



**EVOLUTION
OF
CONSTITUTIONAL
GOVERNMENT
AND
ASSAM
LEGISLATURES**

M. KAR

Evolution of Constitutional Government and Assam Legislatures



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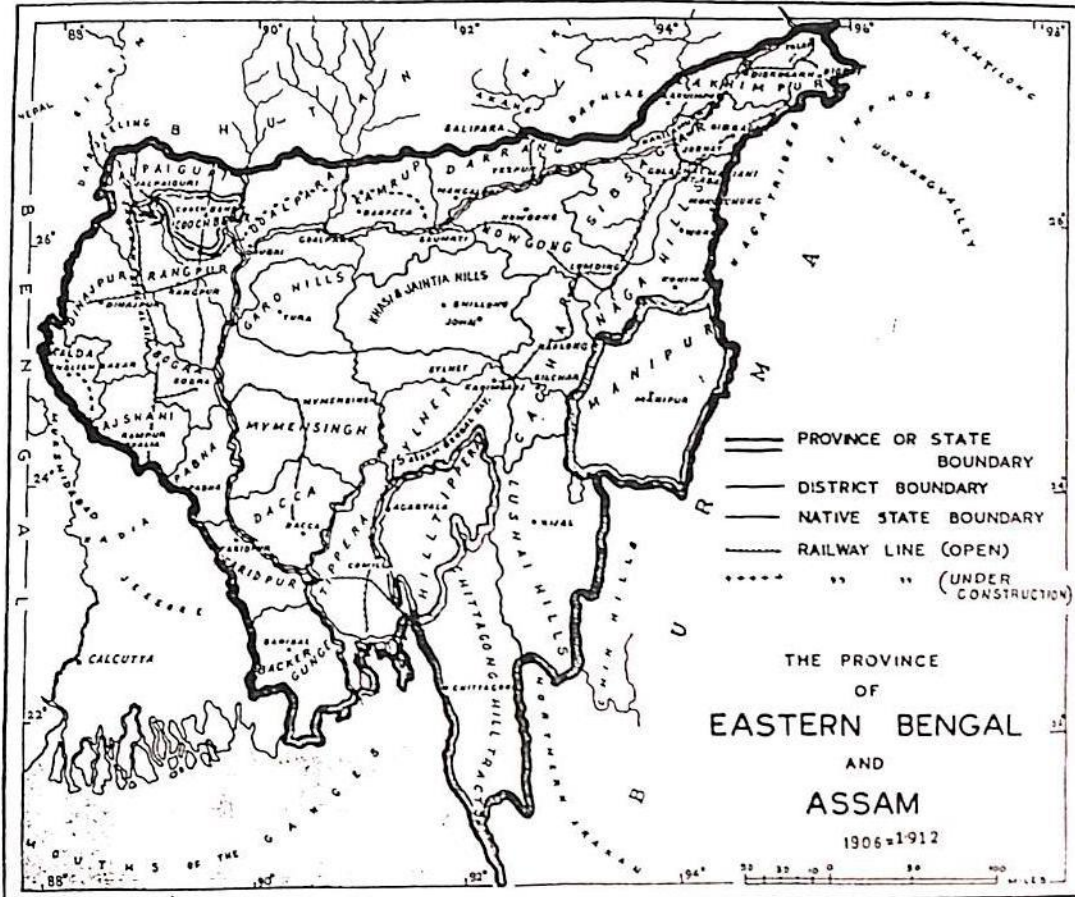
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Dispur home is my sanctum sanctorum.

Guwahati
14 July 2004

—Makhanlal Kar



PREPARED UNDER THE SUPERVISION OF THE GOVERNMENT

A s s a m



INTRODUCTION

A considerable part of India's struggle for political emancipation related to the demand for constitutional and administrative reforms. This was so because the upper echelons of the society who represented it initially had faith in peaceful methods such as prayers and petitions. But the obstinate unwillingness of the British authorities to part with power in any form and their unilateral policies, often oppressive, disappointed the younger generations of the early twentieth century. That led to considerably well-organized and repeatedly violent outburst of the people's political awakening against alien rule. Thus two simultaneous streams of Indian national spirit emerged. While the two major political parties, the Indian National Congress, supported by the Jamait-UI-Ulema-E-Hind and the All India Muslim League followed non-violent methods for the redressal of national grievances, the revolutionaries were determined to get rid of foreign rule by force.

It is neither easy nor correct to say that non-violent constitutional struggle alone brought us freedom though its eminent role is universally lauded and recognized. That cannot of course mean the negation of the devotion, bravery, patriotism and sacrifice of the people who did not see eye to eye with the principle of non-violence and therefore carried on with armed revolution. Even the last phase of our struggle for freedom was characterised by a combination of peaceful negotiation between the British Government on the one hand and the declaration of war against the imperial power on the other. It was led by no less a person than a former top Congressman turned revolutionary, Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, the Supreme Commander of the Indian National Army or Azad Hind Fauz. The INA fought its way right upto the North Eastern part of India and further inspired the people. Our purpose here is not exactly the study of the freedom struggle as such but the constitutional reforms, which went on side by side with the revolutionary ideas. Assam was a part and parcel of both aspects of the struggle, the later being much less active than the former. But the province did not receive the attention it deserved in the study of reforms vis-a-vis the all India historical parameters. Therefore, a detailed study of the evolutionary process of local self-government, legislatures and electoral polity is called for and is expected to fill up the gap.

Assam is referred to in some historical works but the degree of emphasis on the province was scarce. Greater attention was laid on the working of the different sets of reforms

practically neglecting the evolutionary aspects of the same, as if the people's representation and participation in the Government and the legislatures emerged over night through certain parliamentary act. It has not been asserted that Assam was an active and ardent partner in the national demand for reforms with the object of finding a legitimate role and place in constitutional evolution. The people of Assam were as conscious as those of the other provinces to bring her in the purview of reforms. In every stage of the demand, Assam played its role. We have studied this in detail.

First Chapter of the book gives a glimpse into Assam's history from ancient time to 1947. The next Chapter begins with the study of the Raj of the East India Company, traces its termination and India's absorption into the British Empire and ends with the Government of India Act 1935. Special attention has been given to the essence of constitutional governance namely, people's right and participation therein.

During the later half of the nineteenth century, the principal issue was the development of Panchayats in the rural and semi-rural areas and Municipalities and Local Boards in urban and semi-urban areas respectively. These systems nurtured the principles of local self-government and were the harbingers of the next phase of reforms in Assam along with the rest of India. The Ripon Plan faced strong opposition from the official quarters in Assam but ultimately the basic concept of local self-government namely Panchayats, Municipalities and Local Boards evolved along with the elective principles. These have been elaborately studied in Chapter 3.

The last Chapter gives a detailed account of the evolution of Assam Legislatures in three different phases and consisting of only nominated members, majority nominated and other members elected and finally only elected members. Elections were, however, held on a very restricted franchise granted to an infinitesimal section of the people. By the last constitutional reforms under British rule, the Government of India Act 1935, franchise was no doubt considerably extended but the vast majority of the people did not have the benefit till the elections of 1952 under the Constitution of free India. For the first time in the history of this province, a bicameral legislature was provided. The Assam Legislative Assembly or Lower House was a wholly elected body without any official bloc. The upper House or Assam Legislative Council was partly elected on indirect franchise, naturally limited, and partly nominated, maintaining official majority. All these features have been studied in detail.

1

ASSAM IN A NUTSHELL

Section I

PHYSIOGRAPHY, ETHNIC AND LINGUISTIC COMPOSITION

Assam, one of the constituent units of the People's Republic of India, is situated in the north-eastern corner of the country between 24° - 28°N and 89°-97°E with an area of 78438 square kilometres, almost a third of what it was before 1947. The depletion was the result of repeated political reorganisation and creation of new states. The population of the territory was 26638407 according to the Census of 2001. It is bounded on the north by Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh and on the east by Burma (Myanmar), Nagaland and Manipur. The states of Mizoram, Tripura and Meghalaya lie to the south. Assam is also co-terminous with Bangladesh along the southern frontiers and is connected with West Bengal and the rest of India through a western corridor 28.8 kilometres long. The rivers Brahmaputra and Surma - Barak divided the state into two valleys named after them till independence. Though the latter rivers flowed through the two districts of Sylhet and Cachar respectively, these were given the common name of Surma Valley of which the town of Sylhet was the most important administrative centre. Since independence Cachar has been known as Barak Valley.

The Surma Valley

Sylhet, which was an extension of the vast Gangetic plains, is now in Bangladesh except a small part which partition left with Assam. The district was bounded on the north by Khasi and Jaintia Hills. It had Cachar on the east, Lushai Hills and Hill Tipperah in the south and the Bangladesh district of Mymensingh in the west.

Northern part of the Cachar district emerges from the Assam range of hills but southern Cachar is like the Gangetic plains. The district is bounded on the north by Jaintia Hills and Naga Hills. Manipur lies to the east, Lushai Hills to the south and Sylhet to the west. The Barak rises in the 2995 metre high Japro in the Kohima Hills. Flowing south west through Manipur for one hundred eighty kilometres within two mountain ranges, it turns first to the north and then to the west and enters the plains of Cachar. At Bhanga in the district of

Karimganj, it divides into two streams named Surma and Kushiara. Traversing the whole district of Sylhet these unite again into a single stream. Proceeding southward it ultimately merges into the "greatest river complex of the world" that flows into the Bay of Bengal.¹

The Brahmaputra Valley

The Brahmaputra or Assam Valley has two physical divisions. Upper Assam lies between the Eastern Himalayas and the Patkai - Naga - Barail ranges on the east and south and is under "cover of a blanket of alluvium". Lower Assam is situated between the Himalayas in the north and the Meghalaya Plateau in the south and is more fertile than the former. The valley as a whole extends from Sadiya in the north-east to Dhubri in the west covering a length of 1300 km with an average width of 120 km.

The river Tsangpo originates in western Tibet at a height of 5100 metres about 100 km south east of the Manasarovar and east of mount Kailash. Flowing for about 1250 km through Tibet it takes a sharp hairpin bend from the south-west-north-east course to north-east -southwest. Then cutting a deep gorge through the peaks of Namelu Bowrah and Gylla Perse and after taking on the waters of the Dihing, Debang and Lohit rivers, it descends to the plains of Assam near Sadiya. Henceforth it is known as Brahmaputra. Meandering mightily through all the districts of the valley and dividing it into north and south bank territories, it flows into the Padma in Bengal. The valley's present physiography owes its origin to the aggradational work of the river and its tributaries.²

Assam is truly called an anthropological museum. "Assam's culture has never been Assamese culture as understood in the narrow sense of the term; it was and is a composite culture." Being situated on one of the migration routes of human races, her people became an admixture of races which brought with them their specific cultural traits. Negritos, Australoids, Mongoloids, Tibeto-Burmans, Aryans and Non-Aryans, Hindus, Muslims and other non-Hindus, tribals and non-tribals "contributed to its origin and development."³

It has not yet been possible to ascertain exactly when in the remote past Assam was first peopled. We also do not know "who those people were, where they came from and whither they have gone." But there is no doubt that this easternmost corner of India received its share of human migration from the east to India "though in much lesser proportion than the racial elements entering the country from the west." Some of them "peopled the land, gradually moved towards the east and the remnants ... passed out of the country over Assam and the hill ranges."⁴

There were four lines of communication, three over land and one along rivers, between Assam and Bengal through which it was connected with the rest of India. The water route connected the two territories through Goalpara via the Jenai river from Jamalpur to the Pabna river reaching the Ganges. The journey required twenty five to thirty days to reach Calcutta through the Sundarbans. One of the land routes passed from Goalpara through Bogra, Rangpur, Dinajpur, Malda, Murshidabad and Calcutta. The second line of land communication connected Goalpara, Singimari and Jamalpur, to Dacca. The third one linked up Guwahati, Ranigaon, Nongkhlow, Mawphlang and Chera connecting Kamrup, Khasi Hills and Sylhet. The non-tribal populations of Assam consist of the Ahoms, Assamese Caste Hindus, Bengali Caste Hindus, Scheduled Castes, Bengali and Assamese Muslims

Nepalese, Marwaries and tea garden labourers from northern and southern India. They speak Assamese, Bengali, Hindi, Nepali and Tamil group of languages.

The tribal people are broadly divided into the following groups:

Hill Tribes - Dimasas, Garos, Hmars, Kocharis, Karbis, Kukis and Nagas.

Plain Tribes - Burmans, Bodo- Kacharis, Hajongs, Kacharis, Mechs, Mishings, Lalungs and Rabhas.

Recent times witnessed a regression of the process of amalgamation because the various ethnic elements in the population began vigorously to assert their distinctive identities. They are no longer satisfied with the linguistic identification as Assamese. However, Assam remains predominantly Tibeto-Burmese as large segments of the people belong either to that stock or owe their origin to its union with other elements. Therefore, the ethnic and cultural composition of Assam today is very complicated.

Section II A SKETCH OF POLITICAL HISTORY

Sylhet

Sylhet was a part of the ancient "Pratyanta Desha". The Kingdoms of Gour, Laur and Jaintia emerged there in early times and flourished till the thirteenth century during which contact with the Muslim rulers of Bengal began. Starting with Gour or Sylhet proper, which was conquered by Sikandar Bakt and Shah Jalal in 1384, the territory except Jaintia soon passed to the Muslims and during the rule of Akbar the Great formed a part of Bengal and continued so. Till 1765 it was ruled by a succession of Amils under the Nawab of Dacca and upto 1874 remained a permanently settled unit of the 15th Division of Bengal. The last Hindu ruler of Laur embraced Islam. Bengali language and culture flourished in the district. In order to make Assam into a viable Chief Commissioner's Province, Sylhet was transferred to Assam in 1874. In a way that was the first Partition of Bengal.⁵

Cachar

In ancient times Cachar also was a part of the "Pratyanta Desha". Dimapur in the present state of Nagaland was the seat of the Kachari or Hedamba Kingdom. Like Sylhet, it also formed part of the Mughal empire and till 1765 remained under the rule of Amils. In the sixteenth century, repeated Ahom onslaughts compelled the Kacharis to migrate to North Cachar and establish their capital at Maibong. In 1706, these people were suppressed by the Ahom King Rudra Singha who ruled from 1696 to 1714 and they settled in the plains of Cachar with Khaspur as their capital. Further, repeated incursions and invasions of the Manipuris, Jaintias and Burmese caused the rapid decline of the Kingdom. The East India Company intervened in the Kachari - Manipuri conflicts in 1762 thus beginning their contact with Cachar which remained politically unstable till 1830.⁶

The first Anglo-Burmese war of 1824 was ended by the Treaty of Yandabo, 24 February 1826 which facilitated the British imperial expansion into North East India. The Kachari King Govinda Chandra was murdered in 1830 as a result of internecine conflicts and the territory was informally taken over by the English. But by Lord William Bentinck's

Proclamation of 14 August 1832 it was annexed to the British dominion. At first the territory was administered by a Superintendent under the Agent to the Governor General but Later it was placed under the Dacca Division of Bengal. North Cachar was transferred in 1854 to Nowgong district of Assam by Lord Dalhousie. The rest of the district remained in the Dacca division till 1874 in which year, like Sylhet, it was transferred to Assam for the purpose stated above. Linguistically and culturally Cachar has been a part of Bengal.

Goalpara

Goalpara was originally a part of the district of Rangpur in Bengal and was permanently settled. The Koch race had established its military supremacy there early in the sixteenth century under its King Biswa Singh. His son Naranarayana waged successful wars against the Kingdoms of Cachar, Jaintia, Sylhet and Tripura. But even before his death the Koch Kingdom faced disintegration. His nephew, Raghu Rai, claiming to be the ancestor of the Bijni royal family in lower Assam, established his authority over Goalpara, Darrang and Kamrup. The seventeenth century witnessed repeated conflicts between the Ahoms and the Mughals for military and political supremacy over Assam. The latter wrested the eastern Koch country or the district of Goalpara and Kamrup from Parikshit, son of Raghu Rai, in 1614. The Goalpara territories were included in the Bengal Subah of the Mughal Empire in 1639. It formed part of the Muslim dominion till 1765.

After the English obtained the Dewani of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa, Goalpara continued to be a frontier outpost. Considerable trade was carried on from there as well as Jogigopha on the opposite bank of the Brahmaputra between the European merchants and the Assamese. In 1826 Goalpara was made a district and attached to the Assam Division of Bengal. In 1866 the eastern Duars were annexed by the British after the Bhutan war. Along with Goalpara the entire area was included in the Bengal Commissionership of Cooch Behar. The following year it was placed for judicial purpose under the Judicial Commissioner of Assam. The territory, however, remained with the province of Bengal continuously from 1639 to 1874. The same year, like Sylhet and Cachar, Goalpara was transferred to Assam. During these two and half centuries it became a constituent of Bengali culture and majority of its people considered Bengali as their mother tongue. Along with Sylhet and Cachar, Goalpara was also brought under Assam Chief Commissionership in 1874. The Assamese had only a marginal presence in the district. Primary education continued to be imparted in Bengali till 1947. Then overnight the people became Assamese. In this connection, a veteran Communist leader, Phani Bora said in a Press Conference at Gauhati on 24 May 1954,

The Assam Government, through their official and non-official agents forcibly sealed off all Bengali Schools in Goalpara district denying safeguards of the Bengalee's cultural and linguistic rights. Such imperialist and reactionary actions of Assam Congress Government were responsible for encouraging disintegrating elements in Assam.

The Brahmaputra Valley

In ancient times Assam was known as Pragjyotisha and in early medieval times as Kamarupa. The present day Assam was a part of ancient Pragjyotisha mentioned in

Ramayana and *Mahabharata*. The *Vishnu Purana*, *Kalika Purana* and *Yogini Tantra* contain information regarding the territory's early traditions. It was ruled by Kings called Danava Asura suggesting their non-Aryan origin. The first epigraphic reference to Kamarupa was found in the Allahabad Pillar Inscription of Samudra Gupta. But the Chinese pilgrim Hiuen Tsang who visited Kamarupa during 642 - 643 A.D. left an authentic account of the area which at that time was a strong and prosperous Kingdom under Bhaskara Varman of the Varmana dynasty. Its area was about 1700 miles "in circuit". Winningham was induced by Hiuen Tsang's account to conclude that Kamarupa then included the whole Brahmaputra Valley, Bhutan and Cooch Behar. ⁷

Political history of Pragjyotisha - Kamarupa began with the Varmana dynasty which ruled over the territory for about three centuries, from the middle of the fourth to the middle of the seventh. Pragjyotishpura (Gauhati) was its capital. It was followed by the Salastamba dynasty founded in 650 AD by Avanti Varman, a close relative of Bhaskara Varman. Their rule lasted till the end of the tenth century. Tyaga Singha was the last King of the line. Then came the Palas under Brahmapala in 990 and their regime lasted for one hundred fifty years. The last King of the line was Jayapala who died in 1138. Vaidyadeva, a General of the Pala King of Pundravardhana or north Bengal, Kumarapala, established a new line of kings in Kamarupa. ⁸ Towards the end of the 12th century Kamarupa was conquered by Lakshman Sena, King of Bengal, who defeated Vallabhadeva. Vaidyadeva's other "successors are not definitely known."⁹ The emergence of Muslim power in Bengal affected Kamarupa in the form of repeated invasions between 1206 and 1257.

At the time of Bakhtiyar Khalji's invasion of Assam in 1206, Rai Prithu was the King of Kamarupa. He is claimed to have defeated Bakhtiyar. A second invasion of 1427 led by Sultan Ghyias Uddin, Governor of Bengal, was also repulsed successfully by Prithu. He was overthrown and killed by Nasiruddin, son of Iltutmish and Governor of Bengal. After the death of Prithu, "Kamarupa was probably for some time a Vassal State of the Sultans of Delhi". ¹⁰ North Gauhati or Kamarupnagar was then the capital of Kamarupa. During the rule of the last King of the line, Sandhya from 1250 to 1270, Tughril Khan Malik Yuzbeg, the Turkish Governor of Bengal invaded Kamarupa in 1257 but he was defeated. Shortly after Yuzbeg's invasion Sandhya shifted his capital from north Gauhati to Kamatapur situated in Goalpara. From that time the Kingdom of Kamarupa came to be known as Kamata or Kamarupa - Kamata. The kings were known by the appellation of Kamateswara or Kameswar (Lord of Kamata).

This Kingdom was smaller than that of ancient Kamarupa and included only Goalpara and Kamrup territories of present Assam as well as some parts of Pundravardhana and Mymensingh. In fact, since the fall of the Pala dynasty in the twelfth century, "the political sway of ancient Kamarupa had been shrinking gradually", so that by 1200 A.D., the "rule of Kamarupa - Kamata Kings became limited, to all intents and purposes, to Kamrup and Goalpara, i.e., Western Assam."¹¹ Sandhya's successors continued to rule over Kamata till the third quarter of the 15th century during which period Kamarupa was free from Muslim invasions. But in 1498, the Kingdom of Kamata "was destroyed" by Hussain Shah, the Nawab of Gaud. But as he was "compelled" to leave Kamata in the face of revolt of petty local chiefs called Bhuyans, the Kotch tribe curved out a principality for itself under the leadership of Haria Mandal. They reached prominence under one of Haria's sons, Biswa

Singha who brought the whole stretch of territory from "Karatoya in the west to Barnadi in the east under his sway."¹²

Though the Koch Kings from Biswa Singha to Naranarayan and Chila Rai fought relentless wars against the Ahoms, who had already come to Assam, on occasions attaining victory, the Kingdom had to be divided by 1581 to satisfy rebel claimants into two parts, the western one being known as Koch Behar and the eastern part as Koch Hajo. The last king of Koch Hajo, Parikshit was "carried away to Delhi" by the Mughals under Jehangir who agreed to restore him to his kingdom on payment of rupees four lakhs, but he died on his way back. Koch Hajo was annexed to the Mughal Empire. Koch Behar also came under the Mughals and later became one of the hundreds of tributary states of the British.¹³ Despite repeated invasions beginning with Bakhtiyar Khalji and ending with MirJumla in 1662 the Muslims had short lived successes but could not conquer Assam. The achievement was left to the English East India Company.

The most important event of history of the 13th century Assam was the invasion of the Ahoms. Members of the Shan Tribe of the Tai family of human race had established a powerful Kingdom in upper Burma, called Maulang. Prince (Chao Lung) Sukapha, brother of the king, left Burma in 1215 due to family hitches and after years of adventures and wanderings in the Patkai Hill ranges, led an invasion of the upper Brahmaputra Valley in 1228, i.e., immediately after the second Muslim invasion. Sukapha soon established his authority over the local residents who were the Chutias, Marans and Barahis. In dealing with these subdued tribes, he adopted a "policy of appeasement and conciliation."¹⁴ He and his followers married local women. The Shans' exemplary "courage", their large heartedness and the amiable treatment won "great admiration" from these people. It is these tribes which found Sukapha and his people "unequaled" and "unparalleled or Ahom or Asom".¹⁵

Sukapha and his successors followed a policy of conquest and expansion. Rudrasingha or Sukhrungpha who ruled from 1696 to 1714 completed the conquest of the whole of the Brahmaputra Valley.¹⁶ Assam had been under Ahom rule for nearly six hundred years. But from 1769 internecine conflicts of leaders and rival claimants to the throne as well as repeated rebellions of the Maomarias sapped the vitality of the Ahom imperial power that led to political chaos and instability. The situation was fully exploited by the East India Company to annex Assam to their possession within a few years of the first Anglo-Burmese war.

Section III BRITISH INTERVENTION AND ANNEXATION

Berthalomeo Plaisted, a Surveyor of East India Company in Bengal pioneered the writing on Assam following Tavernier's account. Another officer, Major James Rennel, called the father of Indian Geography, was appointed Surveyor, Government of Bengal in 1764. He surveyed the Assam frontier and traced the course of the river Brahmaputra upto the Bengal border.¹⁷ James Mill of the Ostend East India Company was the first to attempt at establishing trade relations with Assam. Ahom King Siva Singha allowed him only to do so but not to stay here. Robert Clive, during his second Governorship of Bengal, 1765-1767, through his Society of Trade, tried to explore the commercial possibilities but

the Board of Directors did not give the necessary permission. They, however, asked the third Governor Cartier, 1770-72, to collect more information in the matter.¹⁸

During that period, Ahom power was declining and there was political instability which hindered the Company's efforts. Series of rebellions and depredation along the Assam borders followed the death of King Rajeswar Singha in 1780. His successor, young Gourinath, was compelled to leave his capital Gorgaon and flee to Gauhati where also he was practically besieged by his opponents. From there he sought the help of Lord Cornwallis, Governor General of Bengal, asking for a battalion of sepoys at his own cost. In response to his appeal Capt. Welsh was sent to Assam with two missions, namely, expulsion of the 'bandits' and restoration of Gourinath to authority.¹⁹

Welsh reached Goalpara on 8 November 1792 at the head of six companies of 360 sepoys belonging to the 27th Native Infantry Battalion. By the end of December, Gauhati was recovered by a combined fleet of the East India Company and the king. Welsh assured Gourinath of his restoration to Gorgaon. By January 1793, Assam was rid of the depredators as they surrendered. By that time the Ahom Kingdom had been overburdened with an hierarchical structure. An "opium addict", the king under the influence of the "crafty priests" and "flattering dependants" safeguarded only their interests. This created great discontent among the people and rapidly eroded his authority. Cornwallis reminded the Captain of his second mission, i.e., restoration of Gourinath. But the latter wrote that it would not be possible without interference with the management of the territory and wanted necessary permission for the purpose.²⁰

Without waiting for the Governor General's consent, Welsh unilaterally decided to purge the royal court by swiftly removing the vested influences. He obtained popular support by a proclamation issued in Bengali and Assamese asserting the innocuous objects of his expedition. He further assured them of protection against tyranny, oppression and injustice. Though resentful of Welsh's intervention, the Ahom king had to dismiss all his unfaithful officials and grant general amnesty to rebels. Cornwallis now advised the officer to assure the subjects that the Company would no longer abandon them to "so ferocious and sanguinary tyrant" as Gourinath. As the king was vacillating in taking proper actions against subversive elements, Welsh did so and brought them under control.

The Ahom king was made to sign a secret commercial treaty with the Company on 28 February 1793. It was "a reciprocal and entire liberty of commerce between the subjects of Bengal and Assam for all singular goods and merchandises" of a good number. However without the permission of the two contracting parties, no European would be allowed to fix a residence in Assam. The Company simultaneously raised its armed strength ostensibly to maintain peace and tranquillity which was pre-requisite to the success of the treaty. In addition to opening of trade and commerce between Bengal and Assam, the treaty gave the Company enormous political advantage by establishing its contact with a territory lying just outside the frontiers of Bengal which had already become the centre of expansion of the British power.

Sir John Shore succeeded Lord Cornwallis as Governor General of Bengal in 1793. Under the concept of the policy of neutrality he wanted to know from Capt. Welsh whether his continued presence in Assam with an army was beneficial and in keeping with the Company's intention. He also wanted a detailed report on the various aspects of his relation

with the Ahom king. The reply was that "support of the most respectable natives of Assam" was with the Company. Further, withdrawal of its troops and cessation of English presence would be disastrous to both Assam and the Company's trade. This was so because there were continuous troubles due to personal rivalries of leaders and their conflicting interests which made the king's position precarious. Despite all this, however, Shore decided, in January 1794, to withdraw and Welsh had to leave Assam in July. Gourinath died on 17 December 1794. His successor Kamaleswar Singha now led a more decadent monarchy. In view of the same old internecine quarrels, confusion and anarchy, he had to request the English repeatedly for further assistance with troops, arms and ammunition.²¹

The next Governor General, Lord Wellesely from 1798 to 1805 followed a different policy. He helped Kamaleswar with men, money and material and enabled him to establish his authority giving Assam a period of sixteen years' comparative peace despite ambitions of rival pretenders to the throne. He was succeeded by his sixteen year old brother Chandrakanta Singha who ruled for ten years. His Prime Minister Purnananda Burgohain managed to appropriate to himself the state power. However, the vitality of the Ahom Kingdom further decayed due to continuous court intrigues and a new factor which was repeated Burmese invasions, actually invited by disaffected aristocrats like Badan Chandra Phukan. The new invaders established their power in large areas of the Brahmaputra Valley between 1821 and 1824 and King Jogeswar Singha had to accept their authority.

The East India Company under Lord Almerst's Governor Generalship could not silently accept the Burmese advance towards their Bengal frontiers. This resulted in the first Anglo-Burmese war which started in 1824 and ended with the defeat of the Burmese and the Treaty of Yandabo, 24 February 1826. This had two immediate results. Firstly, the British victory not only pushed the Burmese out of Assam but also signalled the establishment of the Company's undisputed supremacy over the land even without a formal conquest. Secondly, there remained the least possibility of resistance to their expansion. They had, however, given a solemn assurance to the people which read,

*We are not led to your country by the thirst of conquest, but are forced, in our own defence, to deprive our enemy of the means of annoying us. You may, therefore rest assured that we will never consent to depart until we exclude our foe from Assam and re-establish in that country a Government adapted to your wants and calculated to promote happiness of all classes.*²²

A degenerate Ahom monarchy, however, could no longer protect Assam, far less the Bengal - Assam border.

After Yandabo, the East India Company followed a two-fold policy with respect to Assam. On the advice of David Scott, Political Agent to the Governor General, Civil Commissioner of Rangpur and Agent, North East Frontier, they annexed western Assam without any pretension pending a general settlement with a tributary King at a later date. At the same time, on the recommendation of T.C. Robertson, Agent to the Governor General, Assam was organised into five districts, namely, Darrang, Kamrup, Lakhimpur, Nowgong and Sibasgar under a European Principal Assistant endowed with the triple power of a Collector, a Judge and a Magistrate. Again on the advice of Scott, the Company installed Purandar Singha as the King of eastern or upper Assam in 1833. Purandar had to sign a

treaty with Robertson agreeing to pay an annual tribute of fifty thousand rupees. But soon the arrangement failed. In 1838 the Ahom king expressed inability to rule and eastern Assam was annexed to the British territory on 31 July 1839. The newly formed districts were constituted into a Commissioner's Division of the Bengal Presidency. In 1854, the Governor General was authorised by the Company's home authorities to appoint officers designated Chief Commissioners, to administer territories under his control. However, the Brahmaputra Valley districts as mentioned above remained under the "umbrella" of the Bengal Presidency till the administrative reorganisation of 1874.²³

Section IV EARLY RESISTANCE TO BRITISH RULE

(a) The Ahom Loyalists' Disaffection

The Assamese ruling sections soon realised that the British Raj had come to stay despite their innocuous pre-war assurance of allowing an Ahom monarchy to continue. The new rulers took quick economic and administrative measures to consolidate their freshly acquired position. This was done through permanent establishments under European officers with overriding powers and discretions. This alerted some of the chiefs not only in Assam but also in the neighbouring areas. There were repeated uprisings of various group leaders like Gomdhar Konwar, Peali Phukan and Rupchand. They had either vested personal interests or wanted to serve the cause of this or that scion of the Ahom royal family. But these failed because of superior British strength, lack of real popular enthusiasm and the disunity amongst the rebels even in the face of a common danger. By the close of the 19th century the whole of north-east India was captured and controlled by the British.

(b) Peasant Uprising

The spirit of resistance took a new form with the progress of the Company rule. The new Government had started new periodic taxation and random increase in land revenue, sometimes to the extent of one hundred per cent. The tax-net included houses, licences and income demanding payments in cash. This only resulted in a deplorable economic crisis in the life of peasants and the burden was too much for them. Even the Board of Directors of the Company in 1832 had expressed the view that

*.....the dreadful extortion had beggared the ryots and reduced large portion of Assam waste in which upto our conquest such a thing as jungle was hardly to be seen.*²⁴

Yet the authorities in Assam did not pay heed to the condition of the peasants who constituted the bulk of the population. The peasants in the districts of Kamrup, Nowgong and Sibsagar, especially in areas namely Rangya, Bajali, Pathacharkuchi, Phulguri and Pathureaghat, organised themselves under the Raj Mels or People's Assemblies. There began public demonstrations of resentment against the Government policy. Peasants in large numbers met the officers and petitioned them to redress their grievances. But the latter made only show of force which dissatisfied and angered the victims. The Raj Mels decided not to pay taxes. The police occasionally resorted to firing, killing some of the demonstrators and imprisoned their leaders. Though the uprisings were ruthlessly suppressed the contemporary

The demographic and linguistic profiles of the new province are depicted below:

TABLE 1 : Demographic and Linguistic Profiles of Assam 1874 (Census of 1871)

	Population in 1871	Population after Reconstitution	Language
Brahmaputra Valley	Plain Districts		
Darrang	235300	235300	
Kamrup	561681	561681	
Lakhimpur	121267	121267	
Nowgong	256390	256390	
Sibsagar	296589	296589	
Total	1471227	1471227	Assamese majority
Surma Valley Plain Districts			
Sylhet	1719539	1719539	
Cachar	205027	205027	
Total	1924566	1924566	Bengali majority
Goalpara (in Bengal)	444761	444761	Bengali majority
Total	2369327	2369327	Bengali majority
Total new Province (1874)		3840554	Bengali majority

It would be seen from the Table that the population of the Surma Valley exceeded that of the other Valley by 453339. Even the population of the Sylhet District only was more than the population of the five districts of the Brahmaputra Valley. Sylhet, Cachar and Goalpara together had 2369327 people, i.e., 898100 more than the Brahmaputra Valley. In other words the Assamese constituted 38.30 per cent of the provincial population. Vast majority of the remaining people were Bengalees. This drastic alteration of the demographic, ethnic and linguistic profiles soon created the pernicious Assamese - Bengali rifts which continued till 1947 and the legacy still plagues Assam's life.

The following Table gives us an idea of the Non- Muslim and Muslim components of the new province:

The Table shows that while in the Brahmaputra Valley, non-Muslims accounted for 94.15 per cent of the population, Muslims constituted only 5.9 per cent. With the inclusion of Sylhet, Cachar and Goalpara in the reconstituted province, the non- Muslims formed 71.24 per cent and the Muslims 28.76 per cent. This was a drastic alteration in demography. This had far reaching impact on the electoral process which started four decade later as Muslims with increasing number due to migration played important and often dominant role in Assam politics.

TABLE 1.1 : Non - Muslim and Muslim populations of Assam 1874 (Census India 1871)

	Non-Muslim	Percentage	Muslim	Percentage
Brahmaputra Valley Plains				
Darrang	221441	94.1	13859	5.9
Kamrup	515858	91.8	45823	8.2
Lakhimpur	117441	96.9	3826	3.1
Nowgong	246324	96.1	10066	3.9
Sibsagar	283970	95.7	12619	4.3
Total	1385034	94.15	86193	5.85
Surma Valley Plains				
Sylhet	865408	50.3	854131	49.7
Cachar	130666	63.7	74361	36.3
Total	996074	51.75	928492	48.25
Goalpara	354845	79.8	89916	20.2
Total Surma Valley and Goalpara	1350919	57	1018408	43.00
Total New Province	2735953	71.24	1104601	28.76

As the Bengalis had the benefit of earlier English education, they naturally became the instruments and beneficiaries of the British imperial administration everywhere in the Bengal Presidency, more especially in the new province of Assam. But it must be noted that the policy making powers were vested only in the English bureaucracy. The fact having been either ignorantly or motivatingly missed by most writers on Assam history, distortions followed leading to the alienation of the Assamese and Bengalis though they have been living together for more than a century and a quarter.

In their own interest, Government of Bengal had in 1831 unilaterally and unjustly replaced the Assamese language by Bengali. No doubt Assamese was restored to its legitimate status by the time of the reorganisation but the inter-community alienation persisted.

A psychological fear developed in the minds of the Assamese who would be happy to part at least with Sylhet. There also arose the questions of the diversities of the two physically isolated parts of the province. The Hindu-Muslim question added fuel to the fire. Assam's life was very much influenced by these factors and the conflicts ramified into education, employment, land settlement, election to legislatures and what not. The Partition of Bengal in 1905, the creation of the province of Eastern Bengal and Assam and the Morley - Minto Reforms aggravated the conflicts. The Congress- League tangle during the freedom struggle completed the alienation of the communities. Those seriously discordant dispositions of the communities and the valleys coloured the political consciousness even though the people were equally exploited by the alien rulers.

Truly speaking, the history of Assam between 1874 and 1947 had been the history of those conflicts. The Sylhet Referendum was planned and executed partly as a remedy. But

Provincial Congress which also controlled the Surma valley. This arrangement continued till independence.

The Anti-Partition Agitation

The most important factor which made any widespread movement in the Brahmaputra Valley impossible was the absence of any well organised public opinion. The formation of a new province as well as the vast expanse of cultivable waste lands attracted the attention of the Muslims of Eastern Bengal, particularly of Mymensingh, the majority of whom were landless labourers and agriculturists. Their kith and kin in Bengal part defended their cause and so supported Partition as being in the same province would help them utilise the waste land easily. They were also inspired by a new sense of political importance that accrued to a majority. Further, the cult of nationalism was characterised by intensely Hindu tinges like Rakhibandhan, Bande Mataram Song and teachings of the Geeta which failed to attract the Muslims much. Last but not the least, the Muslims of both Eastern Bengal and Assam could "rely as firmly as ever on British justice and fair play for the appreciation of its loyalty and the safeguarding of its interests."³² This was evident from the particular provision for separate electorate for Muslims under the Morley – Minto Reforms of 1909.

The Armed Revolution

It is generally accepted that Partition of Bengal gave rise to "extremism" and underground revolutionary activities. According to Assamese writers, "the Swadeshi Movement which originated in Bengal early in the present century, at last took on the nature of terrorism which could not allure the peace loving people of Assam."³³

The Khilafat and Non-Cooperation Movements

The beginning of the Non-Cooperation Movement in Assam can be traced to March 1920. By that time, Gandhi's manifesto had embodied a definite course of action for the redressal of Muslim grievances with respect to Khilafat. It also elaborated his doctrine of Non-Violent Non-Co-operation. This imparted an impetus specially after the return of the Assam delegates from the Congress Session and the Students' Conference held at Nagpur. The initial stage was characterised by public meetings held all over the province. The speakers emphasized the need of implementing the programme of propagation of Swadeshi and restoration of the Khilafat. They pointed out the evils of British rule. Issues like eviction of Nepalese, discontent of tea-garden labourers arising out of the planters' racial hatred and economic exploitation through low wages, retrenchment and dismissal of labourers, mass exodus of workers from thirteen Surma Valley tea gardens and police atrocities were raised.

The Assam Association, the Surma Valley Conference and the Surma Valley Muslim Conference separately adopted the programme towards the end of 1920. These organisations, however, ceased to function as the provincial branches of the Indian National Congress and the Central Khilafat Committee took charge of the Movement. But the two valleys remained under two different Provincial Congress Committees. The unanimity of the Surma

Valley organisations eroded soon after their resolutions were adopted. Government claimed that leading Hindus and Muslims regretted that those conferences should have been held at all and they particularly “deplored the folly of Bipin Chandra Pal having been invited.” Some prominent loyalists of both the communities, the Anjumans and the Local Boards were opposed to the idea of Boycott.³⁴

Conflicting social, economic and linguistic interests of the two valleys and the communities which had been agitating the leaders since the formation of Assam Chief Commissionership in 1874 could not be reconciled even though there was a common anti-British objective. A strong religious overtone prevailing between the Hindus and the Muslims despite absence of open hostilities in respect of the Movement hindered its progress. Absence of one single co-ordinated central authority either in the valley or at the provincial level was another obstacle to united action. This was particularly important as the bulk of the province’s population was Hindu.

Though there was a considerable interest in the Brahmaputra Valley, it failed to observe the first August 1920, the inaugural day of the Khilafat Movement. However the Non-Co-operation aspect held sway there as the overwhelming Hindu majority population had less concern for the Khilafat. In the Surma Valley, on the other hand, the Khilafat issue received greater support in view of its majority of Muslim population. A serious deficiency of the Movement was that no single person could command respect of both the valleys and the communities. As a result only sectional leadership developed amongst the various ethnic and religious entities of the people. This is a dominant legacy even today in all spheres and aspects of Assam’s life.

The boycott of educational institutions, Law Courts and Legislatures was the most exciting aspect of the Non-Co-operation Movement. Of the Triple Boycott Scheme most attractive was the first one. About ten per cent of the total enrolled student population, both male and female, in three hundred thirty four Middle English, Middle Vernacular and High Schools and three Colleges in the province withdrew from their institutions when the “Strike was rife”, i.e., during 1920- 1921. Next year enrolment fell by about twelve per cent and attendance by twenty one per cent. The students also played the leading role in picketing shops, selling liquor and foreign cloth. Students’ procession formed an important element of the Movement. The initial enthusiasm did not take long to diminish. The Government gave students a specific time limit after which most of them returned to their classes.

The establishment of National Schools was another important aspect of the programme. Twentyfour such schools were established in the Brahmaputra Valley and sixteen in the Surma Valley with public support. About one thousand three hundred students joined those schools. Most of the schools disappeared soon after the dissipation of the Movement. But a significant consequence of student participation was that for the first time a select band of young men swearing allegiance to the cause of India’s emancipation appeared on the political scene. Khaddar became a symbol of sacrifice and devotion to the country’s cause.

Due to vigorous propaganda of the non-co-operators all over the province, the Government suffered heavy losses on land revenue, excise, stamp and forest duties and choukidari taxes. The consumption of liquor, opium and ganja came down by 49.8%,

35.8% and 24.4 % respectively. The most widespread item of the programme was the boycott of hats (markets) for prevention of essential supplies to garden labourers under European planters and Government officers to bring them to their knees. In this respect both Hindus and Muslim united.

The Movement gained strength and momentum towards the end of 1921. The AICC's Civil Disobedience call of 4 and 5 November, though not implemented in Assam, created a stir in the province further inspiring the non-co-operators in their propaganda. Organisations like the Assam National Volunteer Corps consisting of Congress and Khilafat workers, Santi Sena and Sevak Sampradaya worked simultaneously. Nearly seventy thousand young men joined the organisations. Further, the third Jamiat-Ul-Ulema-E-Hind Conference and thirtysixth Session of the Indian National Congress held at Sylhet and Hyderabad respectively renewed the pledge of Non-violent Non-Co-operation and made the Movement in Assam more vigorous. The Movement was admittedly tarnished by some amount of violence and intimidation in different places. Volunteers challenged the police and forcibly rescued the persons arrested. In some places, threat, social ostracism and boycott of pro-government elements became widespread.

Government adopted an elaborate policy to contain the Movement, namely, restraint on the Press, organised counter-propaganda against Gandhi and Congress and persecution and repression of its supporters. As the native Press criticised Government atrocities and published critical articles written by Congressmen, the authorities imposed fines, demanded security deposits, seized copies of publication and sentenced editors and printers to imprisonment and fines. They also appointed loyalists for counter propaganda in urban and rural areas through public meetings and pamphlets condemning Gandhi and Congress and assuring the people that if the movement was withdrawn Swaraj would be established.

Further, the Congress Khilafat Volunteer Corps, Santi Sena and Sevak Sampradaya were declared unlawful associations under Section 16 of the Indian Criminal Law Amendment Act 1908. The whole province was brought under operation of the Prevention of Seditious Meeting Act 1911, the Press Act, the Police Act and Section 144 of Cr.P.C. was invoked vigorously. The deployment of Assam Rifles in demonstration marches and punitive expeditions and suppression of labour participation became the regular features of Government action. Houses of Khilafatists, Congressmen and their offices were searched, records seized or destroyed and buildings demolished and properties were forfeited. Workers were fined, imprisoned and ill-treated in Jails. European tea planters were utilised to suppress the tea garden labourers.

On 5 February 1922, the police fired upon a procession of about 3000 peasants at the Chouri Chaura village of Gorakhpur district of Uttar Pradesh. When their ammunition ran short the policemen took shelter in the Police Station. The agitated and angry crowd attacked and burnt the Police Station killing 22 policemen. Gandhi was altogether upset at the violence and unilaterally decided to suspend the entire Movement forthwith. Though the movement failed, its significance should not be lost sight of. Participation and suffering of large sections of the people imparted to it the character of an upheaval. Further, the events hurled Assam into the vortex of the national politics. The upsurge of the Movement continued to inspire successive generations of the people of Assam as elsewhere.

The Period of Parliamentary Politics 1921 – 1937 Congress a Divided House

The Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms had introduced Dyarchy in 1921. It came into force despite Congress opposition and non-co-operation. Division appeared among Congressmen regarding participation in election and Council Entry. One group under the leadership of Deshabandhu Chitta Ranjan Das, V. J. Patel, Hakim Ajmal Khan and Pandit Motilal Nehru wanted to take part in the elections to enter the Legislatures and wreck Dyarchy from within. Other Congressmen like Chakravarty Rajagopalachariar, Kasturiranga Ayangar and Patabhi Sitaramayya favoured complete boycott of elections. In June 1922 therefore, the AICC appointed the Civil Disobedience Enquiry Committee under Hakim Ajmal Khan to consider and report whether Civil Disobedience in some form or any other measure could be adopted and whether the party should participate in the elections.

The Committee made an assessment and reported that the country as a whole was not prepared for any Civil Disobedience Movement. As regards Assam, the consensus gathered during the Committee's itinerary was that no full-fledged agitation was feasible in the Brahmaputra Valley. Similar conclusion was drawn by the Central Khilafat Enquiry Committee which visited the province about the same time. Congress Committees were, however, given the liberty of launching such Movement on a limited nature on their own responsibility.

On the question of Council Entry, the leaders were almost equally divided, one group favouring Das's view and the other supporting Gopalachariar. The fight between pro-changers and no-changers, as they were called, reached its climax at the Thirtyseventh Congress Session of December 1922 held at Gaya when a clear schism appeared in the party. The delegates rejected Das's resolution for Council entry. He resigned presidency in the Session itself. The Congress Khilafat Swarajya Party was born on 7 January 1923 with Das as President and Motilal as General Secretary. The Delhi Congress of 1923, however adopted a face saving compromise formula. It permitted individual Congressmen of Swarajya Party to contest the elections and enter the Councils.

The majority of witnesses before the Civil Disobedience Enquiry Committee had opposed non-co-operation and civil disobedience. In Gaya Congress, the Brahmaputra Valley delegates led by Tarun Ram Phukan, APCC President and including Faiznur Ali, supported Chittaranjan. Phukan and most other non-co-operating lawyers joined the Swarajist group and returned to the bar. They formed the Assam Branch of the party on 25 July 1923 and decided to contest the Municipal Election. Tarun Ram Phukan, Rohini Kumar Choudhury and Gopinath Bordoloi were elected President, General Secretary and Assistant General Secretary respectively. Bishnu Ram Medhi, Dhaniram Talukdar, Jadav Chandra Das and Kamahkyaram Barua became members. This led to acute differences in the Assam Congress and Phukan was compelled to resign. Kualadhar Chaliha, Nabin Chandra Bordoloi and Hem Chandra Das were elected President, General Secretary and Assistant General Secretary respectively. Despite the opposition and boycott of the Congressmen in general, Dyarchy came into operation in Assam as there was no dearth of co-operators. Four elections were held under the scheme and the Assam Legislative Council functioned till the elections of 1937.

The Civil Disobedience Movement

The Madras Congress Session of 1927 had declared complete independence as India's goal. The Congress boycotted the all-white Simon Commission. This imprudent act of the Government provided a rallying ground for nationalists of all shades and created a universal indignation in the country. But the Calcutta Congress Session of 1928, in a volta face, adopted a resolution demanding Dominion Status on the basis of Nehru Committee Report. The resolution affirmed that if the Government failed to grant Dominion Status, the party would launch a Non-violent Non-Co-operation Movement for attainment of full independence. During the following year of waiting the Government made the trifling offer of a Round Table Conference. In the Lahore Congress Session of December 1929 a resolution was adopted reiterating the earlier demand of complete independence. It was further decided to observe 26th January 1930 as the Independence Day all over the country.

Conflicting views of Congress in Assam made it impossible for them to project a clear reaction to the Lahore resolution. However, till the celebration of Independence Day, the differences were not expressed in public. But soon the facade of unity and supremacy of the old guards disappeared. In the Surma Valley, there was unanimity for full implementation of the Lahore resolution. The party High Command asked all its representatives in central and provincial legislatures to resign forthwith and boycott all future elections. The AICC was directed to launch a Civil Disobedience Movement which would start with an 'independence' pledge. Accordingly, the Swarajists in the Assam Legislature Council also resigned.

The Assam Provincial Congress was a divided house so far as the Lahore Resolution on resignation and Council boycott were concerned. Tarun Ram Phukan APCC President, Gopinath Bordoloi and Rohini Kumar Choudhury openly opposed that part of the Civil Disobedience Programme. In the Surma Valley, despite differences, unanimity was reached on the issue. Gandhi's 241 mile Dandi March, which started on 12 March 1930 for violation of the Salt Laws was the beginning of the countrywide Civil Disobedience Movement. However, some of the elder leaders like Tarun Ram Phukan, Kuladhar Chaliha and Nabin Chandra Bordoloi were not willing to lead the Assam Congressmen. The old guards resigned on 27 January 1930.

Bishnu Ram Medhi and Muhammad Tayyabulla became the President and Secretary respectively of the APCC to "...to take Assam to the path of struggle..." Here again the Congressmen and the Swarajists differed. Some of the latter who earlier resigned, re-entered legislatures through bye elections. They also pleaded that Assam was not yet prepared for the Civil Disobedience Movement. The Congress asked them to resign but they went a step further by resigning from Congress itself. In the meantime the Movement was gathering momentum. In April 1930, the first batch of Satyagrahis left Sylhet for Noakhali and Midnapur for breaking Salt Laws. Students and other volunteers held meetings and processions, campaigned against payment of taxes, violated prohibitions under Section 144 Cr.P.C., courted arrest and boycotted schools and colleges. In this connection, the Hindu - Muslim divide was evident. A prominent Muslim League leader and President, Assam Provincial Muslim League, Munawar Ali said, "we condemn Civil Disobedience Movement in no unmistakable terms, so also we condemn some of the Bureaucratic methods which

have been adopted for its suppression. We condemn some of their methods and not the end".³⁵

The progressive unrest and student participation alerted the Government. The result was the famous Cunningham Circular of May 1930. J.R. Cunningham, Director of Public Instruction asked the heads of educational institutions to obtain from the pupils and their guardians an undertaking to abjure all political activities and to obey the rules and authority of the Education Department. But instead of suppressing the students, this step further incensed anti-British feelings and they took active parts in the various aspects of Civil Disobedience including agitation against the Circular. Repressive measures of the rulers resulted in the imprisonment and other forms of punishment of hundreds of workers, but they remained undaunted and implemented the programme in right earnest.

The British Government's declaration to hold a Round Table Conference at London with loyalists and excluding Congressmen caused further resentment. The Congress refused to recognise any such Conference and Assam witnessed "series of demonstrations and processions" held in defiance of prohibitory orders. Government repression only strengthened the anti-British sentiment. However, the first phase of the Movement ended without achieving the cherished result. Two months of deliberations of the first Round Table Conference also failed to bear fruit. In pursuance of the Gandhi-Irwin Pact of 5 March 1931, the Congress decided to suspend the Civil Disobedience Movement.

The Government agreed to invite the Congress representatives to the Second Round Table Conference which started on 7 September 1931 and was attended by Gandhi as its sole representative. But he returned home empty handed. The Congress Working Committee decided to resume the Movement on 1 January 1932. The Government adopted a tough attitude and affected arrest and imprisonment of a large number of Congressmen. The events of 1932-33 ran much on the same line as in the earlier years. But the national feeling was now more intense and more determined. The repression was ever so much more ruthless and the peoples' sufferings were much greater. In Assam the response was very enthusiastic. Three items of the programme received the greatest attention namely, boycott, non-payment of taxes and hoisting of the National Flag. More than a thousand persons including eight women were prosecuted and imprisoned.

The Congress condemned Ramsay MacDonald's Communal Award of 1932 but Gandhi could not devise any thing better than that. The party agreed to reservation of double the number of seats suggested by Macdonald as well as the benefit of a separate electorate for Depressed Classes. The British Government accepted the formula which came to be called Poona Pact. The Civil Disobedience Movement in fact petered out as Gandhi adopted diversionary strategy. His "purification fast", resolve to devote himself to the upliftment of the Harijans, removal of untouchability and individual Satyagraha replaced the Movement after his release from jail on 8 May 1933. In Assam the fourth Independence Day was observed in a lack-luster manner only in Nowgong and Sylhet. Emphasis was now laid on **social reconstruction rather than independence**. The Movement was officially terminated on 20 May 1934.

The Congress now accepted parliamentary form of Government and methods of agitation for remedy to the Indian political problem. Between the Non-Cooperation and Civil Disobedience Movements, Assam witnessed some new dimensions of people's awakening

in the form of peasant movements, working class struggle, Plantation labourer strike, agitation against Governments' Opium Policy, popularisation of Khadi, anti - untouchability, spread of communism and revolutionary terrorism especially after Bhagat Singh's martyrdom. These factors however, disappeared with the Civil Disobedience Movement.

The Period of Provincial Autonomy

Mainly on the recommendation of the Simon Commission, the British Government unilaterally decided to replace Dyarchy in the provinces by 'Autonomy' and to establish a Federal Government at the centre. The Government of India Act 1935 was passed by the British Parliament for the purpose. Elections were held in February 1937. In Assam the Congress emerged as the largest single party in the Legislative Assembly. Earlier the Congress High Command had decided not to accept Government responsibility in provinces wherein it could not obtain electoral majority. This left the field open for Sir Muhammad Saadulla who formed a Coalition Cabinet on 1 April 1937. His team consisted of his supporters, the Muslim Party, United People's Party and the Progressive Party. The Saadulla Government started functioning amidst strong opposition and antagonism of the Congress which observed the Assembly's inaugural day as Anti-Constitution Day.

The period from 1937 to 1947 witnessed intense parliamentary activities, though often of a shady character, aimed at petty political gain for the Congress and the Muslim League. No issue was discussed without a communal and racial tinge and vehemence. The League's ambition had already crystallised into an attitude of separatism for which the fear of Hindu and Congress domination were greatly responsible. The Congress under leadership of Gopinath Bordoloi entered the Assembly with the noble ideal that his party's "... policy is more important than winning the seats and capture of fictitious majority in the legislatures". But it ended with the ignoble scramble for such majority and political power in the form of defection and tricky toppling of Cabinets.

The Provincial Muslim League, the main contender for power in Assam, had started its parliamentary career in an humble way with four members only. But by 1938, it consolidated the Muslims under its control with 33 out of 34 Muslim members who rallied round it under the leadership of Sir Saadulla. With short breaks totalling to less than two years, Saadulla was the Assam Premier and dominated the political scene from 1937 to 1946. The entire tenure of his office was characterised by Hindu-Muslim bitterness centering round land settlement, Line System, Grow More Food Scheme, Provincial Census of 1941, Anti-War Satyagraha and Quit India Movement. The Muslim League's demand for inclusion of Assam in East Pakistan is well known.

The Anti-War Satyagraha

The Viceroy's offer of expansion of his Council with the addition of more Indian members to it and his offer of August 8, 1940 promising setting up of a representative Indian body to frame a new constitution did not appeal to the Congress. The party had declared in March 1940 that "nothing short of complete Independence would be acceptable to the people of India". It was decided to launch a Civil Disobedience Movement for the purpose without of course, fixing any programme. However, a few days later, Gandhi

formulated the Anti-War Satyagraha Plan in protest against the Government's unilateral declaration of India as a belligerent in the Second World War. The Muslim League's Lahore Session of 20 March 1940 also adopted the disastrous resolution demanding the creation of a sovereign Muslim home-land called Pakistan on the basis of Two Nation Theory.

As Assam was a Hindu majority province, its opposition to British war efforts was natural. But the Muslims were more concerned with the safeguarding of the interests of the community vis-à-vis the Hindus. The Assam Provincial Muslim League by a resolution of 18 September 1940 agreed to co-operate with the British. The Assam Premier Saadulla joined the Provincial War Aid Committee along with Rohini Kumar Chowdhury from the Brahmaputra Valley and Hirendra Chandra Chakravarty and Abdul Matin Choudhury from the Surma Valley. The Provincial Muslim League gave the Committee whole hearted support and the Saadulla Government donated one lakh of rupees to the War Fund. Eleven Municipalities and Local Boards resolved to contribute to the War Fund much to the criticism of large sections of the people of Assam. The Anti-War Satyagraha had three phases, from October 1940 to December 1940, from January 1941 to March 1941 and from April 1941 to the beginning of Quit India Movement. The programme failed to stir the people as much as the earlier uprisings. But it succeeded in recording a forceful moral protest against the imperial policy of involving India in the war. The Satyagraha was suspended in December 1941 in view of escalation of the war to India.

The Quit India Movement

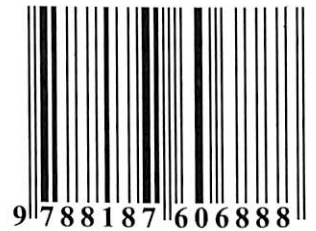
Early in 1942, war situation worsened for the British through the fall of Burma at the hands of the Azad Hind Fauz of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose. This national army quickly proceeded to Indian soil. Through the Cripp's Mission of 1942, the British Government offered Dominion Status to the country at the end of the war. But the offer was rejected by the Congress thus closing the door for negotiation. The party now went on a war path and the Working Committee adopted the famous Quit India Resolution on 14 July 1942 which was endorsed by the A.I.C.C. on 8 August. Though the Movement was supposed to be non-violent, it did not remain so as the Government adopted a policy of persecution and repression from the morning of 9 August.

The Movement in Assam, as in other places, was initially peaceful. But soon disruption of military supply bases and postal and rail communications, attacks on Government properties and police stations, sabotage and incendiarism, mail dacoities, establishment of parallel Governments, organisation of Santi Senas and clashes between the public and the police turned the Movement violent despite Gandhi's disapproval. The most interesting feature of the event was the absence of any blue-print of organisation and plan of action. Young workers became the only link between the Congress and the people through their underground organisations. The Quit India Movement failed to compel the Government to leave the country. As observed by a historian,

The revolutionary movement which had begun early in the century as well as the non-violent Satyagraha which Gandhi launched in 1920, both came to an end almost simultaneously... The last battle for India's freedom began almost immediately after far beyond

29. Dutt, K.N., *Landmarks of the Freedom Struggle in Assam*, Reprint 1998, p.45.
30. Pal, Kristodas(Ed.), *The Hindu Patriot*, 7 September 1874, cited in K. Deb's Speech in Assam Legislative Council, 1924, Vol.4., p.590 and Guha, p.28.
31. *History of Freedom Movement Record*, cited in Bhuyan, Arun Chandra and Sibopada De (Eds.), *Political History of Assam*, Volume Two, p.14.
32. Gopal, Ram, *The Indian Muslims*, p.337.
33. Sastri, Biswanaarayan and Promode Chandra Bhattacharjee, *This is Assam*, p.16.
34. For details see,
 Government of India File No.59 of December 1920,
 Home Political Fortnightly Report on Assam,
 Assam Secretariat File No. Judicial B., December 1924,
 No.233 – 246.,
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