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CAN THE SUBALTERN PROTEST? TEA PLANTATION WORKERS OF ASSAM AND INDIAN NATIONAL MOVEMENT

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Subaltern struggle is not a new phenomenon to Indian history. Movement, resistance and ideology are the three components and also interrelated factors that can determine the dynamics of social change. The functioning of the state cannot be fully understood without the understanding of the politics of the masses. It is sometimes the perception, beliefs, aspirations and the views of the subaltern classes which come into the conflict with the state apparatus. Most of the time, the collective action of people is often regarded as alienated, estranged, excluded and outside the polity. Collective action of the tea plantation workers of Assam in the form of protests and resistances were the manifestation of subaltern way of resistance against the dominant power structure. Protest of tea garden workers is an integral aspect while referring to the tea plantation in Assam. Strikes and protest of the workers were not unknown to the tea garden workers during colonial and even in the postcolonial period, though they have come in different forms and nature. The deprivation, suppression and exploitation of the workers at large sometimes led to sporadic violent outbursts and protests between tea garden workers and Planters during the colonial period. It is in this context, book, and '*Tea Plantation Workers of Assam and the Indian National Movement 1920- 1947*' written by, Bikash Nath is relevant. Author in his book, has given a historical account of the workers protests in the colonial period. Author has significantly located the protests of the workers in the period confined within 1921 to 1947. The reason cited by the author is that the perspective of the native bourgeoisies towards the subaltern

workers struggle was diabolic and therefore resistance of the workers never gets adequate recognition from the nationalist leaders. This period was also significant as simultaneously nation has witnessed national movement led by the congress and nationalist leaders. How the nationalist leaders perceive the workers struggle is significantly raised by the author. Book contains eight different chapters on workers protests in colonial period. But the readings of the book can be contextualized in the form of protests and resistances of the workers and how the protests of the workers are interpreted by the established knowledge of the Indian national movement and the leaders associated with it. Moreover the book has also laid down the description of the emergence of trade union culture in Assam and how far the trade unions of Assam has been successful in shaping the workers protests in colonial period is also dealt by the author.

Author here successfully describes the space of participation of the subalterns in the nation's struggle for freedom, and locating their struggle he mentions that space is not shared equally by all. Basic cause against the disowning by the nationalist leadership was that the bourgeoisie nationalist leadership would not encourage and embrace the working class and their way of struggle. Moreover the book also raises the pertinent question of 'spontaneity and autonomy' of the subaltern struggle. Theoretical ambiguities faced by the labour historian while defining the exact nature of the labourers' struggle is also mentioned in the book. Because of the peasant characteristics of the working class have been held responsible for the breakdown of working class solidarity is also highlighted by the author. In regard to the ambiguities in determining the nature of the workers protests, author has mentioned about the colonial socio economic set-up which created difficulty to determine the nature of exact capitalist development and the formation of working class in India during the colonial period. According to historians such as Eric Wolf, laborers' consciousness has been regarded as being devoid of the notion of pure proletarianised class conflict. The scenario in case of the tea garden workers can be said to be similar as previously they were mostly landless peasant but under colonial regime they lost their peasantry identity and did not enjoy the right of 'autonomous decisions' regarding the process of cultivation.¹ Therefore they have unable to develop the class consciousness and which subsequently affected their way of protesting against the capitalist power.

These tea garden worker recruits were mostly landless and deprived which has limited the workers to attain the class consciousness. But despite their heterogeneous background they have developed a sense of collective unity from their shared history of disposition, exploitation and sufferings to fight against common enemy of colonialism. Author has mentioned in detail about many examples which show this class's resistant through unorganized sporadic outbursts and strikes against the plantation authority. (p.146 -172) Tea plantation of Assam is the product of colonialism and migrant workers constitutes the core of the plantation system in Assam. As mentioned by the author, before joining the plantation economy workers were mostly peasant and the large scale colonisation of land and resources were responsible for the migration of tea plantation workers which subsequently transformed their peasant and tribesman characteristics to plantation workers. In the colonialist –capitalist discourse, labour was simply defined as a commodity which could be tamed and subjected to the discipline and authority of the tea planters. Everyday confrontation with the cruel realities in plantation regime such as hard work, discrimination, malnutrition and undernourishment, impoverishment, exploitation, disease etc has led to the death and desertion of the workers in Assam tea gardens. But the accounts of such painful experiences have not been recorded by the colonial bureaucracy. Even their individual identities remained unrecorded but were subsumed into anonymous 'gangs' and 'muster rolls', to be confined in 'depots' during the journey and 'coolie lines' upon arrival in the plantation. Like many of their counterparts, they have been relegated to the category of a 'people without history.' But contrary to the stereotype picture of the workers as 'helpless', 'ignorant', the workers too often showed their awareness about their rights although it was unsuccessful in most of the time. (p. 146-175)

Most significant aspect dealt by the author in the book was the ambivalent attitude of the nationalist Congress leaders and the leading periodicals of Assam during colonial period towards the protests of the workers of Assam. Moreover the 'thaumaturgical role' which was ascribed to Gandhi in the context of workers' protests worked as indirect catalysts and giving a sense of political knowledge to the workers.² Role of rumour played an important role in subaltern way of protests and author has mentioned this nature of subaltern protest by highlighting the worker's famous Chagola Exodus. Development of new kind of self-confidence

among the workers led to the departure from the tea estates by simply saying that it was on Gandhi's order (*hukum*). But despite their spontaneous and sporadic nature of protests against the plantation authority, their protests did not earn any consideration from the leaders of the Gandhi led- movement. Author opines that the nature of the protests of the tea plantation workers was significantly departure from the elitist led national movement. It was an autonomous domain of subaltern protests without any elitist method of struggle. Moreover author also describes that, subaltern started their protests without any bourgeois intervention and the trade union culture also did not have a great presence among the tea plantation workers, it is because of the strict surveillance of the colonial state as well as the late entry of trade unions in mobilizing the workers of tea estates.

Where the book falters slightly is its little mention about the colonial construction of waste land and its significant role in transformation of vast land into tea plantation area and its role in transforming the nature of the capitalist structure in Assam. Moreover it would be fascinating to know the authors view on subaltern nature of struggle in detail and how the different protests and resistance of subalterns groups happened in Assam and other parts of India against the colonial power structure has influenced the tea plantation workers consciousness and their mobilization against plantation regime. Keeping these minor research gap aside, Bikash Nath's book is an important contribution to understand the nature of subaltern protests and more specifically the collective resistance of tea plantation workers of Assam against the exploitative colonial regime.

References:

¹Wolf, R. (1971). '*Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century*', London, p. xvii, Quoted in Chaudhury, B. (1979). *The Transformation of Rural Protest in Eastern India*. Presidential Address. Indian History Congress. Fortieth Session. IHCP, p. 505.

²Nath, Bikash. (2016). '*Tea Plantation Workers of Assam and the Indian National Movement 1921-1947*'. Primus Books, New Delhi, p. 158.