

Occasional Paper No. 83

TRAM WORKERS OF CALCUTTA : SOME REFLECTIONS ON  
THEIR UNIONISATION AND POLITICAL EXPERIENCE  
1920 to 1930

SIDDHARTHA GUHA RAY  
ICSSR Doctoral Fellow  
and  
Malda College  
West Bengal.



May, 1986

Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta  
10, Lake Terrace,  
Calcutta-700 029.

1875

THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES  
COLLECTION OF THE  
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

PLAT 1000  
SECTION 10  
T. 10 N. R. 10 E.

1875

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT  
WASHINGTON, D. C.

### Acknowledgement

This paper owes a great deal to the help of my supervisor Prof. Amalendu Guha. I am also indebted to Dr. Saugata Mukherjee, for valuable suggestions. I am grateful to the staff of the National Library, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Library, West Bengal State Archives, Calcutta and National Archives, New Delhi. I am, however, responsible for the remaining errors, if any.

Tramworkers of Calcutta : Some Reflections on their  
Unionisation and Political Experience 1920 to 1930.

The year 1920 is rather significant in many ways in the history of working class struggle in modern India. It was from about this time that India's working classes began to be involved in the broader stream of the national politics. Although Bombay workers had launched a political strike in 1908 to protest Tilak's arrest and Gandhi made his enigmatic experiments with the Ahmedabad mill hands in 1917-18, the labour force in India can be said to have systematically started coming out of the orbit of narrow economic demands to associate themselves with the outsiders for organizing themselves only from 1920.

In 1919 the Indian National Congress at its 35th session in Amritsar urged its provincial Committees to secure for the working class "a proper place in the body politic of India".<sup>1</sup> The first federation of Indian trade unions, the All India Trade Union Congress (A.I.T.U.C.), had its birth in 1920, and its inaugural session witnessed the presence of eminent Congress leaders. This whole process took place however much against the pleasure of Gandhi.<sup>2</sup> The strike wave of the early 20s in different industries throughout India saw the working class emerge as a significant force. This obviously accelerated the process of interaction between the Indian National Congress and working class. Despite efforts of the Indian National Congress to win over the support and sympathy of the workers, the latter in many industries rallied behind the Communist Party of India (C.P.I.) after it was formed in 1925. The case of the tramwaymen of Calcutta also tells a similar story. They were trying to get themselves organised against their employer with a view to redress their grievances and, at this crucial phase in 1920, important Congress leaders of Bengal came forward to unionise them. Eventually disillusioned over the experiences of early 20s, the tramwaymen, however, gradually began to switch over from the Congress fold to the Communist forum. This essay attempts to look into the whole process of unionisation of tramworkers as well as to examine the factors responsible for their disillusionment over Congress leadership, and their gravitation towards the Communist Party. It will also be shown, how the Communists inspired them to fight not only on rudimentary economic issues but also to respond to events of political significance.

### General Condition of Tramwaymen of Calcutta :

In early 20s the tramwaymen were subject to incongenial and oppressive service conditions of the British monopolistic Calcutta Tramways Company. The work force of the Company were of two categories. Those in the traffic section were drivers and conductors, while those engaged in Nonapukur workshop were engaged mainly in welding, painting and the assembling of different parts.<sup>3</sup> Apart from them, there were checkers and inspectors, who belonged to supervisory rank and clerks in the head office.

The traffic staff (either as a driver or a conductor) had to work for 12 hours a day against a monthly pay of Rs.19.<sup>4</sup> But he could not earn even this meagre amount since he was employed purely on a daily wage basis. As the Company used to engage surplus staff, he would often be deprived of his daily employment. Leave Casual or otherwise - was unknown to him. In case of injury, due to accidents during his duty hours, they received neither any allowance "On Compassionate ground", nor the wages during the period of his absence, due to injury. In cases of accidents for which he was not responsible, his attendance to the court was compulsory and cost him his days' employment (often numbering 10 to 20 days at a stretch) and travelling expenses, which he himself had to bear. From 1918 onwards, the issuing of overcoats to the members of traffic staff during the winter season had been stopped : trams would start plying at 4.30 a.m. in the morning and remained on rails upto 12 at night. To fight the cold he had to buy his own winter garments.<sup>5</sup> There was a workman's Compensation Act since 1923, but it did not cover the workers of small factories, mines, the railways and tramways.<sup>6</sup>

Apart from these strains, inflicted by the Company, a traffic staff was constantly harassed by the flying checkers and inspectors, who tried to exact illegal 'gratuity' from him. Whenever, the worker refused to meet the dishonest demand of the checkers and inspectors, the latter would lodge a cooked up complaint to the management, against the man concerned.

He was suspended or even dismissed often without any proper enquiry.<sup>7</sup> Along with his job, went his salary due and also his deposit money - as every worker had to deposit Rs.31 to the Company at the time of joining - to which the aggrieved man gave a caustic name "the forfeit case". To go back to this native place, he had to sell his household goods and utensils and sometimes even had to borrow money from friends and relations.<sup>8</sup> This practice had another adverse effect on workers leading them into clutches of money lenders.<sup>9</sup> These latter together with the inspectors and checkers drove the workers down to very extreme poverty.

## II

### The First Strike : From Spontaneity to Organisation :

With an intention to ameliorate their precarious economic conditions the tramwaymen of traffic section placed a petition before the General Manager of the Company in June 1920, demanding an increase in wages. In reply, they were informed that the General Manager was awaiting the instructions of the Directors of the Company, in London.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, in August, two drivers of the Company were sacked, allegedly for inciting the tramwaymen against the management.<sup>11</sup> On 11th September, the Police Commissioner of Calcutta suddenly received an anonymous petition, containing a list of grievances of Calcutta Tramwaymen. Their demands in the petition included 75% increase in wages, supply of free uniforms and reinstatement of two retrenched workers.<sup>12</sup> The Police Commissioner, whose concern was to avoid the impasse caused by a transport strike in the city, approached both the management and workers to come to an amicable settlement. But his efforts proved futile. The workers ultimately gave out clearly that unless favourable orders were passed on the petitions submitted to the Police Commissioner and management, they would resort to a continuous strike from the 1st of October.<sup>13</sup> Tramwaymen's grievances went unheeded and they struck work on the first day of October.

It is not clear why the drivers and conductors submitted an anonymous petition and why they picked on the Police Commissioner to place their demands. The tramwaymen who had no association at that time did not dare expose the names of their leaders. This simple evidence throws light on the uncertainty in which they had to work. As to the second question the plausible answer may be that the men, being apprehensive of police excess, if they resorted to strike, kept informed the most important man of the Calcutta Police, about their position.

About 2,500 drivers and conductors kept themselves away from normal duty on 1st of October, which led to a virtual paralysis of the city life.<sup>14</sup> The management of the Company tried desperately to retain normal services of tramcars. The checkers and inspectors, who were generally Anglo-Indians and were better paid, volunteered their services as drivers and conductors. The strikers on the other hand fought hard to make their strike a success. On the 1st of October, the Razabazar tram depot became a scene of violence. One Mr. Kettle, trying to drive a car, received resistance from the strikers. He knocked down a conductor. Infuriated, the strikers attacked Kettle, who had to be rescued by the police.<sup>15</sup>

Eruption of violence proved alarming both to the management, as well as to the Government. Moreover, Congress leaders of Bengal who believed in the credo of non-violence, preached by Gandhi also did not like the violent stance of the strikers. Hence a meeting took place between the workers and management on 3rd October, at the initiative of the Government. The workers were represented by two drivers, two conductors and five other 'gentlemen' who were not in the service of the tramways Company.<sup>16</sup> The identity of three of these five gentlemen is known. They were Nisith Chandra Sen, Byankesh Chakrabarti and Nirmal Chander Chandra -- the first two were barristers. All the three gentlemen were prominent Congress leaders and reportedly "staunch non-cooperators".<sup>17</sup> In that meeting, the General Manager of the Company agreed to increase the initial pay from Rs.19 to Rs.24, supply free uniforms and reinstate discharged drivers. The men insisted on allowing the two retrenched drivers to drive the first cars on 4th of

October, when they would resume their duty. The General Manager had to agree.<sup>18</sup> Tramwaymen were jubilant with their victory and shouted, "Kali Mai Ki Joy".<sup>19</sup> This slogan indicates that the impact of the Swadeshi Movement was still fresh among the tramworkers. "Kali Mai" as a symbol of spirit (Shakti) played a vital role in crystallizing Swadeshi ideology. In fact, Sumit Sarkar has used Jadu Gopal Mukherjee's 'Biblabi Jibaner Smritikatha' to give us the information that in October 1905, the tram drivers and conductors had observed a token strike in support of the Swadeshis.<sup>20</sup> A considerable number of drivers and conductors of the early 20s, who had also participated in the strike during the Swadeshi Movement were still swayed by the war-cry, "Kali Mai Ki Joy". That religion had nothing to do with this slogan is clear from the fact that one of the leaders of the strike was Mahmud Siddique, a Muslim driver.<sup>21</sup> However, at the initiative of the Government on one hand and non-cooperator 'Bhadraloks' on the other, the strike came to an end and trams started plying from 4th October, as usual.

For the first time in the history of tramwaymen of Calcutta the Congress leaders came forward to represent them in their meeting with the management, with a view to end the deadlock. They now also helped the tramworkers to form their association. The importance of the strike of October 1905, lay in the fact that it led to the formation of Calcutta Tramways Employee Union (hereafter C.T.E.U.), the first union of the Calcutta Tramwaymen.<sup>22</sup> Nisith Chandra Sen was the first President and Gayatri Prasad Choubey, a dismissed conductor, the first Secretary.<sup>23</sup>

### III

#### The Second Strike : Days of Militancy :

As days passed, the tramwaymen found to their utter disgust, that most of the decisions of the meeting of 3rd October had remained unimplemented. They began to think about another strike. On the 23rd of January, 1921, they placed a fresh charter of demands to the General Manager of the Company. The Charter included :



- (1) Fixation of eight hours as a working day and payment of overtime allowance for work done in excess.<sup>24</sup>
- (2) Fixed monthly salary on a graduated scale with a minimum pay of Rs.30.
- (3) Not to introduce any more extra hands till all men had been provided with permanent jobs.
- (4) Fair distribution of work by the head starter.
- (5) Introduction of a neutral enquiry in cases reported by flying checkers and inspectors.
- (6) Granting of Compassionate allowances in cases of accidents on duty.
- (7) Introduction of casual and privilege leave.
- (8) Chance for a conductor to make good shortage of cash, without his entailing suspension.
- (9) Abolition of the forfeiture system except in cases where a man was found guilty of cheating by a Competent Court of justice.
- (10) Not to dismiss any employee without conducting an enquiry in his presence.
- (11) Counting attendance in court as a witness of the Company as attendance on duty.
- (12) Free supply of overcoats in winter season.<sup>25</sup>

In the same Charter, the workers requested the General Manager to give his decision regarding these demands on or before 25th January, otherwise they would have to go to strike. Nowhere in the Charter was there any mention of C.T.E.U. or its office bearers. The address of its senders was given as Drivers and Conductors C/o. Walter Mother, Nikarapara, Tollygunge, the address of a tramwaymen's mess<sup>26</sup> and not 23 Wellington Street, which was

the address of the C.F.E.U. office.<sup>27</sup>

The management turned a deaf ear to the tramworkers' demands. The traffic staff of Calcutta tramways assembled in a meeting at Esplanade junction on 26th January, 1921. During this period Gandhi was in Calcutta. Being briefed about the condition of tramwaymen of Calcutta he decided to attend the meeting. Tramworkers waited for hours, but Gandhi did not turn up and divested himself of the responsibility by sending a note of excuse.<sup>28</sup> Why Gandhi did not attend the meeting of the tramworkers, may be any body's guess. It is likely that Gandhi's absence in tramwaymen's meeting was quite in keeping with his general attitude to labour. Round about the same period, Gandhi did not support the tea-plantation labour movement in Assam and also condemned the sympathetic strike launched by the railwaymen. In a letter to Shapurji Saklatvala, a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain, Gandhi wrote,

"Labour in India is still extremely unorganised. The labourers have no mind of their own when it comes to national policy or welfare of labour itself ..... . It is highly provincial and even in the same city it is highly communal".<sup>29</sup>

Notwithstanding Gandhi's absence prominent Bengal Congressmen moved to clinch the meeting and tried to avert a strike. The President of C.F.E.U. N.C. soon requested the men to settle the issue amicably and not to go in for a strike. But the workers refused to accept his proposal. N.C. Chandra also tried to convince the workers to stay away from a strike, but in vain. G.P. Chowdhury, another Congressman and at the same time a union office bearer also reminded the workers of great distress associated with such a strike. The workers responded with a, "That we know". "Are you determined to go to a strike?" Chowdhury asked "Yes Yes" was the answer. "Are you prepared to go to jail?" Chowdhury persisted. The reply was again in the affirmative. The Congress leader then used the last weapon out of his arsenal : "Are you prepared to remain unemployed for two months or more?"

Again "Yes" was the answer of the thousands of workers, assembled in the spot. The advice of the Bengal Congress leaders, "to settle down quietly" was rejected in unequivocal terms, and all the drivers and conductors shouted, "We shall strike from tomorrow morning and no first car shall leave the depot". Failing to persuade the workers to step down from the strike decision, the President of the C.T.E.U. N.C. Sen said, "As you have decided on striking all I can say to you is that there must be no Zhoolum, there must be no marpoot". A worker, present in the meeting immediately stood up and asked, "If anybody tries to take out a car?" "Hat Joro, pai paro" (fold your hands and fall at their feet) was Sen's answer.<sup>30</sup> But the events of the subsequent days would demonstrate that workers were never swayed by the advice of the non-violent president: they fought the forces of betrayal and black-legism when situation demanded.

The details of the meeting clearly show that the workers fully differed from the Gandhite labour leaders on the means to fight their cause. Thus the decision of going in for a strike in clear disregard of the congress leaders' advice shows beyond doubt, that the decision regarding their protest movements rested with the workers and not with Congress officials.

About 3,000 drivers and conductors struck work from 27th January, 1921. The President of C.T.E.U. expressed his regret at the occurrence and won the praise of the British bureaucracy for trying to induce the workers to "proceed Constitutionally".<sup>31</sup>

The Duke of Cannaught visited Calcutta on 28th of January. Not a single tram was seen plying that day. The tram strike was described by the Government as a pre-planned one, aimed at disturbing the "Royal visit" and it was suspected that, "local students and striking workers were being incited by the extremist organs of Calcutta". The same official communique lamented, "Gandhi's reiterated advice to learn Hindustani and use Charkha was not satisfying them (the striking workers and the students - SGR). Moreover local extremist organs are explaining that Gandhi's advice must not

be taken too literally."<sup>32</sup> No evidence is available to corroborate this statement that tramwaymen's decision to go in for a strike at that specific moment was a pre-determined manoeuvre to upset the "Royal Visit". However, one cannot ward off the feeling that the tramwaymen, in course of their struggle for better wage and improved working condition came to forge a link with the broader extremist politics of Bengal.

On 31st January, M.C. Son, without taking consent from the striking workers, opened a dialogue with the management. Son requested the authorities to appoint a Committee consisting of two non-official Europeans and two members, nominated by the Union.<sup>33</sup> But his proposal was turned down. The management took a rigid stand and categorically stated that this strike was engineered by "Ultior motives" and lacked any genuine cause. The management however did not spell out whose "ultior motives" precipitated this strike. Nor did Son demand any clarification of the term. Management handed over to him the following statement :

"Unless the men come back to work, we are not prepared to discuss the matter. On no account can any further increase of pay be granted. We are prepared to reinstate all the men, with exception to driver no.134".<sup>34</sup>

Having refused to accept the most modest proposal of the President of C.F.E.U., the management resolved to break the strike with the help of black-legs. The Company began to recruit Anglo-Indian drivers and conductors at an exorbitant rate of Rs.3 per day.<sup>35</sup> This malicious attempt of the Company to run cars, at any cost, met with stiff resistance from the strikers. The strike however continued amidst a few scuffling between the strikers and the black-legs, in several depots.

The 11th day of February was an eventful one in many ways. Violence erupted in Nonapukur Depot, when the black legs tried to take out the cars in the morning. Strikers attacked the black legs. One such element, Ram Kamal Bhattacharya, a conductor was assaulted by the strikers. As the situation grew tense, the management communicated with the police head quarters. A strong police contingent was sent to counteract the working

class violence. Massive lathi charge by the police brought the situation under control.<sup>36</sup>

At about 5 P.M. on the same day, the strikers assembled in a meeting to assess the position of the strike. The union leaders advised them to show restraint in face of provocation. The strikers also pledged themselves to persuade the men, who had broken away, to join them again. After the meeting tramwaymen paraded the Dhurmotala Street with shouts of "Gandhi Maharaja Ki Joy".<sup>37</sup> Gandhi's launching of Non-cooperation movement gave him a glorious image. Evidently, Calcutta's tramwaymen belonged to that lot of fighters, seen both in the industrial and agricultural sectors, who, albeit being shaken off by Gandhi, saw in him a Charisma. He was accepted as a symbol of protest against colonial oppression and an archangel of deliverance from the iron chains of imperialist control.

That this slogan was not an index of the perception of Gandhian Non-Violence by the tramwaymen as an appropriate and sufficient means to fight their employer, was evident from the events in the Kalighat tram depot on 18th February.<sup>38</sup> The strike was attempted to be black legged and the Company organised a massive import of strike breakers in Kalighat depot, on that day. Majority of the blacklegs, again, were Anglo-Indians. Incensed at finding the blacklegs, the strikers at Kalighat, stopped the cars and pulled them out of driver's cabin. The blacklegs attacked the strikers with stones and bamboos, snatched from nearby roofs, and pushed the strikers' to the Shahobbagan Bustee, adjacent to Kalighat tram depot. The impudence of the Anglo-Indians proved irksome to the slum dwellers, and they rallied by the side of the strikers. Thus reinforced, the tramworkers once again attacked the blacklegs with shouts of "Maro Sala Feringi Lokego" (Assail those bloody Anglo-Indians).<sup>39</sup> A police contingent reached the troubled spot to rescue the blacklegs. The strikers, along with the slum people ignored the arrival of the police and continued their attack on the blacklegs. A "sergent van" (sic!) appeared in the scene and opened fire on the militant crowd. A tramworker was killed and several others including the slum people were injured.<sup>40</sup> This incident demonstrated that to the tramwaymen neither

the peaceful strike, nor the leisurely petition to the management appeared as the most appropriate weapon to win their demands. To counter the high-handedness of the alien management acts of violence by the workers tended to be the rule, rather than the exception and trade disputes often tended to develop into riotous situations.

In the eyes of the British Bureaucracy, the residents of Shahobagan was a "turbulent class of Mohammedans".<sup>41</sup> In fact Shahobagan was a working class slum area, comprising mainly rickshaw pullers and daily wage earners, engaged in small industrial units in Calcutta and its suburbs. The toilers of Shahobagan had recourse to violence only when they saw innocent strikers being manhandled by the blacklegs. Their action evidently may counter any lingering notions of crowd as mysterious, vague and haphazard phenomenon, composed of social misfits and occurring almost by chance.<sup>42</sup>

However, police firing in Kalighat created a sensation. On the next day (19th February), a debate was held in the Calcutta Corporation. The Corporation dominated by Congressmen passed a resolution requesting the Government to take such steps as they might deem fit "to terminate the present deadlock and prevent such deadlocks in near future".<sup>43</sup> The Government immediately entered into communication with the parties to the dispute. On 23rd February, it was settled that men at strike should return to work on the next day and that the Company should announce its decision on tramwaymen's charter of 23rd January, 1921. In case the Company's decision failed to satisfy the workers, the Government would constitute a Committee to investigate their grievances.<sup>44</sup> Thus the strike came to an end and the streets of Calcutta again heard the clamours of tram cars on 24th February, after twenty-seven days.<sup>45</sup>

The Company's decision stated that all the workers, except the driver no. 134, would be allowed to join and the Company would make a proper investigation of their grievances.<sup>46</sup> The tramwaymen naturally thought that these decisions eluded the vital issues and refused to accept them. The Government immediately set up a Committee known as the Calcutta Tramways' Strike Committee. The members of the Committee were :

D.B. Meek, Director of Industries, the Chairman of the Committee.  
R.S. Watron Smyth, President, Bengal Chamber of Commerce.  
Byomkesh Chakravarti  
Rai Chunilal Bose Bahadur, Sheriff of Calcutta.  
G.H.W. Davies, I.C.S.<sup>47</sup>

Among these members only Byomkesh Chakravarty, a Congress man and a rich barrister was the representative of the workers. The Committee made certain recommendations, the majority of which went in favour of the Company. The Committee's report categorically stated, "We do not feel justified in recommending any change in the present scale of pay". It further recommended that "all power regarding dismissal, suspension and forfeiture of deposit will remain with the Company" - the adjoining piece was - the Company should deal with such cases with "Careful Considerations", which was nothing but a vague promise. So far as workers' interest was concerned, it only recommended nine hours' working day, instead of twelve hours and 3 weeks' annual leave with half pay. Regarding other points of grievances the Committee remained silent as "they were not pressed by the representatives of men".<sup>48</sup> The Committee did not take any clear stand regarding the reinstatement of the dismissed driver no.134. Interestingly enough, even the C.T.E.U. also kept on the strike for nearly a month, were so exhausted by the insolence of the Company on one hand and irresponsibility of the C.T.E.U. leaders on the other that they had no alternative but to accept the recommendations of the Committee and resume work, leaving behind them their retrenched comrade, driver no.134.

Despite the failure of the strike, its importance should not be minimised, as Calcutta tramwaymen fought against the systematic repression of their white employers. They even went to the extent of denying the champions of class collaboration, who posed as the non-violent well wishers of the workers. Moreover, like many other strikes of the period, this strike also horrified the ruling class, with the spectre of Bolshevism.<sup>49</sup>

IV

The Third Strike : Hammering and Aftermath

Once the strike of early 1921 came to an end, the Company began with a double edged policy. At first, the minimum pay of the drivers and conductors were raised from Rs.19 to Rs.24,<sup>50</sup> which enthused the workers. Then the Company ensued a policy of hammering upon the workers, with redoubled energy. In August, 1921, the management dismissed seventy conductors for alleged dishonesty. The order was summed up thus : the "notorious" Conductors were retrenched "for pocketing pice, without issuing tickets".<sup>51</sup> Strangely enough not a single enquiry was held before this decision was taken. In fact, all the retrenched conductors had played a leading role in their action against the Company in early '21. The tramwaymen viewed this vindictive act of the Company with great concern and requested to revoke the order to examine the whole thing "with careful consideration". But the Company turned a deaf ear to the workmen's plea.

On the 4th September, tram drivers and conductors assembled in a meeting and decided to strike from the 5th to protest against such unlawful retrenchment.<sup>52</sup> The C.T.E.U. leaders, so long did not execute their duties to pressurise the management to bring the dismissed workers back. But in this meeting they made their presence felt, again by trying to induce the workers not to go in for a strike immediately, which would mean a "terrible inconvenience to the travelling public" of Calcutta.<sup>53</sup> The members of the Traffic staff of Calcutta Tramways, however, again launched a strike, "in defiance of the advice of the President of C.T.E.U." on 5th September.<sup>54</sup>

The strike rendered the city transport in complete disarray for two days (5th and 6th September). On the 6th night the President of the C.T.E.U. met the strikers and urged them to return to work.<sup>55</sup> He again reminded them of the evil consequences they might have to face for participating in the strike. Tramwaymen were already dejected at the unhappy endings of the strike of February 1921. Moreover, sudden dismissal of their fellow workers in August came as a ruthless revenge and threatened their job security.



Government and the Company not only condoned this strike; they also tried to break it at any cost. Unprecedented import of black-legs was made to keep the trams moving. The situation took such a magnitude that the Employees' Association of Calcutta, an organisation of middle class and white collar employees of different units, in a resolution, urged the Bengali youths, "not to be enlisted as black-legs and deprive living of thousands of tramway employees summarily dismissed by the Company".<sup>56</sup> The situation however showed no signs of improvement so far as the tramwaymen were concerned. At this stage the C.T.E.U. President's constant bemoaning of the impending danger as the out come of their strike, unnerved the workers, and they began to lose hope. On the 7th, there was partial resumption of work. Within two or three days, almost all the workers returned to work unconditionally.<sup>57</sup>

Again a miserable setback was tasted by the tramwaymen of Calcutta. Their protests of the early 20s were mere reaction against hardship - though they resorted to striking and other forms of militancy. In course of such struggles, they gained a new lesson. They realised that a decent livelihood could not be attained merely by occasional outbursts. It required eternal vigilance, organisation and movement, a genuine trade union and a political party of their own. Disillusioned over their experience with Congress leaders, tramworkers were left only to align themselves with a more radical line. True that the C.P.I. was not formed in 1921. But some individuals in India had already established their link with the Communist International and Moscow. May be that some of the tramwaymen came in contact with such individuals. This assumption is strengthened by a pamphlet received by the management of the Company during the strike of September 1921. The pseudonym of the author of the pamphlet was "Communist". The pamphlet read :

"Ye of the well fed and comfortable class. We do not threaten : We warn. We indulge neither in vain hopes nor in craven despair : We seek to make sure. We take our stand by the side of those whom capitalism has cast out. We say of them and for them - these are flesh and

blood even as Ye. Because they are flesh and blood, they have as much right as anybody to be fed, clothed and sheltered with honour and dignity. They have right of an opportunity to repay the cost of their keep (as all men should) by labour useful to their fellowmen. You, who by incompetence, callousness, cupidity or neglect, debar them from this right are guilty of crime against them.

"It is the consequence of your crime, which confronts you today".<sup>58</sup>

V

Years of Tranquility and Transition : 1922-1927.

Tramwaymen's protest against retrenchment could not gain much ground and their unconditional resumption of work in September, 1921 naturally enthused the management. The management struck again by retrenching at least three hundred workers, towards the end of 1921.<sup>59</sup> But this time not a single protest of the workers confronted the Company. In fact workmen's sad experience in their struggle against the management gave their hopes and aspirations a staggering blow. Hence the years succeeding 1921 were largely eventless for the tramwaymen of Calcutta. During these years of apparent lull, while still despising the colonial Government and their British employers, they also developed a mistrust over the nationalist leaders and union office bearers. Regarding the interest of their fellow workers, they kept themselves in the grip of thick cobwebs of apathy. The C.T.E.U. gradually went defunct.

Meanwhile, in the national scene, a great change was in the making. The rising tide of workingclass movement in different parts of India in the early 20s compelled the Government to enact certain liberal labour laws. One such important enactment was the Indian Trade Union Act of 1926, which allowed any seven persons of a Company or concern to form a registered trade union.<sup>60</sup> In 1927, the Indian Trade Union Act led to the reorganisation of

the C.T.E.U. under a new name, Calcutta Tramways Workers' Union (hereafter C.T.W.U.).<sup>61</sup> The change in the name and office bearers suggested the influence of communists. In July 1924, the Communist International had decided that a new Communist Party should be formed in India, as one of its branches. Accordingly, the first Conference of the Indian Communists was held in Kanpur in December, 1925.<sup>62</sup> Bhupendranath Dutta, a doyen of the Marxist theoreticians in India, was the President of C.T.W.U. and Sibnath Banerjee, a Socialist leader, who had developed some links with Communists abroad in the early years of his political career, its Secretary.<sup>63</sup> In 1927, the new C.T.W.U. was affiliated to A.I.T.U.C.

Tramwaymen's experience with the C.T.E.U. leaders in early 20s still haunted them and in the beginning they looked the new leaders with similar distrust. But a section of the tramwaymen realised that the new comers were different from their earlier leaders. Within that year, the membership of the new union rose to 800.<sup>64</sup>

The Communist Party of India which during this period acted as a segment in the broad platform of Indian National Congress, guised in Bengal as the Bengal Workers' and Peasant Party (B.W.P.P.). The B.W.P.P. leaders were trying to organise the working class of different industrial sectors. As a part of their programme, they worked to bring the tramwaymen under their influence. The workers, who lost their jobs in 1921 acted as an auxiliary force, in this effort of the B.W.P.P. leaders. A large number of these sacked workers had not left Calcutta. Some of them now worked in small industrial units while some others earned their livings as podlars. These men did not sever links with their old comrades, who still worked in the Calcutta Tramways. When in 1927 the B.W.P.P. leaders contacted these people, they readily acted as the link between the B.W.P.P. and the tramworkers. One such worker was Kali Shon, a driver, discharged in 1921, whose unrelenting efforts to associate the tramwaymen with B.W.P.P. is still remembered by Dhiron Majumdar, a fosterparent of the C.T.W.U.<sup>65</sup> Thus the penetration of Communist ideology within the tramwaymen percolated through the dismissed workers' efforts.

The number of C.W.U. members was 800 in 1927. True that, the enrolment of 800 men or only 13.3% of the Company's total 6,000 employees did not present a very rosy picture for the new union, but in the very year of its inception even this was no mean task.<sup>66</sup>

## VI

### The Simon Commission : Acid Test of the New Union

The coming of the Simon Commission in early 1928 came as a test case for the new union. The British Government appointed the Indian Statutory Commission, known popularly after the name of its Chairman as Simon Commission in November 1927 to go to the questions of further constitutional reforms. The Commission was due to arrive in India on 3rd February 1928. All the members of the Commission were Englishmen and reflected a racist arrogance which hurt the dignity and national sentiment of the Indians. In January, John Simon received a letter from S.S. Mirajakar, a pioneer of the Bombay Communists -- in which the letter branded the commission as a "gang of robbers".<sup>67</sup> On the 11th January a mass meeting held under the auspices of Bombay Municipal Workmen's Union resolved to observe "a universal strike in all departments of the Municipality on the day of arrival" of the Commission.<sup>68</sup> Marxist radicals like Nimbkar, Dango, Ranadive etc. were closely associated with this union. In the middle of January All Parties Conference unanimously decided that the Simon Commission must be "left severely alone" by the people of India. It appealed to the people to observe a 'hartal' on the 3rd February, all over the country from morning to 4-30 P.M. in the evening.<sup>69</sup> Shapurji Saklatvala, a Communist member in the British Parliament who had also close links with Indian Communists, thundered in the House that the Commission was being sent with a view "to perpetrate the imperial rule in India". He also hailed the decision of the All Party Conference to boycott the Commission and observe a hartal on the day of its arrival.<sup>70</sup> From the available evidences, it seems clear that the Communists in India too, along with other political parties, demonstrated their opposition to the all-white commission.

Accordingly, the B.W.P.P. set itself to make the 'Hartal' a grand success.<sup>71</sup> The leaders of C.T.W.U. put up a tireless effort to mobilise the tramworkers against the commission and the tramwaymen of Calcutta did not lag behind in their struggle against British imperialism. In the meeting of 22nd January, 1928 in Calcutta Maidan, held under the auspices of C.T.W.U., tramworkers expressed their willingness to observe Hartal on 3rd February.<sup>72</sup>

The Calcutta Tramways Company, when it heard of the hartal programme of the tramwaymen proceeded to tackle it with usual brutality, bringing the 'civilisation and justice' of the bourgeois order in its lurid light. The Company walled up a notice in its Head Office, stating clearly that if any worker remained absent on the 3rd February will be summarily dismissed. The Company also arranged to keep the drivers and conductors forcibly confined in their respective depots, for the night of 2nd February.<sup>73</sup>

On the penultimate day of proposed 'Hartal' a conductor was caught by the Traffic Superintendent for distributing leaflets among the workers, which appealed to boycott the Simon Commission. The Traffic Superintendent immediately took away the leaflets and trampled them. Within a few minutes he put up a fresh notice, at the Company's Head Office, threatening once again with dismissal in case of absence on the 3rd. But the notice was torn apart by the angry tramworkers, leading to the consequent dismissal of two conductors.<sup>74</sup>

In the evening of the 2nd February police and military forces heavily guarded all the important depots of Calcutta and Howrah and prevented every member of the traffic staff from leaving the depot after their duty hours. Evidently, this proved irksome to the workers but they had nothing to do but to stay in the depots.<sup>75</sup> As the morning broke in Calcutta on the 'Hartal' day there was a strange scene on the roads. Tramcars containing tramworkers and armed policemen were plying along the rails. Gunpoint compelled those tramworkers to keep cars running.<sup>76</sup>

But not all of them : even the threat of force failed to good the men at Kalighat depot and Tollygunge depot to work. At the Kalighat depot leaders of the C.T.W.U. spoke to the men about the ulterior motives of the Simon Commission and their political implication. The police attempt to terrorize them to run cars was evidently a failure as not a single car went out of the depot.<sup>77</sup> At Tollygunge depot, the men resisted the blacklegs who came to run cars. When the police came to the defence of the blacklegs, it became a tramwaymen versus police showdown. The police atrocities of February 1921 faded before the ineffable infamy of February 1928. They opened fire on men, killed two and injured at least thirty.<sup>78</sup> Sibnath Banerjee, the C.T.W.U. Secretary soon appeared in the scene and condemned the police action. The Police at first gave him a rough treatment and then arrested him.<sup>79</sup>

On the 4th February, the Company dismissed four workers and suspended many others, allegedly for creating disturbance on the 3rd February. It also declared to reward the men, who did not join the strike.<sup>80</sup> Somnath Lahiri, an early Communist in Bengal, who associated himself with the C.T.W.U. for a considerable length of time, depicted the tale of police repression on the tram workers during the anti-Simon agitation, in his short story "Akabaka". The story reveals how the company rewarded the blacklegs, as a token of gratitude, who went all out to foil the political stirring of the working class.<sup>81</sup>

This political struggle of the workers was not to be erased easily from the minds of the management. G.R. Dain, a high Company Official, in his statement before the Royal Commission of Labour in India, in 1930 expressed grave concern over the fact that though there was not a single strike in the recent years, there was indeed a "Hartal" i.e. the 'Hartal' of 3rd February, 1928. A member of the Commission asked Dain to clarify the difference between 'Hartal' and a strike. "Strikes" occurred as a consequence of "trade disputes", "but there is no trade dispute involved in a 'Hartal'" - was Dain's reply.<sup>82</sup>

Tramworkers' protest movement against the Simon Commission was quelled with extreme brutality and in the process of fighting the evil designs of imperial rule, they were subject to suspension, dismissal, injury and death. But this time their experience was different. Unlike the leaders of early 20s, the leaders of C.T.W.U. did not shake off their responsibility by condemning the militancy of the strikers. When the tramworkers faced the onslaught of the state, these leaders stood by their side and unhesitatingly embraced torture and imprisonment. They lost their battle against the Company and the state on the issue of Simon Commission. It was a set back no doubt, but they were convinced that such setbacks were necessary stepping stones for marching towards a better future.

## VII

### The Remaining Years :

The B.W.P.P. went on giving unrelenting efforts to act as the vanguard of the tramwaymen and tried to involve them in various forms of political activities. Tramwaymen were active participants in the striking demonstration of the Calcutta working class in December, 1928, led by the B.W.P.P.<sup>83</sup> The workers in their way of marching into the Congress session in Park Circus, were manhandled by the Bengal Volunteers,<sup>84</sup> and "it is said Subhash Bose, 'GOC' of the volunteers, even wanted to call in the police".<sup>85</sup> The objective of the workers was to appeal to the Congress leaders to support their modest demand for reduction of working hours, stopping retrenchment in different industries and a resolution for Purna Swaraj.<sup>86</sup> This infact was an eye opener for the workers, and many of them including the tramwaymen began to give a fresh thought over the attitude of Congress leaders towards the working class.<sup>87</sup> From an official note it is known that Subhash Bose was trying to extend his influence over the tramwaymen of Calcutta, towards end of 20s, but received a very little response.<sup>88</sup>

In 1929, the Government of India being apprehensive of the Communist activities throughout India, framed the Moorut Conspiracy case and arrested a number of labour leaders, including some British Communists. C.T.W.U. Secretary, Sibnath Banerjee was a victim of this imperialist conspiracy. On 21st April, 1929, the meeting of the C.T.W.U., under the presidency of an early communist, Bankim Mukherjee, condemned the Moorut Conspiracy Case and expressed sympathy for the arrested leaders.<sup>89</sup> Despite a poor attendance in the meeting, it was a demonstration of working class solidarity and their political maturity.

After the arrest of Sibnath Banerjee, P.K. Sanyal acted as Secretary of the C.T.W.U. The third decade of the 20th century ended for the tramwaymen of Calcutta, with concern expressed by P.K. Sanyal over small number of unionised tram workers. In a meeting of the tram workers, on 29th December, 1929, he stressed on the necessity of joining the C.T.W.U.

## VIII

### Some General Observations :

Some important points emerge from our study of tramwaymen's movement in the Calcutta of the 1920s. The drivers and conductors were the advanced echelons among the total body of tram workers. It was they who launched the strikes of early 20s with only marginal support from workshop workers. Members of the traffic staff, particularly the retrenched drivers and conductors, were instrumental in forming a new union in 1927 led by the Communists. Most members of this new union came from the traffic section. During the anti-Simon Commission phase of the nationalist struggle it was the drivers and conductors who initiated the agitation among the tramwaymen. Repression thus fell heavily on them. Their vanguard role possibly stemmed from their bargaining strength. Their bargaining position was exceptionally strong, as they could put a stranglehold on the work whenever they wanted. From Hobsbawm's study of labour protests we find that in the British Gas Industry, similar bargaining position was being enjoyed by the stokers and firemen, whose services proved indispensable to



the industry. These stokers and firemen formed the most active and politically conscious workers in the British Gas industry.<sup>91</sup> In Britain as well as in other countries in Europe most militant and politically advanced elements among the toiling people came from the skilled craftsmen.<sup>92</sup>

The tramways being a public utility, the public was much concerned about it. As it was a British Company, people of Calcutta saw its workers' movement not as an isolated case of employees' agitation against the management but as a part of the united struggle of the Indians against British imperialism. We have seen that the Calcuttans were ready to help the striking workers whenever situation so demanded. Slum dwellers of Sahobbagan came as their saviours, when they were attacked by the Anglo-Indian blacklegs and company-hired hoodlums. The Employees' Association, representing white colour workers and middle class elements, appealed to the Bengali youths not to be lackeys of the alien company by joining it as blacklegs. Tramways being the fulcrum of city transport in the 20s, a strike of its workers meant an insuperable difficulty of Calcutta's middle class employees, yet the Calcuttans extended their protective arms to the cause of the strikers. Not a single manifestation of public wrath against the strikers was visible.<sup>93</sup> Tramwaymen's bargaining strength was undoubtedly derived in great part, from this.

The eventful 20s provided a good-bed for a stronger trade union of the tramworkers ~~to be established~~ in the late 1930s and 40s. In course of their struggle against the management as well as against the state machinery, they were involved in the process of selecting and rejecting their vanguards. The philanthropist Congress leaders being largely devoid of any positive policy which could cater the workingclass interest in the wake of employers' offensive, they were summarily rejected by Calcutta's Tramwaymen. A continuous struggle waged by the working class engendered the necessity for a more radical organisation that would ensure its effectiveness.

Our study of the 20s confirms that aspirations for a better tomorrow animated the tramworkers to renew their struggle. Defeats were temporary setbacks and passing facade. In their analysis of working class struggle, some historians, however, locate the diabolic in the structure of consciousness.<sup>94</sup> Perception of working class struggle in the syndrome of Struggle-Consciousness-Defeat is indeed metaphysical. For it not only negates the Struggle-Setback-Struggle syndrome but also identifies the temporary setbacks as 'defeats' emerging out of structural constraints within the working-class. Tramwaymen's movements in early 20s ended with retrenchment, hunger and wretchedness but perhaps also with hope. Their protest against the Simon Commission marked only the beginning of organised and more developed struggles of the C.T.W.U. in subsequent years. Days of glorious struggles in the '40s provided an answer to the poor tramwaymen's dream of the 20s.

Notes and References

1. P.P. Lakshman : Congress and the Labour Movement in India. Allahabad. 1947, p.17.
2. A.I.F.U.C. Fifty Years Documents. (Volume I). New Delhi, 1973. S.A. Dango's Introduction. P. IXXXIII.
3. For details see my article, "Tramwaymen of Calcutta : their movement and organisation : 1920-47", in Chittabrata Palit Edited Revolt Studies Vol.I, No.2, December 1985.
4. The Statesman and Friend of India, 2nd October, 1920.
5. Calcutta Gazette (Supplimentary) 13th April, 1921. P.695.
6. Ralph Fox : The Colonial Policy of British Imperialism. London, 1933, p.46.
7. Commerce Department (Commerce Branch), Government of West Bengal, Calcutta 8th March 1921, Resolution No.856. — West Bengal State Archives (Hereafter W.B.S.A.).
8. The Statesman and Friend of India, 27th January, 1921.
9. Ralph Fox : op. cit.
10. The Statesman and Friend of India, 1st October, 1920.
11. The Statesman and Friend of India, 3rd October, 1920.
12. Report of the Committee of Industrial Unrest in Bengal, 1921, pp.VIII & IX.
13. Ibid p.IX.
14. Ibid .
15. The Statesman and Friend of India, 2nd October, 1920.
16. Industrial Unrest Committee, op. cit.
17. Confidential Report on the Political Situation of Bengal for the first half of October 1920, File No.17/20, Home Department (Political Branch), Government of India, National Archives (Hereafter N.A.).
18. The Statesman and Friend of India, 5th October 1920.
19. Ibid .
20. Sumit Sarkar : The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903-1908. Delhi, 1973, p.183.
21. Amrita Bazar Patrika, 5th October, 1920. Infact, Mahmud Siddique was one of the two drivers, who was discharged in August, 1920. The other man was Driver No.134. Whose name is not known.

22. Sisir Mitra : "Those labour makes the wheel Turn?"  
In Marxist Miscellany, No.8, June 1977,  
P.57. Also Secret Report - op. cit.  
File No.17/20. Home Department  
(Political). Government of India. N.A.
23. ~~xxx~~ Panchanan Saha : History of Working-class Movement in  
Bengal, New Delhi, 1978, p.221.
24. Calcutta Tramworkers were possibly the trend setters in Bengal, in  
launching the demand for reduction of working hours.
25. Calcutta Gazette (Supplementary) : 13th April 1921, p.695.
26. Ibid.
27. ~~xxx~~ Panchanan Saha : op. cit.
28. The Statesman and Friend of India, 27th January, 1921.
29. "Is India Different ? The Class Struggle in India", Correspondence  
on the Indian Labour Movement and Modern Conditions by S. Sakhlavala  
and M.K. Gandhi. A pamphlet published by Communist Party of Great  
Britain. London, 1927.
30. The Statesman and Friend of India, 27th January, 1921.
31. Report on the Strikes in Bengal Presidency, Department of Industry  
(Labour Branch), Government of India, File No. 1881(11), November,  
1921. (N.A.).
32. Fortnightly Report on the Political Situation in Bengal for the  
Second Half of January, 1921, Home Department (Political Branch).  
Government of India, File No.42 of April 1921 (N.A.).
33. The Statesman and Friend of India, 1st February, 1921.
34. Ibid.
35. Department of Commerce (Commerce Branch), Government of Bengal,  
June 1921, Progs No.15-21, (W.B.S.A.).
36. The Statesman and Friend of India, 12th February, 1921.
37. Ibid.
38. Fortnightly Report on the Political Situation in Bengal for the  
Second half of January 1921, Home Department (Political),  
Government of India, File No.43 of April 1921 (N.A.).
39. Home Department (Political) Police, Government of Bengal, File No.  
P.5-R-9. Progs. No.35-44, July 1921, (W.B.S.A.).
40. Ibid.
41. Judicial Enquiry Report on Disturbance at Kalighat Tram Depot --  
Calcutta Gazette, (Supplimentary), 22nd June, 1921.

42. R.W. Brown, H.J. Snelser etc. give such views on crowd. Quoted in George Rude : The Crowd in History 1730-1848, London, 1981, p.4.
43. Resolution on the Report of the Calcutta Tramways Strike Committee, Commerce Department (Commerce), Calcutta, April 1921, Resolution No.1359, (W.B.S.A.).
44. Ibid.
45. The Statesman and Friend of India, 25th February, 1921.
46. Resolution on Calcutta Tramways Strike Committee, op.cit.
47. Ibid.
48. "Report of the Calcutta Tramways Strike Committee", Calcutta Gazette, 13th April, 1921.
49. Contemporary journals like Shramik, Karmi, Nayak, Samyavadi, give that the British Government suspected a hand of Bolshevism in the strikes of early 20s.
50. Calcutta Gazette, 13th April, 1921.
51. Karmi, (English Version), October-November, 1921.
52. Amrita Bazar Patrika, 4th September, 1921.
53. Karmi, Op. Cit.
54. Report of the Strikes in Bengal Presidency, Department of Industry (Labour), Government of India, File No.1881(11), November, 1921(N.A.).
55. Ibid.
56. Karmi, op. cit.
57. Confidential Report of the Political Situation of Bengal in the First half of September, 1921, File No.51, Home Department(Political), Government of India (N.A.)
58. Karmi (English Version), February 1922.
59. Ibid.
60. C.A. Myers : Industrial Relations in India, Bombay, 1958, p.106.
61. Sisir Mitra, op.cit.
62. Sir Horrace Williamson : India and Communism, Calcutta, 1976, p.109.
63. Sisir Mitra, op. cit.
64. Panchanan Saha, op. cit.
65. Interview with Dhiren Majumdar, Erstwhile Secretary of C.T.W.U. on 10th January, 1985.
66. Report of the Royal Commission on Labour in India (Hereafter R.C.L.I.), Great Britain, 1931, Vol. V, Pt.I, p.215.

67. G. Adhikari (Ed.) Documents of the History, C.P.I., Vol.(IIIC), 1928, New Delhi, P.191.
68. Forward, 12th January, 1928.
69. Ibid, 21st January, 1928.
70. Ibid, 2nd February, 1928.
71. Gangdani (In Bengali), 20th January, 1928.
72. Forward, 25th January, 1928.
73. Ibid, 3rd February.
74. Ibid.
75. Ibid.
76. Ibid, 4th February, 1928.
77. Ibid.
78. Ibid, Also R.C.L.I., Vol.V, Pt.II, P.62.
79. Amrita Bazar Patrika, 5th February, 1928.
80. Forward, 5th February, 1928.
81. Somnath Lahiri : Kaliyuger Galpa (In Bengali), Calcutta, 1985, p.141.
82. R.C.L.I., Vol.V, Pt. II, p.62.
83. Sukomol Sen : Working Class of India :History of Emergence and Movement, 1830-1970, Calcutta, 1979, p.289.
84. Saroj Mukhopadhyay : Bharat Communist Party O' Amra, Pratham Khand (In Bengali), Calcutta, 1985, p.15.
85. Sumit Sarkar : Modern India 1885-1947, New Delhi, 1983, P.270.
86. Saroj Mukhopadhyay : op. cit.
87. Interview with Dhiren Majumdar, Majumdar participated in this rally of working class.
88. "Confidential Report on the Political Situation in Bengal for the Second half of August, 1929". Home Department (Political), Government of India, File No.17/29, (N.A.).
89. "Confidential Report on the Political Situation in Bengal for the Second half of April, 1929". Home Department (Political), Government of India, File No.17/29, (N.A.).
90. R.C.L.I., Vol. V, Pt. II, P.61.
91. Eric Hobsbawm : Labouring Men, London, 1964. See "British Gas Workers, 1873-1914". P.166.

92. Eric Hobsbawm : The Age of Revolution, London, 1962, P.213.  
Also see Mick Jenkins : The General Strike of 1842, London, 1980, passim.
93. In each and every issue of Karmi, which was the organ of Employees' Association, the issue of tram strikes was widely covered and tramwaymen received tremendous support.
94. Diposh Chakrabarty : Communal Riot and Labour : Bengal Jute Mill hands in the 1890s. Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Occasional Paper No.11.  
For Chakrabarty's views see D. Chakrabarty and Ranajit Das Gupta : Some Aspects of Labour History in Bengal in the 19th Century, Two Views. C.S.S.S.C. Occasional Paper No.40.