

The Assam Oil Company Workers' Strike at Digboi in 1939: A Historical Study

Papari Das

Research Scholar, Department of History, Bodoland University, Kokrajhar

Abstract:

Assam is rich in Natural resources, minerals, forest, fertile soil of Brahmaputra. The discovery of black gold or curd oil in Assam became the turning point for economic growth. The birthplace of Oil industry in India is Digboi, where in 1901, Asia's first Oil refinery, the Digboi Refinery was established. The Oil industry recruited workers from different parts of India under Assam Oil Company. The refinery workers were worked under miserable condition without proper rest and increasing inflation due to the First World War, which became challenging to survive for workers on their low wages. Workers from every commercial sector during war crisis mobilised several workers strikes and movements for their rights. In the History of Assam plantation and non plantation workers organised number of significant strikes against capitalist exploitation.

Keywords: Assam Oil Company, Digboi Refinery, Worker's Strike, Assam Oil Company Labour Union, industrialization .

Date of Submission: 09-07-2026

Date of acceptance: 20-07-2026

I. INTRODUCTION

The worker class movement is collective organisation of working people to demand better working condition, wages and working hours. The Capitalism brought several issues within working class and to settle their issues they mobilise several movements and Strikes. In the History of India the working class movement period began with the colonial rule in India from mid- 18th century to 1947. In Assam period between First World War and Second World War marked as the period of worker class movement by both plantation and non plantation workers. The Assam Oil Company Workers Strike at Digboi from 1938 to 1939 for six months was one of the significant strike which gets most regional and national political attention.

1.1 REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The following books were reviewed for the proposed study:

- A) Amalendu Guhahis book "*Planter Raj to Swaraj- Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam, 1826- 1947*", publisher- Tulika Books, New Delhi (first edition) 2006, discusses about Freedom Struggle in Northeast India and political challenges during colonial period. This book discusses all the industrial workers, peasants movement.
- B) Priyam Goswami his book "*The History of Assam from Yandaboto Partition, 1826-1947*", publisher- Orient Blackswan Private Limited, Telangana, 2012, discusses about Socio-political history of Assam during Colonial period, also provides information about exploration of natural resources of colonial Assam.
- C) S.L. Baruah's book "*A Comprehensive History of Assam*", publisher-MunshiramManoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd, New Delhi 1986, discusses about History of Assam from early period to colonial period and social and economical History during colonial period of Assam. In which discovery of oil and industrialization in Assam was also briefly discusses.
- D) "*Assam in the 19th Century: Industrialization and Colonial Penetration*" authored by Priyam Goswami, emergence of the industrialization of natural resources of Assam like: coal, tea, oil sectors and in order to do so the development of the communication network brought by EIC and Colonial administration was the main focus of the this book. The main argument of this book is about the colonial exploitation of natural resources and minerals for feeding growing industries and decline of some handicraft production.
- E) H.K Barpujari's book "*Assam in the Days of the Company, 1826-58*" which was based on the discovery of oil in Upper Assam during the period of British East India Company.

1.2 OBJECTIVES:

The work makes an attempt to understand:

To understand the cause and impact of The Assam Oil Company Workers Strike at Digboi in 1939 and the condition of Digboi Refinery workers at that which concluded the strike.

1.3 METHODOLOGY:

The study will follow the descriptive, analytical, mode of Historical inquiry based on both primary and secondary sources.

II. FINDINGS:

The glorious history of Digboi Oil Refinery dated back to 1864, when for the first time oil discovered at Digboi in Tinsukia district. British Lieutenant R. Wilcox of the 46th Regiment Native Infantry for the time in his report in 1825 he mentioned about oil at Supkong, which about is 40 km west of Digboi. In 1867 when a few officers of the Assam Railways and Trading Company who were laying rail tracks in forest noticed that the elephants fetching logs from the forest were soaked in black mud, led to the discovery of oil seepage. On 26 March 1867, oil was struck at merely 118 feet in Asia's first mechanically drilled well by Mr. Goodegnough. The first commercially successful oil discovery (200 gallons per day) dug at Digboi field in 1889 and completed in 1890 at depth of 662 feet by Assam Railway and Trading Company Limited, registered at London. In 1899, the Assam Oil Company was founded with headquarter at Digboi. In 1901 Asia's first oil refinery the Digboi Refinery was established, with a production capacity of 500 barrels (20 gallons) a day. In 1912 UK based Burmah Oil Company taken over Digboi Refinery from Assam Oil Company.

The workforce was recruited from various regions, including Assam, eastern Bengal, Gourakpur etc. The Royal Commission on Labour of 1931¹ chaired by John Henry reported that 2,450 workers came from Bengal and 1,200 from the United Provinces (mostly Gorakhpur). The imported workers usually worked for short periods and then returned home, often returning later. According to the report of 1931 mineral oil mining workers work fifty-six hours a week, worked either in eight hours shift, and some fifteen percent of those employed work eight hours shift on continuous processes, without a rest day. Practically no woman and children are employed. The report recommended to modification in provisions of the mines Act, or separate legislation should be passed for the regulation of hours, rest days, safety and health care on oil fields, combined with the inspection of mines in the province, will require the appointment of a separate inspector. This report explains the situation of the workers in capitalist industries including workers in the Burmah Oil Company.

The worker class of Assam slowly mobilised themselves from First World War due to the crisis they faced during World War. After 1935 there were several worker strikes broke out before Second World War. The Digboi Refinery Works Strike in 1939 is one of the tragic and significant events in the history of Assam. The Administrative Report for the Year 1937-1938 noted the signs of the trouble between workers in Assam. Meanwhile Jawaharlal Nehru visited Assam and addressed meetings at Moran, Khowang, Dibrugarh, Chabua, Tinsukia, Doomdooma, and Digboi. Nehru raised his concern on capitalist exploitation² with reference to the Assam Oil Company.

The Assam Oil Company workers were in miserable condition because of issues like- law wages, increasing inflation due to the Wars, curtail and non- recognition of bungalow servants as company employees, the retrenchment insecurity, unsafe working conditions, needs of good quarters for workers and their families, old age pensions, demand for one month privilege leave, festival leave, forty-four hours of work in a week for all workers, including medical staff, cleaning staff, chowkidars, and bungalow servants. On 13 and 22 February in 1938, general meeting held by workers in which they formed Assam Oil Company Labour Union organised by Sudhindra Pramanik (popular Bengal trade unionist) one of the prominent leader of steel workers strike in Tatanagar (now in Jharkhand) "Still city of India" also first secretary of the Assam Oil Company Labour Union. The Union applied to the government on 27 July for its resignation under the Trade Union Act, 1926³. The Union also submitted a twelve point charter of demands and fourteen day strike notice to the company. The Assam Oil Company moved to the government for look into the matter. A Court of Enquiry formed by Sir Syed Muhammed Saadulla on 16 August 1938 under the Chairmanship of J.C. Higgins. The Union was registered under the Trade Union Act, 1926, despite that the Court of Enquiry failed to find any conclusion on the issue of workers. Meanwhile new government formed into Assam under Gopinath Bordoloi, which bring new hope for workers, but the Bordoloi government failed to meet the expectations of workers. Thus the agitation was

¹Royal Commission on Labour in India 1931, Indian Labour Archives.

²Capitalism is the economic system in which businesses own by private sectors and individuals not by government.

³<https://labour.delhi.gov.in/>

continued by the workers. The Union extremely criticised the government because they had expectations from new government but it failed to resolve the issues.

The Digboi Refinery workers Strike lasted for six months and four- thousand workers from Tinsukia, where the company had their tin container factory and more than six thousand workers in Digboi joined the strike. Gopinath Bordoloi visited Digboi and Makum on 14 April 1939, and publicly disapproved continued strike. In this meeting president of Assam Pradesh Congress Committee Hemchandra Baruah criticised the role of police. On 16 April many workers attended a public assembly in Digboi and in this meeting they decided to continue the strike peacefully under the leadership of Dalbir Singh Lohar⁴ until and unless their demands were met. While the strike was in peak the situation took a violent turn on 18 April 1939 when the British administration sent eight platoons of Assam Rifles to clamp down agitation heavily, which concluded direct clash took place between workers and patrol of Assam Rifles, where three workers Chegan and Bedan Sutiya, Machiram Kalita, and Deburam Kalita among the workers who attained martyrdom and issued order to quit Digboi and Assam within seventy-three hours. This incident got serious political attention over the country and increased antigovernment sentiment all over the Assam. Government appointed M.N. Mukherji (a retired chief justice of Calcutta High Court) on 10 July to investigate the Digboi incident. Asom Chhatra Sanmilan associated with All India Students Federation met in Jorhat wherein students strongly denounced the killing of Striking Workers and they expressed their strong support for workers strike.⁵

On 23 July 1939; K.K. Hajara, ICS, appointed as the Board of conciliation to find out a way to settle the dispute as over a period the Strike became crucial political phenomena. The Conciliation Board of Mr. Hajara recommended that "All the Strikers should be called back on termination of strike, by discharging the new recruits. This report adding fuel to the fire Strikers decided to not accept this report and continued their protest, but due to the declaration of Second World War the Digboi-Tinsukia area was declared protected under the Defence of India Rule on 4 September meeting and processions were banned under section 144, CrPc. Sudhin Pramanik was also under ban while Pramanik appealed to All India Congress Committee about their commitment that they support the strike of Assam Oil Company workers (under Burmah Oil Company). While congress decided to support British administration in Second World War nothing came out of Sudhin Pramanik's appeal. The Mukherji Report which was appointed after tragic incident of 18 April 1939 submitted their report on 25 November and published on 3 December that Digboi Refinery Oil Strike was unjust event. On 10 January 1940 The Assam Oil Company Labour Union's regulation was cancelled on technical grounds. The brutal action against workers processions, and meetings led to suppression of heroic strike of Digboi Refinery workers which lasted from mid 1938 to the end of 1939.

III. CONCLUSION:

The Assam Oil Company workers Strike in 1939 lasted almost for six months. The main grievances of workers were low wages, heavy workload, lack of basic needs for living. The strike of the workers got the attention in National level, despite that their issues were not resolved as the attention of the national politics turned into the Second World War. Due to the outbreak of Second World War The Digboi Refinery workers strike was suspended. Although the Assam Oil Company workers strike at Digboi not considered as successful mobilised workers movement but the spirit of this strike expanded into various fields of plantation and non-plantation workers of the region to raise their voice against the exploitation at industries. All India Congress Committee while the strike was started concerned the strike as a part of the freedom struggle of India. The Digboi Refinery workers strike was one of the most significant event in the history of Assam during the phase of workers struggle from 1937 to 1940. These struggles were clearly marked as anti imperialist features.

REFERENCES:

A. Books:

1. Barpujari, H.K., *Assam in the Days of the Company 1826-58*, Assam Publication Board, Guwahati, 1963.
2. Baruah, Malla, Dipankar, *Dig Boy Dig: A Novel on Oil Exploration in Assam*, Niyogi Book, New Delhi.
3. Dutta, Himadri Shikhar, *The River of Liquid Gold*, Notion Press, Chennai, 2020.
4. Goswami, Priyam, *The History of Assam from Yandabo to Partition, 1826-1947*, Orient Blackswan Private Limited, Telangana, 2012.

⁴ Dalbir Singh Lohar was prominent freedom fighter from Gorkha community
<https://amritmahotsav.nic.in/district-repository-detail.htm?6588>

⁵ Assam Chhatra Sanmilan meeting (1939) <http://indianculture.gov.in/node/2838753>

5. Goswami, Priyam, *Assam in the Nineteenth Century: Industrialization and Colonial Penetration*, Spectrum Publications, Guwahati, 1999.
6. Guha, Amalemdu, *Planter Raj to Swaraj- Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam, 1826-1946*, ICHR, New Delhi, 1977.
7. Hazarika, Biswajyoti & Ramanuj Dutta Choudhury, *Failed Attempt, Lasting Legacy - A story based on the first oil drilling expedition in Assam*, Walnut Publication, New Delhi 2021.
8. Sarma, Pranjal, *A Sociological Study of An Oil Industry in Assam: Oil and Natural Gas Corporation Limited*, Omega Publication, New Deldi.
9. Saikia, Arupjyoti, *Forests and Ecological History of Assam*, Oxford University Press, 2011.
10. Visvanath, S.N., *A Hundred Years of Oil: A Narrative Account of the Search for Oil in India*, Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 1990.

B. Report:

1. The Royal Commission on Labour in India Report of 1931 (Indian Labour Archives).