

***The Indian Tea Control (Amendment) Bill**

The Honourable Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (Labour Member):

Sir, in view of the observations which fell from my Honourable friend, Mr. Joshi it is only proper that I should rise to state the position of Government on the points that he has made. In a certain sense, the remarks of Mr. Joshi might appear to be irrelevant. We are discussing the Tea Control Act and obviously any provisions dealing with conditions of labour would be entirely out of place therein. But looking at it from a larger point of view, it must be admitted that when the State is asked to suspend the laws of supply and demand with regard to any industry, it is fair that those who are interested in labour should ask that their interests should be protected. And it is from this point of view that I say that a reply from Government is necessary.

Sir, the first point which Mr. Joshi made was that it is now more than 12 years since the Royal Commission on Labour reported and that the Government of India has practically done nothing with regard to the recommendations of that Commission. Sir, I agree that 12 years is a long period for any Government to take in order to deal with the recommendations made by a Royal Commission which was appointed to investigate into this matter. But I think on the facts to which I propose to refer in the brief remarks that I am making, Mr. Joshi will realise and the House will also realise that much serious blame would not be laid at the door of the Government of India. As the Honourable Member will remember, the Royal Commission on Labour made five recommendations with regard to the tea plantation. First was that the Assam Labour Emigrant Act should be repealed and another Act permitting very much greater fluidity to the labour should be enacted. The second recommendation was to establish a wage board for fixing the wages of labourers there. Third recommendation dealt with the

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appointment of a Board of Health for the welfare of labour in convenient areas with power to make regulations relating to the drinking water, sanitation, drainage, medical facilities and housing. The fourth recommendation was that provisions relating to the regular and prompt payment of wages and deductions to be made for advances made to labour should be applied to plantation labour. The last recommendation was that provision should be made in order that access to public should be provided to gardens.

Now, when the recommendations were made it is important to bear in mind that the Government of India without loss of time examined these recommendations in order to find out which was the proper authority to deal with them, and they came to the conclusion that except the first recommendation which dealt with the repeal of the Emigration Act and substitution of another, all these would legitimately be regarded as fundamentally of local concern. I do not think anybody could contend that the attitude taken by the Government of India in the matter of dividing responsibility with regard to these recommendations was incorrect. I submit that it was, in pursuance of the decision that the Government of India took on the recommendations of the Royal Commission on Labour they immediately addressed a despatch to the Assam Government informing them that liberty was given to the Local Government to deal with other recommendations, and the Government of India without loss of time, as the Honourable Members know, proceeded to pass the Act which is now on the Statute Book and which covers the first recommendation of the Royal Commission on Labour. Sir, unfortunately, for reasons of which I know very little, the Local Government of Assam did not move in the matter: and if I may say so my Honourable friend Mr. Joshi also, although he has been in the House right from the date when the recommendations were made, did not or does not appear to me to have taken up the question at all. But, Sir, if I may claim credit for the Government of India, the Government of India did move in the matter. I would like to inform the House that in 1938 when the Tea Control Act came up for extension in the Legislature, the Government of India did take initiative and approached the planting industry with a proposal for making enquiry into the conditions of labour in plantation. As my Honourable friends, Mr. Griffiths and Sir Frederick James will recall, even a Conference

was held between representatives of the Labour Department and the representatives of Planters.

Maulana Zafar Ali Khan : Why did not the Government of India take to task the Assam Government for not moving in the matter ?

The Honourable Dr. B.R. Ambedkar : The question may have been answered better by the Honourable Member in charge of the Department at that time. I came only yesterday and I know very little about it. The Honourable friend, Mr. Joshi, referred to the question, I am not prepared to say, we're being carried as to whether time had not arrived for making enquiries into the terms of the recommendations. Sir, I find that almost at a time when matters were heading for a decision the new Assam Government, which was the Congress Government, thought it fit to step into the matter and by a Resolution appointed a Committee on the 23rd May, 1939. It is quite natural that as a result of the step taken by the Assam Government the Government of India was bound to withdraw from the Held which by the terms of original despatch they had assigned to the Local Government for being dealt with. As my Honourable friend, Mr. Joshi, referred to the question, I am not prepared to say what exactly was the reason, but somehow there was a clash between the members who were on the Committee and the clash developed almost to a conflict with the result that the work of the Committee was suspended. Ultimately the Government of Assam took no action. All that they did was to issue a notification as to what happened and why the Committee was suspended. That brought matters to the end of July, 1939. Obviously every one knows, a few months after that war was declared, and it is impossible for anybody, either the Local Government or the Central Government, to have initiated an enquiry into the matter. I am sure these circumstances will convince Mr. Joshi that the Government of India is really not liable to be taken to task for any kind of inactivity on its part.

With regard to the main question as to whether Government does or does not consider the necessity of protecting the interests of labour, I would straightaway begin by saying that Government does regard this question as of paramount importance. I do not wish to go into the question as to the conditions of labour on the plantation. We hear in newspapers various figures given; figures relating to wages in Ceylon,

figures given relating to wages on the Assam plantation. I am not prepared to give the imprimatur of Government to either sets of figures as to wages, etc. We have no exact data for the simple reason that so far no investigation has been made in the matter. But I do say one thing that the conditions on tea plantations are unregulated, that they vary enormously from one place to another. There is no common, uniform standard in the conditions of work and the Government of India does think that that is a state of affairs which it can tolerate. It is also clear that we cannot enter upon any legislation unless we have sufficient material brought before us by an impartial enquiry. This is not a condition which the Government of India can be said to have strutted out in order to block any move that may be made in the interests of protecting labour on the plantation. My honourable friend, Mr. Joshi, himself will recollect that this was one of the riders that was put by the Royal Commission on Labour themselves. The Royal Commission, while making the recommendation added a proviso that before these recommendations will be put into operation, specific enquiry ought to be made on the conditions in plantations. Now, Sir, the Government of India has no doubt that this enquiry must be made. Speaking for Government I am prepared to say that Government thinks that proper standards of welfare must be imposed on the plantations. There is no escape. What my Honourable friend, Mr. Joshi, said, I entirely support. It is not open for the Government of India to impose fair conditions of wages on Ceylon as a condition precedent and not applying the same standards of labour in India. The Government of India by the various Ordinances has laid down that wherever any restriction has been imposed upon labour, the Government of India will see that fair conditions of labour are granted to labour. These are the things which the Government of India considers it is bound to apply in the case of plantation labour. Nor can it be denied that whatever may have been the condition of the plantations in the long past, at present the condition of plantations is such that they can bear the weight of such wage standards as a Board may impose upon them.

Now, therefore, the only question that arises is this : can we institute an enquiry at the present moment ? There is no difference between my Honourable friend, Mr. Joshi, and myself as representing the Government of India on the two issues, namely that proper standards

must be imposed. As my Honourable friend, Mr. Joshi, and other Honourable Members of the House know very well, a large part of the tea estates are situated in the Eastern corner of India, Assam and Bengal. It is quite obvious that those areas are greatly exposed to enemy action. It is quite likely that any enquiry that may be started in that corner may have a very disturbing effect. Therefore, the only question that remains is whether we can begin that enquiry on the plantations which are situated in Southern India. I should like to tell the House how the plantations are divided between Northern and Southern India. The figures which I have and which relate to 1941 show that, so far as acreage of the tea plantations is concerned, in Northern India the acreage is 607,000, in southern India the acreage is only 163,132. So far as labour employed on plantations is concerned, in Northern India the labour employed is 773,969 while in Southern India the labour employed is only 144,385.

Sir F. E. James (Madras : European): That only refers to tea.

The Honourable Dr. B.R. Ambedkar : Yes, we are only talking about tea. It is obvious from the figures which I have given that the plantations in Southern India form a very small portion of the Tea Planting Industry in India.

Maulana Zafar Ali Khan : What is the acreage in Assam ?

The Honourable Dr. B.R. Ambedkar : I am taking the North and South. I am not taking Assam separately. Assam is included in Northern India. It is obvious from these figures that the plantations in Southern India form a very small portion of the total population working in tea gardens in this country. It seems to the Government of India that no kind of gain can arise either to the country or to the labourers by undertaking such a partial and limited inquiry. It is not possible to begin an enquiry which by the situation in which this war finds itself must necessarily be limited to so microscopic an area of the total plantations.....

Mr. President (The Honourable Sir Abdur Rahim): I must ask the Honourable Member to realise that the labour question arises only incidentally on this motion.

The Honourable Dr. B.R. Ambedkar : I have nothing more to say.

Dr. Sir Zia Uddin Ahmad : May I know whether the owners of

gardens were paid substantial sums of money for not growing tea at all and that was at the expense of the consumers ?

The Honourable Dr. B.R. Ambedkar : That is a matter which the Commerce Secretary will deal with.

Some Honourable Members : The question be now put.

Mr. President (The Honourable Sir Abdur Rahim): The question is:

“That the question be now put.”

The motion was adopted:

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