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## The Gandhian Movement and Railway Workers in Bihar: A Case Study of the Workers of Jamalpur Railway Workshop (1919-1930)

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### Abstract

*The present paper tries to understand the political and ideological undercurrents of the railway workers movement of Jamalpur railway workshop which gradually unfolded in the opening decades of twentieth century. It further focuses on intensity dimension entwining of Gandhian ideology and techniques with the workers movement which was evident during the Non-Cooperation and Civil Disobedience Movement in the vicinity of Jamalpur Railway Workshop.*

**Keywords: Jamalpur, Railway Workshop, Workers, Strike and Gandhi.**

### Introduction

Jamalpur Railway Workshop, India's first locomotive workshop, was set up on February 8, 1862 by East Indian Railway. Lying at a distance of 6-7 miles from the town of Monghyr (also written as Munger, generally after the Independence) in the province of Bihar, it became the principal workshop on the East Indian Railway Line (EARL). In 1926, L.S.S. O' Malley described Jamalpur as a town which is picturesquely situated at the foot of Kharagpur hills and which owes its development to its being the headquarters of the Mechanical Department of East Indian Railway.<sup>1</sup>

In the same year, the Chairman of State Railways Workshop Committee, Vincent L. Raven, described Jamalpur Locomotive Workshops as the 'biggest in India, and so far as state railways are concerned, the most important'. The adjacent of Monghyr was known for years as 'Birmingham of the East', and it was conceived as source of supply of skilled mechanics.<sup>2</sup> Jamalpur became a focal point in attracting labour from nearby areas. The East Indian Railway Authorities provided free conveyance to and from their

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homes to the workers employed in the workshops. In 1896-97 three 'coolies trains' were started to bring in the labourers from outline areas of Jamalpur. These trains operated between Jamalpur and Kajra (19 miles), Sultanganj and Monghyr (6 miles).<sup>3</sup>

## I

Shashi Bhushan Upadhyay in his essay 'Indian Labour History: A Historiographic Survey'<sup>4</sup> presents an eloquent survey of the major trends in historical writings on Indian labour. He divides these writings into three overlapping phases. According to him, the first phase of labour history in India began in the late colonial period. The second phase starts with the turn of Independence and continues till the mid-1970s. During this phase, Marxist-nationalist trends became prominent. The beginning of the third phase can be traced to the late 1970s and early 1980s. During this phase, historians re-examined the basic premises of the work on labour history that preceded them and added fresh dimensions.

Upadhyay further suggests that during the colonial period various commissions of enquiry were instituted to study the conditions of workers as well as the official reports and writings of colonial officers enriched the literature on the Indian labour. This discourse which sought to espouse the cause of the colonial regime through recommendations aimed at regulating workers' movement was challenged and countered by liberal nationalist writings. But, the latter could not correct the basic premises of the colonial discourse whose major proponents include Kydd, Broughton, and Gilchrist.<sup>5</sup>

The Marxist writings on Indian labour movement started with the turn of Independence in the 1950s but took a more mature form in the 1970s. These works did not see the workers as different entities but saw them as constituting a particular class of international character. They proposed with teleology of progression which entailed the development of 'class consciousness' into a full-fledged class conflict with colonialism as well as capitalism. Some of these writers include R.P. Dutt whose book with a chapter on the working class in India was published in England in 1940 called *India Today* and A.R. Desai whose work *Social Background of Indian Nationalism*, Bombay 1948 traced the relationship between nationalism and the working class.

Since the late 1980s, we find writings which, according to Upadhyay, constitute 'new' labour history. These new writers not only challenged the

colonial discourse on labour history in new ways but also questioned some of the fundamental premises of Marxist labour history. The latter even questioned whether the workers in India constitute a class. Upadhyay points out that S. Bhattacharya, for example, has proposed that a closer category would be 'labouring poor'.<sup>6</sup> Similar attempts to highlight socio-cultural and environmental aspects in the labour movement of India have been made in the writings of Dipesh Chakrabarty, Gyan Prakash, Rajnarayan Chandavarkar and others.<sup>7</sup>

As suggested earlier, this paper marks a radical departure in the historiography of labour movement in India because it links the labour movement, particularly of the railway workers in Jamalpur to the Gandhian whirlwind sweeping the country during the colonial time. Gandhi's role in the Champaran's Peasant Movement is well known and well researched. Gandhian connection with the Jamalpur Railway Workers is an unexplored area of study. It shall be in fitness to add here that labours of this Workshop responded to Gandhian call of Non-cooperation and Civil Disobedience Movement in the years 1919 and 1930 respectively. In this background of approaches to study the labour movement the paper moves to discuss the various factors of the Jamalpur strike in the subsequent sections and the Gandhian influence.

## II

Being the India's first locomotive workshop the development of the Jamalpur Railway Workshop was phenomenal. The Industrial Commission of 1916-18 reported that the shops of East Indian Railway at Jamalpur were topping the list at 11,000 employees.<sup>8</sup> The Commissioner also noted that the foremen and the superior establishment in the workshops were primarily European or Eurasian thus highlighting the well known racial divide present throughout much of the railway workshop.<sup>9</sup> The British railways in colonial India had a twofold contradictory identity, to the British they were a symbol of the Raj but to the Indian mind they had come to signify its opposite - the colonial reality, its exploitation, humiliation and the imperial arrogance of the 'ferenghi'.<sup>10</sup> By 1919 the native workmen had come to be alienated from their work by the tensions created due to the racial discrimination in the labour process. As the superior grades of railway workmen were whites, it was left to the 'peripheral' categories of Indian railwaymen – the drivers and guards of goods trains, unimportant station masters of the small stations, the 'native' firemen travelling a lifetime on a British train in the

shadow of a 'ferenghi' driver, the signallers and the workshop men – to assert rights through various forms of popular protests.<sup>11</sup>

### **The First Organised Strike-1919-1920**

A novel phenomenon of the post First World War railwaymen's agitation was the strike of workshop men all over India. Mahesh Kumar Mast defines this period 1919-21 as 'the period of genesis of the railway labour movement, because the period saw the birth of strong, well-built unions in the Indian railways'.<sup>12</sup> The Jamalpur Railway Workshop strike started on 2nd December 1919 and since then the shop had been closed. The strike originated with lower paid employees. On the 27th November 1919, a few notices written in Kaithi (a local script of Bihar) were found pasted on the walls of workshop. These notices purported to show that the men were dissatisfied with their pay condition and grievances regarding Sunday labour. On 5th December, 1919 a notice signed by works manager were found pasted on Keshopur gate of the workshop in which the strikers were urged by the Loco Superintendent to return to the work. In response of this the workers also pasted a notice on Dariapur Flagman's gumti of the workshop and repeated their demand. The works manager did not consider it.<sup>13</sup>

The SP Monghyr wrote to Deputy Inspector General of Police on 9th December 1919 that he received an information regarding a mass meeting of the strikers to be held on next day. Workers were planning to take the services of a Barrister or Vakil to represent their case and it was also desirable to invoke the services of Messrs. Gandhi and C.R. Das.<sup>14</sup> Initially the workers started the strike themselves. The 10th December meeting, which was attended by at least two thousand men, brought in the first instance of outside mediation in the form of a low caste Rajput named Bhagwan Singh, who was not a Railway Workshop employee but a co-villager of many workers. According to police report, this leader was from the same socio-economic background as the striking workers: 'he was literate only in Hindi'. The demands put forward by the workers were 50% increase of pay, wages for overtime and concession of free family passes as given to clerks, removal of the power of dismissal the Sergeants and kept by the Locomotive Superintendent, ten delegates to be chosen to represent workers' claims to the Agent and the District Magistrate, to act in conformity with the advice given by the ten men selected, none to resume work until their case had been favourably decided and a Barrister/vakil to

be briefed with the sum subscribed. The last five points listed here bring out the desire of workers to organise themselves.<sup>15</sup> The management in the meantime maintained their usual instance of maintaining their authority by insisting that 'grievances cannot be discussed till the men actually return to work'.<sup>16</sup>

On 12th December some of the leading workmen submitted a letter to the Secretary, Peoples' Association, Monghyr, putting forth all their grievances and requesting the help of association in bringing about an amicable settlement between the strikers and Railway authorities. In consideration of the interests of a large number of people of the district the secretary took immediate action on that letter and sent telegrams, to the Lieutenant Governor, President Railway board and the agent East Indian Railway reporting the main features of the strike and the demands of the workmen and requesting their intervention in the matter. The secretary also wrote letters, one to Mr. Tomes, the Loco Superintendent and another to Mr. Walker, the manager offering services of the Association for bringing about a speedy settlement with the strikers. Mr. Tomes asked the Association to advise the men to resume work and then put forward their grievances. Babu Murlidhar, B.L. Secretary of the Association wrote a letter to the District Magistrate and Collector informing him of the critical situation as also of the attitude of the local Railway authority and requesting his intervention in the matter. An interview was fixed with Mr. S.M. Zobair Bar at law, Babu Srikrishna Prasad B.A., a member of the District and Municipal Board and the Secretary Babu Murlidhar, B. L., a Municipal Commissioner with District Magistrate as representatives of the Association. After the interview it appeared that the railway authorities were not inclined to grant 50 percent increases of pay which was the main and substantial demand of the strikers, but that the Railway authorities were willing to consider the other demands which of course, appeared reasonable provided the strikers resumed work. The 17th December Report said that the men tried to contact one of the leading lawyers of Monghyr but he refused to take their case. Following this, a lawyer from Allahabad was asked to take up the matter.

### III

#### **The Gandhian Connection**

It can be assumed that after success of Champaran Satyagraha in 1917 Gandhi had become a popular figure in Bihar and it was quiet natural

that any agitation against the colonial state would try to seek the support of Gandhi to their cause. Given this context, it is easy to understand the invitation given to Gandhi by Jamalpur Railway Workers to lead their agitation against the Workshop management. The District Magistrate of Monghyr also noted that 'a wire was sent to Mahatma Gandhi to come and help the men, but he regretted and said that he could not come.' In the following meeting held on 27th December, the workers reiterated their decision not to return to work. The workers again met on 1st January. The repeated calls to remain united and not to join work suggest that the feeling amongst the workers to get back to work was growing stronger.<sup>19</sup> One Habib Mia who addressed the meeting accused the previous representatives for not 'doing anything' to achieve the demands. He exhorted the workers to form a proper association for an organised representation, of which he was selected the secretary on the spot. He again assured the workers about Gandhi's visit. He claimed to have sent no less than five telegrams to Gandhi and two to C.R. Das for their help. Habib had sent Rs. 40 to Gandhi on 6th January for his expenses and pleaded with him to come immediately to Jamalpur. The next day Gandhi had replied expressing his inability to come to Jamalpur, and asked the workers in turn to send a representative to explain the situation. On 27th December, Tajeshwar Prasad, a pleader of Monghyr wired to the private Secretary of the Lieutenant Governor to intervene in the matter as 'local authorities are still unsympathetic'. On 16th January, Habib submitted a memorial to the Lieutenant Governor of Bihar and Orissa, mostly reiterating the earlier demands. However, the workers had started returning to work before 16th January. On the 12th, over 5000 workers had resumed work and by the 16th, the whole strength of approximately 16,300 of the workers also joined the work. Thus one and a half month long strike ended in failure.<sup>20</sup>

In the East Indian Railway, from 2 February 1922, following the escalation of non-cooperation agitation, all sections of Indian railwaymen struck work. In all these strikes, no previous notice was given. In fact, no demands were put forward by the striking workmen. In these strikes, railwaymen acted as citizens, as a part of the Indian people fighting for Swaraj under Gandhi's leadership.<sup>21</sup> By 10 February 1922, railwaymen of Mughalsarai, Dinapur, Dhanbad, Bokaro and Sitarampur had followed the suit. Jamalpur Workshop was closed on 14th February, nearly 10,000 workshop men left work shouting 'Gandhi ki Jai'. The immediate cause of the strike at Jamalpur was the assault of the Indian workmen by a European

head mistry [mechanic]. The work-manager threatened to discharge the 1,000 striking men. The 'labour trouble' at the workshop followed the strike action of Indian loco-men on 10 February, 1922. The workshop-men only joined them. The interlocking system [track operating] was damaged and local trains stopped regular functioning.<sup>22</sup> The strike was a popular protest against racial exploitation, because the European officers and higher ups were always discriminating the Indian labourers. Moreover, it was not incidental that this protest occurred in the course of non-cooperation movement. The Swadeshi and non cooperation agitations gave a political form to already existing racial tensions in the work place. There were instances where Indian railwaymen struck work during the Khilafat and non-cooperation movements and sought Gandhi's intervention to settle their disputes.<sup>23</sup>

To the railwaymen, after his participation as a mediator in Ahmedabad textile labour strike, Gandhi had come to personify the idea of opposition to the colonial rule. He had also begun to be seen as a trade union leader. The colonial railwaymen confronted the railways as an employer and as a symbol of Raj and saw in Gandhi their natural leader. At this juncture, it would be apt to emphasise the fact that Gandhi was already a well known name in Bihar on account of his successful movement against Indigo planters in Champaran during 1917-18.

Jamalpur was practically a railway town on which tradesmen and others were dependent upon workshop employees for their business. During the beginning of Civil Disobedience Movement in 1930, there was intensive picketing of ganja and liquor shops in Jamalpur by Congress volunteers. As a result of vigorous prosecutions and protection offered to the vendors of liquor and ganja by the police, picketing gradually decreased and sales of liquor, ganja and toddy increased till conditions became almost normal.<sup>24</sup> Near about 7th November, 1930 there was a minor rise of the price of food stuffs in Jamalpur. A rumour was spread that the Congress volunteers<sup>25</sup> and their supporters were stopping the transit of grain and food stuffs from the villages to the town as a penal action against the people of Jamalpur as they did not stop drinking liquor and toddy. Consequently, there was a rise of the price of food stuff in Jamalpur. Inflamed by this rumour the workshop employees tried to vent their wrath on liquor and toddy vendors on which the congress men had been trying to get at.



On 7th November 1930, in the afternoon, a large number of railway workshop coolies, being affected by the price rise of the food stuff and also due to overall dissatisfaction over wage and working conditions, went to the liquor shop opposite the Jamalpur Railway Station and threatened to loot (to plunder) the shop the next morning. On the appearance of the local police, the crowd dispersed. Next day, on 8th November, anticipating trouble, the Deputy Superintendent of Police with a force of 20 constables armed with lathis (sticks) arrived at the Jahangira outpost in Jamalpur to prevent any breach of peace in the liquor shop outside the railway station. Between 11 a.m. and 12 noon, about three or four hundred coolies came to the liquor shop and threw brickbats on the tiles of this liquor shop and also inside the shop. Police arrested three persons among them. The crowd did not disperse and became boisterous and adopted a confronting attitude. Some of the members of the mob wanted to rescue the three persons arrested forcibly. The Deputy Superintendent released the three arrested persons on bail. While a part of the crowd dispersed, still many remained opposite the railway station. The Superintendent of Police, Monghyr then arrived at the spot and finally the crowd dispersed.<sup>26</sup>

On 9th & 10th November, milk and vegetables brought from Monghyr to Jamalpur and Sultanganj to Jamalpur in the coolie trains were thrown out by the railway workshop coolies. On 11th November, 1930, the Divisional Inspector and the Sub-Inspector with a force of twenty constables went to the toddy shop to face any untoward incident. At 11 a.m., a crowd of railway workshop coolies passed this toddy shop shouting 'Mahatma Gandhi Ki Jay' and 'Tari Pine Wale ki Chai' (Down with toddy workers). Two Congress-men were present in the mob. A constable in plain clothes was assaulted by the workshop coolies at the instigation of the two Congress volunteers near that place.<sup>27</sup> Shambhu Saran Sinha, the Inspector of Police, Jamalpur, Sadar went to Congress Ashram and arrested thirteen Congress volunteers and two Congress volunteers mentioned above not in the lot. The next day, arrangement was made to guard the toddy and liquor shops by means of policemen.<sup>28</sup>

On the 12 November, 1930, between 11 a.m. and 12 noon two amongst the five of the constables who had been deputed to guard the toddy shop near Gate No. 7 of workshop were beaten by a mob consisting of railway workshop employee and the pagri (head-gear) of one of the constable was taken away. Between 11:30 and 11:45 am, the crowds of coolies returned



shouting 'beat the lal pagariwalas' (police constables) as the police had arrested the Congress volunteers the day before. When the crowd arrived near the toddy shop, they started throwing stones at the police. The police took shelter in a tobacco shop fifteen or twenty steps away.<sup>29</sup> The crowd started throwing brick-bats at the tobacco shop also. Two constables were beaten by the workshop employees and the Pagri (head-gear) of the one of the constables was taken away. It was decided by the police authorities to arrest the persons who had assaulted the constables on the 12th November 1930. The Superintendent of Police, Monghyr accordingly ordered a force of thirty armed constables to be posted Near Gate No- 7 to stand by in case of need while arrests were being made on the identification of the injured constables.

Mr. B.N.Mullick, Assistant Superintendent of Police was ordered to be in-charge of Armed Police. The armed police halted at a short distance from the gate at about 3:50 p.m. The workshop workers started coming out from Gate No. 7 a little before the 4 p.m. buzzer went off. About twenty three persons were arrested on the identification of the injured constables. When the twenty three men were being arrested, these men protested that they were innocent and resisted the arrest. There upon, there was a kind of tug of war over the body of this person between the police and the workers.<sup>30</sup>

All of a sudden, there was a great noise and the shouts of 'Gandhi Ki Jay' went up. Brickbats were thrown on the police and in one wild rush, all the arrested persons with exception of one were rescued by the workshop coolies. In spite of the warnings of the police, the stone throwing continued. The crowd shouted 'Beat the Police, Do not let them go'. The situation was very critical. During the lull, Mr. Smyth, Officer in Charge of Watch and Ward in the Workshop, went to the mob and tried to persuade the coolies to go back. Seeing that the persuasion had no effect, he called the reserve of Watch and Ward Darwans to come armed with lathis. About this time, Messr Hennis and Coad, who were European officers, arrived in the workshops. These two, along with Mr. Smyth, went to the mob and talked to them. Apparently, it had no effect as there was a heavy shower of brickbats again.<sup>31</sup> The situation was very critical as the police were in danger of being surrounded from all sides.

The police thereupon opened fire which led to four deaths and serious injury to twenty workers. All together, the police fired sixty nine rounds - thirty nine rounds of buckshots and thirty one rounds of ball. The situation

became very tense and additional troops were requisitioned. It almost took three to four months for the situation to become normal in the railway workshop. The strike had been continuing about one and half month very calmly and quietly. Not a single act of violence had been reported to have taken place in this connection.

To conclude, the evocation of the name of Gandhi and use of his techniques of protest by the labourers in the forms of peaceful strikes and picketing of liquor shops etc. of the Jamalpur railway workshop opened a new vista in the strategy of workers mobilisation in Bihar. Despite their class based grievances related to wages, working conditions and racial discrimination provided the essential planks for their consolidation and reasons of protest but in fact, it was Gandhi in absentia who became a more potent cementing force for them than their own set of grievances against the management of Jamalpur railway workshop.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> O'Malley, 1926, p. 216.

<sup>2</sup> Raven, Vincent L. 1926. Nitin, 2012, p. 318.

<sup>3</sup> Huddleston, G. 1906. p. 241.

<sup>4</sup> Upadhyay, 2011., pp. 87-118.

<sup>5</sup> Kydd, 1920.

<sup>6</sup> Bhattacharya, S. 1998, pp. 374-405; Also cited in Upadhyay, 'Indian Labour History: A Historiographic Survey' in Bhattacharya, Sabyasachi (ed.). 2011, pp. 87-118.

<sup>7</sup> Chakrabarty, Dipesh, 2000; Chandavarkar, 1994.

<sup>8</sup> Indian Industrial Commission (IIC), 1916-18, Report, Calcutta, Government Printing Press, 1928:25. Quoted in Kerr, Ian J. 2007, p. 234.

<sup>9</sup> IIC, 1916-18, Report, 26.

<sup>10</sup> Jagga, Lajpat. 1981, p. 106.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 114.

<sup>12</sup> Mast, 1969, p. 24.

<sup>13</sup> Letter from the Superintendent of Police, Monghyr to The Deputy Inspector-General of police, Crime and Railways, Patna, No. 135, 5th December 1919. Government of Bihar and Orissa, Political Department Special Section file no. 406 of 1919, Bihar State Archives.

- <sup>14</sup> Ibid, p. 9
- <sup>15</sup> Quoted in Sinha 2008.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>17</sup> Indian Nation, 01.01.1920
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>19</sup> Quoted in Nitin Sinha 2008.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>21</sup> Lagpat jagga, op.cit, p.144.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid. p. 14 . The Leader 13 February,1922,Supplementary weekly note on the confidential diary of Superintendent of Police; also in letter no.147, of the S.P.Monghyr to the Agent EIR ,dated 11 February,1922 in Railway Establishment Progs. B, May 1922, n .215/1-91 (partA); also in Amrit Bazar Patrika: 14 February1922.
- <sup>23</sup> Lajpat Jagga, op.cit. 145.
- <sup>24</sup> Report on the death of four persons which took place as a result of firing by armed police in Jamalpur, near Gate No.7 of the Railway Workshops. On the 12th November, 1930, between 4 and 4/30 p.m.GOBO, Political Special, file no. 420 of 1930, Bihar State Archives, Patna: 24.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid: 3.
- <sup>27</sup> Statement of Shambhu Saran Sinha S.A.,dated 15 November,1930.p.33 Pol. Spl. File no. 420 of 1930. BSA. Patna .
- <sup>28</sup> Pol. Spl.File no. 420 of 1930 BSA. Patna Report: 4. [The coolies' trains siding was next to gate no. 7 of the workshop. It was one of the principal gates through which thousands of coolies employed in the East Indian Railway workshop had passed in and out. Gate no. 7 was really an inland subway leading to the grounds of the workshops. The reason for this subway was that over it, the subway trains passed. Near gate no. 7 was the time when where the workers had to deposit metal counters when they left the workshop as a proof of their having been employed for the day in workshops. A steam buzzer went off at 11A.M. and another at 4 P.M. Most of the workers got out at 11A.M. and 4 P.M. but those amongst them who had worked at piece rate had no fixed time of departure.]
- <sup>29</sup> Statement of Dalbhajan Singh Constable, dated 18 November 1930. Pol. Spl.File no. 420 of 1930 BSA. Patna Report : 49.

<sup>30</sup> Report on the death of four persons which took place as a result of firing by armed police in Jamalpur, near Gate No.7 of the Railway Workshops. On the 12th November, 1930, between 4 and 4/30 p.m. Political Special, file no. 420. Bihar State Archives, Patna:10.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

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