that condemned the mass-scale oppression of the labour leaders, and made appeals for the immediate release of Abdul Momin (of the C.P.I). The T.U.C. urged for representation at the labour conciliation board, a tripartite board set up by the Government consisting of capitalists, representatives of the Chamber of Commerce, and labour representatives. The Additional Labour Commissioner was particularly notorious as he unduly favoured the R.D.P. The National Chamber of Commerce was considered the root of all workers' troubles. The question of a general strike to commemorate the day was ultimately given up due to strong opposition from moderate socialist trade unionists like Indu Sarkar, Satish Sen, Sibnath Banerjee (Socialist Party of India), and Bhupen Ghosh (Calcutta Postal Union). Disheartened, the radical Communists, via Jolly Kaul, moved a proposition to launch an all-vehicular strike for a day, in sympathy with the Calcutta Tramway Company Workers. He was supported by Biswanath Dubey (Bolshevik Party of India). Ultimately, the all-party meet reached a middle ground to organise a single-day strike for which they formed a strike committee. This episode was pertinent in this regard because it sheds light on the tumultuous situation existing within the trade union circle of the province. With independence around the corner, mutual distrust, power grabbing, personal muscle flexing, lobbying, and mutual intrigue became overwhelming to the extent that the labour question in the postcolonial setup was in jeopardy. While the months leading up to and immediately post-independence saw numerous strikes, lockdowns, and protests, the working-class struggle was posed with newer predicaments in the post-colony. The global decolonial wave, the backlash of the Cold War, especially the Indo-China War (1962), China's Cultural Revolution, and of Bengal. This thesis contemplated and envisaged tracing a genealogy to the making and (re)making of this protest mentality. In each chapter a particular aspect of trade unionism is investigated to chart how the language of the class was adopted, evolved, and put into practise. This epilogue is dedicated to stringing up these various transformed trends that were the hallmarks of 1930s trade unionism. From the changing social composition of the

²² KPM/SB/03079/05 (Bengal National Chamber of Labour). The meeting was held at B.P.T.U.C. headquarters in Bowbazar Street on 7 March, 1947.

vanguards to transformed praxis, the new leaders were countering both the epistemological violence of the elitist discourse in the field as well as democratising it. Mobilisation became more vigorous, and sectors that were never organised previously started to unionise. The bargaining with the capitalists for the rightful demands of the workers augmented. Strikes far from being sporadic were now long-drawn and even combined in sympathy with the ongoing strikes at the other sectors. Simultaneously, the capitalists and state responded with stiffening repressive measures. The bogey of the 'Bolshevik menace' reigned supreme in controlling the incursion of Communism among the working class. The following sections are an attempt to recapitulate and (re)conceptualise these changes within the overreaching framework on the discourse of labour activism, class consciousness, proletarian internationalism, and above all anti-colonialism in South Asia.

Transforming Vanguardism: Organic Leadership, Declassing & Working-Class Militarisation

The opening chapter is dedicated to transformations that were primarily discernible from the late 1920s within the leadership class. The nature of vanguardism from its very social composition to its praxis radicalised from the 1930s. Whereas the old-school humanitarian labour leaders paved the way for the late colonial trade unionists, it is important to comprehend that it was far from a linear process or a sudden demarcated change. The chapter probed the different triggers: political, social, economic, and ideological behind this phenomenon in the labour circuit. It was not one but the collation of several streams of consciousness and influences that merged pervading the intellectual landscape of these individuals. This influenced the indigenous reception of Marxism and the nuanced response to the idea of class struggle and its dialectics. As a part of a very global and cosmopolitan intellectual and revolutionary network, Bengal too was washed over by the tides of Bolshevism post-1917. It made a furrow in the static land of praxis as far as labour was concerned. This was coupled with augmenting dissatisfaction with Gandhian mass politics, especially post the sudden withdrawal of the Non-Cooperation Movement (1924). Many of these youths were heavily influenced by the creed of individual violence propagated by the various factions or groups of 'revolutionary terrorists' of *Anushilan* and *Jugantar*. Initially,

their orientation towards leftism was not wholly conscious, emanating out of a thorough pedagogy in Marxist-Leninist thought. Saroj Mukherjee later recollected in his memoirs, they just chipped in for any protests, meetings, or rallies that remotely posed any challenge to the colonial authority.²³ Hence, even in the late 1920s, a call from a hardcore Congressite, an independent humanitarian labour activist or the incipient socialist clique within the folds of Congress for supporting the causes of the labouring class was univocally and uncritically responded to. There were significant overlaps and mergers between these modes of activism. However, post the return of the first-generation revolutionaries who visited Moscow in the early 1920s there was an emergence of a very disparate form of activism rooted in the ‘language of class.’

The initial encounters between the traditional labour leaders and these emergent vanguards were marked by confrontation not characteristically ideological but practical. Shibnath Banerjee, veteran trade unionist, and socialist, states how in the initial days of his work with the jute workers in the suburbs of Calcutta, he and Kalidas Bhattacharya were a bickering duo.²⁴ Bhattacharya, as Shibnath depicts was particularly hostile and despondent, ‘Nothing doing; with this kind of labour leaders, nothing is going to happen. After all, labour cannot be organised; they are very unstable, unsympathetic, and all that.’²⁵ Banerjee was persistent that even trade unionism in the West was fretted with organisational and logistical constraints and he was psychologically prepared for the imminent setbacks. Kalidas’s pessimism ceased only after witnessing Banerjee’s perseverance, and the duo worked extensively in the jute belts of Howrah, Hooghly, and 24-Parganas (North).²⁶ As much as these conflicts (both ideological and practical) shaped vanguardism in the late 1930s in the province, so did the personal choices, inclinations, social and familial backgrounds, and class

²³ Mukherjee, Saroj. *Bharter Communist Party o Amra*. Calcutta: National Book Agency, 1985, p. 2.

²⁴ Kalidas Bhattacharya, was an early humanitarian labour activist and the President of Bengal Jute Workers’ Association. He was responsible for organizing strikes at Bhatpara and Gouripur jute mills in the early 1920s which made him influential among the workers. He was a blacklisted jute worker himself, and a grocery shop owner. For more consult: Saha,

²⁵ Shibnath quoting Bhattacharya, NMML Oral Interview Transcript. *Interview of Shibnath Banerjee*, Interviewed by Dr. A.K. Gupta, Delhi: 10 February 1971.

²⁶ Ibid.

positioning of these new leaders. Along with focusing on different global and contemporary ideological and political currents that were causing this shift in their praxis, the chapter tries to focus on their personal journeys of getting acquainted with the ‘language of class,’ the reconciliation with their newly gained consciousness with the vested values and socio-economic conditioning. It is an endeavor to chart the intricacies of declassing within anti-colonists in the Global South. Banerjee in the same interview recounts how it was inordinately ‘difficult for him to gulp’ that the proletariat was the most revolutionary class when he initially landed in Moscow.²⁷ While he was in school there was a jute mill right opposite to it. There were ferry boats to take the workers from Hooghly to the other side of the Ganges. The unkempt appearances of the workers and the vulgarity in their exchanges almost ‘repelled’ him.²⁸ He came from a lower-middle-class family but with an innate pride in the cultural capital he inherited; something quite visceral within Bengali middle classes at the time. He confessed that it was only after his stint in Moscow that he realised that the exploitation that the working class faces could be channeled to turn them into an organised formidable fighting force against the British. Although the primary rationale more than Marxist praxis was as he mentioned the ‘A.B.C. of economics that they were in the largest number and around Calcutta and our plan was to capture Calcutta with the help of the jute workers, and exploitation being the worst, they would be more easily organised than others to proceed on.’²⁹ This was a complex and often contradictory process of declassing, which in spite of common denominators, was far from uniform for these individuals, resulting in crippling ideological and psychological crises.

The second half of the chapter employs the emergent methodologies of global intellectual history in thoroughly reviewing the literature that these new brand of leaders were producing. The thesis attempts to shift the paradigm in analysing these trade unionists not just as activists but as intellectuals. The literature generated in the form of essays in emergent socialist and communist journals, organisational pamphlets, leaflets, and handbills provides a fertile ground to remunerate the indigenous response to the structural exploitation of

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

colonialism, imperialism, capitalism, and even fascism. Contrary to the established historiography in the field, I argue that though they were not formal intellectuals, their analysis emanating from their practice were distinct in introspection. Terms like ‘class struggle’ (*sreni juddho*) or ‘dialectical materialism’ (*dondomulok bostubaad*) were becoming a part of everyday decolonial discourses, as these men wrote in simplified, colloquial Bengali often riddled with scintillating metaphors. Through their intellectual and political endeavors, the new vanguards democratised the constricted space of ideological introspection monopolised by the anglicised upper-class nationalist leaders. Not only did they enunciate questions that were drowning in larger currents of the mainstream decolonisation movement dominated by the rhetoric of Bourgeois nationalism, but also bolstered the voices and aspirations from the margins aiding in the reclamation of their agency. Far from being mere puppets in the hands of international organisations like the Communist International or the Communist Party of Great Britain, these leaders though within the confines of the organisation posed original arguments and an independent comprehension of communism and its application in the Indian working class politics. This is a crucial contribution to the edifice on discourses of anti-colonial Marxism.

The Pedagogy in ‘Language of the Class’: Organisation, Mobilisation, and Accentuated Class-Struggle

The next chapter addresses the pertinent aspects and features of trade unionism in 1930s Calcutta and how it shaped the psyche of the urban working class. Instead of stressing social and communal ties which are exhaustively explored in terms of mobilisation patterns of workers in scholarly enterprises of historians primarily investigating the jute industry, my focus has been the union. The union, as a structural institution serves as the loci of my investigation. While analysing the nuances of the disparate ways in which a union was formed it envisages highlighting the interplay of socio-economic factors that influenced the building of such organisations. From the 1930s, especially the mid-1930s there was a proliferation of unions across different urban labour sectors in the city. The initial drive towards forming unions to get recognition in international organisations and procuring election tickets to legislative councils and local governing bodies was replaced by politically

informed and sincere activism. The chapter's focus on ground-level everyday union politics divulges the intricacies of the power dynamics that characterised the new, radicalised working class. The patterns of mobilisation went through striking innovation during these years. The personal involvement of the vanguards increased manifolds. The direct involvement of the trade unionists in educating, enlisting, and radicalising the workers shattered the long-standing gap between the erstwhile upper-class labour leaders and the working-class which was so diligently maintained. This mingling and the bond between the emergent trade unionists were part of the process of the overreaching declassing that these individuals were going through.

Through the two case studies that were undertaken, this thesis highlights how mobilisation tactics varied across sectors. The difficulties in unionising workers in government sectors and local bodies divulge how trade unions as institutions can be utilised to serve the purpose of the capitalists and the colonial state. These organisations were often malleable in the function they were bound to serve and were antithetical to the core idea behind their origin.³⁰ Hence, a trade union far from being merely an organisation promoting the rightful prerogatives of the working class emerges as a structural unit demonstrating how complex and nuanced the socio-political implications of the varied equations between the colonial state, its administrative apparatuses, private individuals, and their profit-making impulses, and the working-class and its augmenting consciousness. Similarly, there were some inherent structural factors like communal ties and caste that influenced the formation of unions, and ignoring these factors often led to premature dissolution in many of the union sectors.³¹

The heightened awareness is reflected even in factory floor politics. Communism while forging and cementing bonds in the echoes of united proletariat struggle simultaneously insinuated mutual suspicions, daily frictions, and even bouts of occasional violence between workers. Being an urban set up the concept of social boycotting of employer's stooges as perceptible in working-class movements in the tea estates around Bengal was not viable

³⁰ Here I specifically refer to the 'Revolutionary Theory' of union making of Karl Marx whereby unions are instruments to overthrow the oppressive capitalist regime. In other words the 'the theory of class struggle'.

³¹ Refer to Chapter 2 and the controversy on Shoemakers' Union.

here.³² Instead, the 1930s saw several ingenious ways to strengthen the working-class struggle in Calcutta and sustain and prolong strikes or boycotts for successful collective bargaining. From the late 1930s, especially during the Second World War, union workers throwing brickbats at trucks ferrying loyal workers to the industrial units became an increasingly frequent occurrence, but police retaliation was also quite prompt.³³ Successful mobilisation often encompassed not just enlisting the workers in the union, but also drawing in the entire staff employed by the management on the factory floor, most pertinently, the security personnel.

In a quite bizarre incident at the Carreras Cigarette Factory in September 1944, a fire ravaged an entire floor of the building causing damage worth ten lakh rupees.³⁴ The official report hinted at foul play though it was apparent that a short circuit was the culprit. By the time the alarm could be sounded, the fire had already spread considerably despite it being the peak hour of the day and the factory floor being under strict surveillance of eight *darwans* or watchmen. There were no attempts to use the fire extinguishers present on the factory floor. Moreover, all the entrances leading to the floor were locked increasing the time taken by firefighters to reach the destination to extinguish the fire. At that time, the factory union was engaged in a long-drawn tussle with the management for a war-time bonus.³⁵ Such instances of violence though rare hinted at the exacerbated exploitation of the working class and the augmented militarisation as the evident outcome.

³² In the estates of Bengal like Rangapani oppression became so acute that by mid-1930s a strong trade union movement started shaping up. It became acute during the famine and the war years. Often labourers in the coolie line who refused to join the union were socially boycotted: the barbers refused to provide them a haircut, the grocer stopped selling them rations, etc. For more consult, Hore, Somnath, translated by Somnath Zutshi. *The Tea –Garden Journal*. Calcutta: Seagull, 2017.

³³ In a strike of the Lever Brothers Soap Factory, Kidderpore police arrested striking workers of the union who prevented lorries which transport loyal workers through Garden Reach Road. KPM/SB/03054/05 (Lever Brothers' Soap Factory Workers' Union.)

³⁴ KPM/SB/03138/05: Messers Carreras Cigarette Factory Workers (CCF) Union.

³⁵ Ibid.

‘Hartal’: (Re) Assessing Striking as an Act of Defense, Proletarian Internationalism and Linking the Local with the Global

The third chapter is dedicated to tracing the heightening of class consciousness and radicalisation through the act of striking. It traces how striking, from being spontaneous and isolated in the 1930s, emerged as the most potent form of protest in the manifestation of the dissent of the working class. From the 1940s, strikes were more organised and long-lasting and were called simultaneously at various sectors resulting in a significant decrease in the rate of strike breaking. The concept of ‘combination strikes’ across major sectors such as the tramways, engineering, and electrical works during the war years led to effective wage bargaining. The chapter also focused on how the war and contemporary political predicaments influenced working-class politics in the province. The adoption of the People’s War line of the Soviet Union had a direct impact on the policy of the C.P.I. in India and that had consequences on the striking patterns. The study is a methodological probe on locating the myriad modes of working-class protests within the broader politics of the world war, famine, and anticolonial and anti-fascist struggle.

Ingenuity was discernible in the modes of protest. While strikes were more organised, prolonged, and sustainable pamphleting was emerging as a potent tool for dissemination of the language of the class. *Hartal* (Strike), Manifestos, and pedagogical materials in Leftist discourse in the form of pamphlets in colloquial Bengali, Hindi, and Urdu proliferated the public sphere from the late 1930s onwards. By the 1940s the access to the discourse on class struggle progressed by leaps and bounds. In the opening months of 1947, strikes became endemic at the Carreras Tobacco Manufacturers’ factory around the Garden Reach area.³⁶ A pamphlet was issued on behalf of the union titled, *Tobacco Manufacturers Workers der Proti Abedon* (An Appeal to the Tobacco Workers of Bengal) which harped on how capitalist exploitation had become pronounced in response to united working-class struggle.³⁷ A particular adage is used to highlight the intensity of capitalist response, ‘*Khyapa kukurer moto malik amader kamrate chesta koreche*’ (The owner is trying to bite us like rabid dogs).

³⁶ KPM/SB/03139/05: Carreras Workers (Tobaco).

³⁷ Ibid. The pamphlet was issued on 7 February, 1947 under the signature of the union secretary, Ramsurat Sinoh.

The comparison of the capitalists with ‘mad’ or *khyapa* dogs brings out the aggression, and brazenness of bourgeoisie oppression simultaneously making the augmentation of class struggle palpable. There was a significant linguistic shift in the intellectual discourse governing class struggles along with the shift in praxis in labour politics from the thirties to the late forties. The register became discernibly fluid, colloquialism was the watchword democratising the realm of politics which earlier was considered as the monopoly of the upper or upper-middle-class anglicised men.

A breakthrough in this period was in the patterns of the international contacts that were being forged and the ideas that were in circulation. As discussed in the opening chapter the labour movement in the province under the humanitarian leaders was heavily influenced by the Chartists in England. Further, the impact of the Paris Commune and the emerging Socialist thoughts in Europe had a bearing on the literary output of the upper echelons of the society concerned about the deplorable condition of the working class in the colony. The revolution in Russia was indeed a watershed moment characteristically altering the nature and modalities of transcontinental exchanges radicalising the labour movement with the incursion of Marxism- Leninism. There was a perceptible shift from the humanitarianism of old labour leaders to the socialist anti-colonialism of the new trade unionists as communist propaganda materials and funds poured in from the Soviet. However, unlike earlier periods these interactions now transcended beyond the realms of upper-class intellectual circles. As the workers of the city took to the streets protesting against the Spanish Civil War (1937) or stood in solidarity with the global proletariat on the 1st of May, the outcome was an exemplary instance of ‘internationalism from below.’ The correspondences, personal memoirs, and letters shed light on the vastness of decolonial transcontinentalism and networking. In September 1946, the Secretary of the Bengal Branch of the Trade Union Congress received a letter from W.H. Andrews, the National Chairman of The Communist Party of South Africa, appealing for a contribution to the ‘Peoples Defense Fund Committee for safeguarding the rights of the accused workers in the courts for striking which was deemed illegal as a war-time provision.’³⁸ It aids in the construction of a parallel discourse on

³⁸ IB: 55/38 (I) : B.P.T.U.C. Interceptions. Letter dated 16 September, 1946, from Burg Street, Cape Town.

radical anti-colonial communism of the Global South countering the Eurocentricism that dominates the historiography of the field.

The Counter-Revolutionary Triad: the Syndicate of the Colonial State, Capitalists, and Police and Muzzling of Working-Class Dissent

The penultimate chapter discusses how the interests of the capitalists, the state, and the police were intertwined. The overlap in instances was so conspicuous, that it is pertinent to analyse this systematic oppression of labour radicalisation in relation to these three factors in collation, but not in isolation. In November 1945, the employees of the Cox & King's Concern in Calcutta went on strike. The strike committee issued a statement against the management's malicious attempts at strikebreaking, 'The Assistant Manager of Messers Cox & King's Ltd., Mr. Goode is an ex-sergeant of police and people have a suspicion that because of that the police came to help the management in early days of strike. Fifteen of our strikers are facing trials on charges under section 144.'³⁹ The degree of entwined motive to curb labour militarisation might not have been this apparent on all occasions, but the modalities to deal with vigorous trade union activities, especially under the communists involved paraphernalia of both legal and extra-legal apparatuses. Furthermore, the insinuation of the formation of yellow unions or statist or pro-management unions soared from the 1930s. While bribing individual workers to betray their fellow workers by intruding into intimate union meetings for crucial intel for the police and management was a long-standing and effective practice, sanctioning the formation of yellow unions was rather new. In the Second Chapter of this thesis, mention has been made of union formation among the workers and clerks of the Calcutta Corporation and how an elitist clique of officers controlled those unions, which acted as a safety valve to channelise the grievances of the workers. However, soon the formation of rival leftist unions posed a major impediment to the scheme. Nonetheless, particularly notorious were the state-backed 'white' unions formed to counter the radical and popular communist-affiliated 'red' unions. Often the management officially funded and endorsed rivals of the communist unions as they aided in strikebreaking.

³⁹ IB 55/38 (B.P.T.U.C), *Nationalist*, 1 June, 1946.

The mushrooming of communal unions is another endemic trend that evolved during this period. The trend aggravated in the closing years of the colonial rule nearing the partition. The company owners often pawned upon nascent contemporary communal situations to their advantage. Taking the same instance of the strike in the Cox and King's Company, the management resorted to indiscriminate retrenchment, especially on communal lines to endanger union activities.⁴⁰ In an official public statement, the President of B.P.T.U.C., congratulated the members of the union on how they have taken up the challenges of the management. He advised them to remain firm in their stand as the 'Union alone will take us out of the morass of communalism.'⁴¹ The Communal problem as already discussed earlier was entrenched not only in the ground-level labour politics in the province but also in the discourse governing the research on colonial capital in Bengal. The presence of a significant number of uptown Muslim rural migrants from the bordering states of Bihar and Orissa had been a perpetual trigger in this regard from the end of the nineteenth century onwards. While the Tallah Riot of 1897 provided a fecund ground for contemplations and the eventual debates on class against community consciousness, the latter being the vestiges of the 'primordial loyalty', my approach has been different. My central enquiry revolved around whether these communal unions had the sole utility of promoting the interests of a particular political organisation, and their defunct demand of separate nationhood, or did they promote the causes of trade unionism precipitating consciousness among the workers. Apparently, all the demands forwarded by these organisations revolved around the upliftment and protection of working rights of a single community against the other, hence it was the manifestation of a consciousness which in its very essence was 'primordial' or 'primitive' as it emanated from the adherence to a particular religion. Nonetheless, it can be argued that in the garb of agitating for the rights of a particular community, they were after all forwarding the rights of the working class and its demands for better wages and lifestyle. It was further discussed that some of the demands made by these communal unions did not solely revolve around the 'Pakistan' or the 'Muslim' question, and it was also fuelled by the management's adoption of preferential treatment of a certain community; a cunning move to wedge a divide between workers. Quite as Dasgupta argued, in the guise of agitating for an extra holiday on *Bakr-Eid*

⁴⁰ IB 55/38 (B.P.T.U.C).

⁴¹ *Nationalist*, 4 April, 1946.

or Durga Puja, lay the workers' demand for leisure.⁴² Does that mean community consciousness in extension habitually translates to class consciousness? Then why is one pitted against the other? Throughout the entire thesis, it is established that class and community consciousness are not disparate and have several overlaps and a clear demarcation is an impossibility and also unnecessary.

The 'Communist Menace': Colonial Surveillance and the Itineraries of Oppression

While the police did the bidding of the capitalists and the state, they were driven by a larger motive, an ideological propaganda war against Bolshevism. In the last chapter, I probe how the Empire's hysteria against the revolutionary ethos of communism and its anti-colonial essence was at the root of the proliferation of the surveillance apparatus of the colonial state. As stated despite the existence of an elementary legal setup to counter the rising surge of dissent among the subject population, notably after the Bengal partition of 1905, the 1930s was a period marked by the issue of new surveillance legislatures. The primary rationale was two-fold, firstly to ensure a sure shot long legal battle culminating in prolonged imprisonment, a proficient measure to deprive the nascent movement both of leadership and crucial funding. A majority of these communist leaders as discussed in the first chapter resembled the Gramscian term, 'organic intellectuals.'⁴³ The social demographic of vanguardism was no more 'surrogate' as Bhattacharya claimed.⁴⁴ The leadership class now comprised of men from lower and lower-middle classes, or from within the proletariat itself; revolutionary enough, but ironically not resourceful enough to pervade the colonial legal

⁴² Refer to Chakraborty, Dipesh and Ranajit, Dasgupta. *Some Aspects of the Labour History of Bengal in the Nineteenth Century : Two Views*. New Delhi: Oxford, 2019. The volume highlights a series of lectures delivered by the two historians at the CSSC and the subsequent papers produced from them and the debate on consciousness that ensued.

⁴³ For more on Gramsci's idea on Organic Intellectuals consult: Valos, Romerio Jr. "The Concepts of Ideology, Hegemony, and Organic Intellectuals in Gramsci's Marxism." *Theoretical Review*. No. 27, March-April 1982.

⁴⁴ Consult, Bhattacharya, Sabyasachi. "Capital and Labour in Bombay City, 1928-29." *Economic and political Weekly*, 16, no. 42-43 (1981), pp 17-24.

chicanery. The second was the preemptive, most precautionary impact that the colonial state sought to achieve. The otherising, the alienation of communism from the indigenous decolonial ethos warranted epistemological, legal, and genealogical foregrounding. From the initial days following the Russian Revolution of 1917, the colonial government flooded the public sphere with anti-Bolshevik propaganda. Ranging from the news coverage of the revolution reaching the prisoners, primarily the ‘revolutionary terrorists’ in the jails to college textbooks, no avenues were spared. However, in a quite Newton(esque) fashion, as every action manifests an equal but opposite reaction, contrary to the desired results of deterring the dissenting population from indulging in communist thought it nudged its curiosity. The colonial state directed all its resources to fuel this ideological crusade against communism. As extensively pondered upon in the last chapter, the paraphernalia of colonial surveillance pervaded all aspects of the lives of the subject population, especially from the 1930s.

I seek answers to two seminal questions here. Despite an existing structure of surveillance already in place to counter the wave of revolutionary terrorism in Bengal, the rationale behind the introduction of new or amendments to older surveillance laws during the decade? And secondly, how potent was this whole infrastructure? How effective was it in countering the dissemination of Communism and its successive incursions within the working class in particular and the anticolonial movement in general? Drawing upon the reports from a number of official reports on meetings of the top tier of British officials, personal correspondences, and successive regulations divulges the Empire’s intrinsic fear of losing its stronghold over the colonised, the basis of which was its civilisational, racial, and governmental superiority. Communism exposed the ideological hollowness of liberal democracy, and shattered the myth of its infallibility post the First World War (1914-19). Essentially intimidating was its revolutionary potentialities which was gaining ground, percolating the niches of the decolonial discourse. Gone were the days of staunch nationalists, the upper-class, anglicised, Hindu spiritualists: the ‘gentlemanly terrorists.’ The war now exceeded far from the realms of ‘bombs and guns’ and took an ideological recourse. Hence, countering dissent with brazen, brute force was ineffective. It was a contagion that took its root in the radical minds of young individuals, weary with the moderate, selective, apologetic, and classist politics of the Indian Congress as well as the Muslim League. The vision of an egalitarian future had a far greater appeal to this new brand of activists than the

elitist, defunct lesson in Gandhian non-violence. Hence, the state had to upgrade the arsenals of its counter-propaganda too resulting in the extension of the surveillance apparatus.

This thesis is an initiative to debunk the existing myth of an unwavering, ironclad colonial structure of order and oppression. The existing historiography on the colonial state's offensive on popular movements like trade unionism is a linear narrative of draconian measures and merciless persecution of the activists. This is balanced on a scale with an equally problematic discourse that unilaterally valorises the indigenous resistance characterised by unwavering zeal for self-determination against the imperial state. Though crucial in the project of nation-building in the post-colonial era, these discourses fail to take into account multitudes of factors that were at the heart of the colonial administration in the Global South. While discussing in detail the disparate ways and levels at which colonial surveillance functioned to repress the augmenting radicalisation in the labour circuit of Bengal, it was discerned how impressive the stint with soft power was. The meticulously maintained, monumental amount of official paperwork testifies to it. The network of manual surveillance was exceptionally competent. In a country with a surplus population and a high unemployment rate employing an army of spies to infiltrate factory floors, union offices, and meetings was fairly easy. Communist labour leaders were often shadowed for months, not to mention the thorough monitoring of inland and overseas mail and notorious interception apparatus at work. However, underneath this well-organised, full-proof system was ceaseless anarchy. I argue that surveillance as we see being deployed from the early twentieth century in the Empire's colonies across South and Southeast Asia was essentially flawed. Despite the enormous amount of investment of capital, resources, and time it failed to address the basic structural deficiencies. The colonial state's obsession with anti-Bolshevism translating into legally sanctioning and binding all the existing surveillance tactics was neither frugal nor practical. The system though ambitious was in its infancy. The officials though huge in numbers, barely had an understanding of the task at hand. Months went by after the legal ratification of a mere clause in a law. Hence, was the English pride in the 'Rule of Law' at the root of its failure and bankruptcy in this scenario? This cannot be denied to an extent but other factors were also at play like a lack of understanding of local channels of revolutionary networking and the mature surveillance-evading tactics of the trade union vanguards in the late colonial era. Perhaps its most remarkable impact has been leaving a viable blueprint for

an infrastructure of postcolonial surveillance legislation in India. India, despite adopting a democratic, and to an extent, in Nehruvian terminology, the socialist structure of governance, framed several of its laws, notably the sedition laws, in the same mould as the colonial laws. What is to be contemplated here is how the temporality of mechanisms of ordering and control remains unrestrained and inconsequential to the actors in power.

(Re) Assessing Consciousness and the Future of Trade Unionism Post-Independence

Hence, to sum up, this thesis aimed at tracing the transforming trajectories in working-class politics of late colonial Calcutta and treating these two decades of the 1930s and the 1940s as a watershed between the colonial and postcolonial working-class politics of the Bengal province. Through an analysis of vanguardism, transforming mobilisation and striking patterns, and the colonial state's backlash to the mass movement, this study is an endeavor to present an alternative narrative of South Asian decolonisation. In the process it (re)asses the most debated issue in the discourse of class struggle: consciousness. Far from being some chimera of the past, the thesis engages actively with the question of consciousness as far as the colonial working class in Bengal is concerned. It departs from the long-drawn controversy of community versus class consciousness to stress how both are not necessarily antithetical to each other. It resorts back to Thompson as he opined that consciousness is not a mechanical outcome spearheaded by capitalism but a process. Failures too are part of that process. His magnum opus opens with the line, 'The working class... was present at its own making,' hinting at the inherent consciousness.⁴⁵ At the same time, he refuses to treat the class as a structure, and harps on the subjective experience of the working class which is equally influenced by the pre-capitalist formations like traditions, religion, and culture. The workers of Calcutta were similarly omnipresent in their making. From being the vanguards of their own movements to learning the new 'language of class,' to rallying their colleagues to struggle for their prerogatives to familiarising themselves with proletarian internationalism, from challenging the manager Raj at the courts to evading police surveillance, it scripted, and

⁴⁵ Thompson, E.P. *The Making of the English Working Class*. London: Vintage, 1966.

viscerally remained engaged in the course of its own making. However, was it just a tale of unwavering mettle and relentless success? Far from perfect the process of unionisation was often besieged with setbacks: lack of funds, dwindling membership, premature strikebreaking, and virulent factionalism to mention a few. The gathering smoke over the factory chimneys resembled their collected anguish, the brazen oppression resulting in their explosion in fury, mobilisation, and protests. At night, however, it was often replaced by cheap liquor (moonshine) - induced stupors, helplessness, and utter dejection. Nonetheless, the dreams for an equitable, free country lived on to see a new day through thousands of marches, millions of strikes, and the indomitable cries for revolution.

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Marxspanthi

Naya Rasta

Naya Duniya

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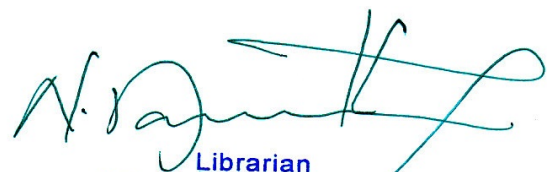
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