



JASIM UDDIN MANDAL

At the tipping point of the Bengal Famine

Railway workers go on historic 'chicken-feed' strike



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ILLUSTRATION: NAHFIA JAHAN MONNI

was still undivided—our activities centred around Kolkata. Leaders like Somnath Lahiri, Barrister Latif, Jyoti Basu, Ila Mitra, Ramen Mitra and Bhawani Sen and many others would participate in those meetings. Sometimes we gathered at the residence of Shahabuddin, a soldier of the Red Flag, in Ishwardi, a quiet house located deep inside the Loco Colony. One day, in one of those meetings, it was decided that a movement would be launched against the chicken feed allocation. The workers would not be forced to eat this—and be metamorphosed into chickens! A movement including a rail strike was thus necessary to bring the authorities to their senses. The decision received overwhelming support from the workers. There were meetings and demonstrations in support of the movement on a near-daily basis.

Towards the end of 1949, the loco-shed

When the famine reached a tipping point, broken bits of grains (khud) were allocated for the workers from the railway ration shop. It was a farce: railway workers, now in a new country, found themselves relegated to chickens. What was used as chicken feed was being supplied for their consumption. There was a separate arrangement for the officers though. They were given rice. Alas, Pakistan! But the League leaders couldn't care less. They called it Divine Providence. Soon, however, the workers became agitated. Our leaders started meeting them clandestinely, since nothing like this could be done in the open as Pakistan was only just born. And there could be no disturbance either, as it was an Islamic state. Add to this the British-trained snitches and holier-than-thou Pakistani police always lurking around. So, some caution was in order. The meetings were held in secret.

Despite the Partition, our trade union

workers came out on the street. There were the shed *khalasis*, who left behind their spades and crowbars. The porters. The firemen. The drivers. All left their work to join the strike. Within a moment, the whole shed zone imploded. All Kolkata-bound trains from Darjeeling were brought to a halt at the Ishwardi platform. (There were still direct rail services between India and Pakistan). Most of the train drivers were English. They were paid by European standards by the Pakistan government. The workers removed them from their engines and emptied out all the coal. News of this soon reached the railway authorities, giving them quite a jolt. Higher-ups from the Pakshi office came rushing in. Requests and threats were made and duly ignored. The trains remained stuck in the yard the whole day. Although the passengers were not happy, the general people and the railway workers and officials erupted in joy. They supported the blockade wholeheartedly. The discrimination so brazenly manifested through the allocation of chicken feed was a sore point for all of them.

At five in the afternoon, several lorries full of police arrived from Pabna. Bahadurpur's Delwar, a worker-cum-revolutionary who was later martyred at the Khapra ward in Rajshahi Jail, rushed to alert me: "Jasim Bhai, we need to escape. The police have arrived!" I was forced to take shelter in a house at the worker colony west of the train yard. I was famished; I didn't eat anything the whole day. Hearing this, many in the worker colony turned up with food. The ever-active Delwar was my conduit for information about the outside world: railway officers, it turned out, were trying to get the trains up and running again with the help of police. I also heard that the police had started to search for the leaders associated with the strike. Sensing danger, I moved further north in the colony, in a house near the Outer Signal. There was a dense forest wrapping around the rear of the house. The neighbourhood surrounding the Ishwardi loco-yard was sparsely populated, with forests covering the whole stretch between the yard and Moabari. Those days, one could hear a tiger roar even during the day.

I felt relatively safe at this house. It provided me with an escape route through the backyard forests in case things came to a head. After reaching the house, I found labour leader Bijan Sen (later martyred at the Khapra ward of Rajshahi Jail). Delwar came at twilight. "Jasim Bhai, you'd better leave this place," he told me. "It's not safe here. I have taken all the preparations. The Parbatipur Local train will leave shortly and stop around here. You can get on it then."

"How is it possible? Why will the train stop here?" I was surprised.

"I had a talk with the train's fireman," he replied. "He will drop off his coal shovelling tool ('kirich') once the train reaches here and you can quietly get into it when they stop the train to pick the tool back up. Don't worry. The fireman is with us." After that, Delwar left. So Bijan Sen and I waited in the dark for the train. The train did come on time and we got on board as planned.

Later, we came to know what a great risk the fireman had taken for us. When the train had neared the Outer Signal, he got up to shovel coal into the firebox with an iron rod with a curved tip. Usually the tool was hung on the hook outside the engine. Instead of putting it there, the fireman threw it out and informed the driver of the "accident". The driver was really mad with him because unscheduled stops were frowned upon by the management. Anyway, the train was stopped finally, and the kirich was collected.

We left the train after reaching the Abdulpur station. From there we walked our way through Natore to reach Haldarpura in the Basudebpur village. It was midnight when we reached the spot. Haldarpura was known as a Party stronghold. Comrade Habu Mitra, who was in charge of the place, arranged for our accommodation.

Soon after, we came to learn that warrants had been issued against six of us including me, Delwar, Hamid and Ruhul for our involvement in the chicken feed strike. Police were searching for us like mad dogs. It would not be safe for us to return to Ishwardi now. The comrades advised us to take shelter in the Santal village. The Party had a strong support base in the Santal community. My dark skin, facial features and health had some resemblance to the Santals which gave me a perfect cover. No outsider could distinguish me from the Santals when I worked with them in the fields. After several days of living and working with them, they accepted me as one of their own. While there, I was surprised to see their cleanliness. Conspicuously absent in their mud huts was dust—the floor so clean you could almost use it to serve rice without needing a plate. A common feature of their nicely manicured courtyards was the jasmine or Marvel-of-Peru flowers grown in one corner of the yards. I really liked their houses. I wondered if their elevated sense of cleanliness originated from their awareness of the fact that they were black.

Time went by. I was getting anxious about the Party's condition in Ishwardi. I felt increasingly restless. After nearly six months, I left the Santal village to

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1945



Sreehatta Zilla Cha Sramik Union (Tea Estates) is organized in 1945 as an affiliated union of AITUC.

1946



9,000 workers of the cotton textile mills in Naryanganj create history by continuing their strike for three months.