

GANDHIAN MOVEMENTS AND MASS PARTICIPATION IN ASSAM

Monalisa Ghosh

Research Scholar, Department of Assamese, Visva-Bharati, West Bengal, India

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ABSTRACT

In 1921 Gandhiji came to Assam on the invitation of middle-class Assamese and the movement spread towards the grass root. It was true that the charismatic character of Mahatma attracted Assamese to involve in national movement mentally Mahatma created a history in Dibrugarh. When Gandhiji fired the British clothes and things, whole Assam was flooded with the tide of anti-British movement. The agitation opened the path to Swaraj. The three movements- Non-Co-operation, Civil Dis-Obedience and lastly Quit India led by Gandhi made the Assamese revolt a real blow against the British. Common people including women and youth involved deeply in the Gandhian Movement. Student Sector also participated actively by agitation, picketing, boycotting foreign goods and with other organized programs.

KEYWORDS: *Swaraj, Charisma, Boycott, Sabha, Samiti, Bhadrak, Satyagrahi, Reformatory, Revolutionary, Hartal*

INTRODUCTION

In the first half of the 20th century when the world history was monstrous, Indian history was also extremely agitated. On one hand we get mass participation in domestic politics i.e. different types of mass movement, demonstration to remove the British from India and on the other hand, the impact of the world are reflected on the life of the Indians in 1914 when the first world war started and after two or three years we see mass awakening in India Amalesh Tripathy states in his book 'Freedom Struggle' Lakhnau Pact which was signed in 1915 creates firstly the separation of Hindu and Muslim and later it brings the communalism in India.

With the ending of World War I the world politics has been changed. It has a great impact on national awakenings. In this positive atmosphere of mass awaking in the month of September in 1920, a conference of Congress held in Kolkata. On 4th September Gandhi announces to non-cooperate with the British and it is passed in Kolkata conference unanimously on 9th September. Gandhi is accepted as the leader of this movement. It seems to be a bright age of movement against the British.

One may say the movement of 1857 is the starting of the freedom movement in India. But it is not a part of the national movement. It is a fact that the expression of agitation against the British was first shown by this movement. But after the establishment of National Congress in 1885 anti-British movement got its own shape. We may divide the Indian freedom struggle into three phases such as

Phase I -- 1885 to 1905

Phase II -- 1905 to 1921

Phase III-- 1921 to 1947

This discussion will concentrate on the phase of 1921 to 1947. But we should remember that the Gandhian movements came to an end in 1942.

Gandhi and Non-Co-operation in Assam: In the month of June in 1918 when Montagu Chelmsford law was passed, Indians became demoralised. All hopes were in vain. In the month of February in 1919 Rowlatt Law was passed and the government has been empowered much. In the effect of it, the Jallian walabag massacre took place.

In the midst of these events, Mahatma Gandhi arrived with an enormous charisma. Jyotiprasad Agarwala wrote in his 'Mahatma Gandhi Jiban Sonborani' - "*aji teon ati nabajugor abatarana kori bharatak jagai tulichhe. shata shata bachar apon pahari shui thaka bharate aji nabajiban pai jagi uthichhe. bharate naba jiban paichhe. teon kon? kar gahin gambhir banie amak elah- topnirpara chamak khubai tulichhe? teonk naam aji biswa-bisrut? jar sanjibani mantrai jugjugantarar atyachar, utpiranat jarjarit hai apon pahari thaka patit jatik eti nabin bhabere bolia kori jagai dichhe. jar tyagor jalanta adarshat aji biswabasirshir donkhai porichhe. aji jar abhrabhedhi himalayarpara kanyakumarika aru brahmarpara bharatar pashchimor sesh simalaike nagare nagare gane-gane, mandire-machhjide, hindu -muchhalman, boudhdha-jaina- parchhi-khritane, shikkhit-ashikkhit, dhani-dukhia, bamun-chandal, tirota-munih, deka burha, sakolobei ei karmajogi tyagorabatarwarup, satyar stambhaswarup, dukhuni bharatar pran swarup, samanya edukhori kaporere ga- dhaka sanyasir jayodhwini korichhe. een haichhe karmabir mohandas karamchand gandhi. tomar uddesye shata shata sabhaktire seba.*"¹ Thousands of students of Assam departed from schools, colleges and joined in Gandhi's Non-Cooperation Movement. The statistics will be served later. In 1921 Gandhiji came to Assam on the invitation of middle-class Assamese and the movement spread towards the grass root. The Police arrested five persons at the time of picketing at Naogaon and as a result of which Lakshmidhar and Chandranath started a hartal program in Jorhat. It was true that the charismatic character of Mahatma attracted Assamese to involve in national movement mentally. Mahatma created a history in Dibrugarh. It can be quoted from Jyotiprasad again "*mahatma gandhi jaoar pachhat asamat utsaha prabal sont boi galo. karmisakale digun utsahere kam koribalai lagilo. tirutai jantarat dwigun utsahere hat chalabolo dhorile. chariophale utsaha aru karmar sont prabahita hoboloi dhorile. bohut din shui thaka asamiya jatie akou ebar sar pale.*"² Dibrugarh was the center of British investment. All the tea gardens, oil refineries, and coal mines were situated in Dibrugarh and people of that locality were more or less depended on the Men at the top played with the fates of millions and Bengal parted. Bhadrlok Bengalis not showed their agitation for partition and gradually isolated from their power. Communal award and Poona Pact deprived the Bhadrlok to maintain their political power as agrarian politics made Muslim more powerful.

The year 1921 is very important in the political history of Assam. The middle class who was basically silent and totally inactive in political participation awakened slightly. It was written in 'Congress Jayanti' in 1935 - "*there was a revolution in Assam in 1920, the national awakening and political movements which emerged in India awakened the mass of Assam.*"³ But when Gandhiji fired the British clothes and things, whole Assam was flooded with the tide of anti-British movement. The agitation opened the path to Swaraj." *it was Gandhiji's advice that the agitation in Brahmaputra valley*

¹Jyotiprasad Rachanaboli, Ed. Hiren Gohain, Asom Prakashan Parishad, Guwahati, Jan 2013, p 332

²Jyotiprasad Rachanaboli, Ed. Hiren Gohain, Asom Prakashan Parishad, Guwahati, Jan 2013, p 365

³Assom Congress Jayanti Vol, 24th Dec, 1935, p 7

was given primarily an anti-opium orientation.”⁴ It is to be mentioned that the labour movement of Assam was encouraged by the non-cooperation movement. However, the tea gardens were not much involved at the time of non-cooperation. But later the strikes of tea gardens and oil refineries were influenced by that mass movement. When Gandhi was arrested in 1922, the movement stopped and it is very painful that the middle class not only stopped the movement but they were back to their own standpoint.

Chandranath was wholehearted supporter of Gandhi but he also revolts against Gandhi when he stopped his movement. But Chandranath was then in ill bed in Puri. He had nothing to do. Chandranath was in view that if Congress working committee goes through the path of Gandhi’s spirituality, then it will take thirty-three crore years for the independence of thirty-three crores.⁵ From 1922 when non-cooperation movement stopped there was no leader in Assam and there reigned a total hopelessness. Moulana Abul Kalam Azad said -This had so demoralized political worker that it would take many years before public enthusiasm could again be roused.⁶ Bhadrolok Bengalies not showed their agitation for partition and gradually isolated from their powers strength was 1,281,810 in 1920 - 21 but it also decreased in 1,239,524 in 1921 – 1922. After abating of the movement, Assam or whole India was disappointed. Many of the youths, devoted to this movement started to revolt against this decision of retreating to the pavilion and they also searched for the alternative way of revolt and which of course was terrorism. In 1923 Swaraj Party was established. Men at the top played with the fates of millions and Bengal parted. Bhadrolok Bengalies not showed their agitation for partition and gradually isolated from their power. Communal Award and Poona Pact deprived the Bhadrlok to maintain their political power as agrarian politics made Muslim more powerful.

These were two forces working at a time -- one aiming at abolishing the British rule any way and the other bargaining the politics of compromise or settlement. A new power emerged on the conflict between these two policies and that is the communist party. The activity of the terrorist workers is less in Assam in comparison with that of the other states of India during 1920 - '30.

Civil disobedience Movement and Gandhi in Assam: The year 1930 is the beginning of the second phase of the freedom struggle. That is the period of civil disobedience movement. Gandhi broke the salt law on 12th March 1930 with 79 people. Students participation in this journey was remarkable. Gandhi was arrested on 5th May and whole Assam revolt against the British. Especially the students and youth made a jihad. Their protest participation was remarkable. For that reason, the education officer of Assam announced a circular to stop the political participation of the students. Then there was another protest to disobey the Kanningham Circular. Every one determined to stop to send their wards in government schools. Civil Disobedience Movement was much explored by the protest movement against this circular and British Was compelled to make the laws lucid to some extent.

⁴Guha Amalendu, Planter Raj to Swaraj, ICHR, Jan 1977, p126

⁵Kalita Dandinath, Karmabir Chandranath, Tejpur, 1845, p60

⁶ Azad Moulana Abdul Kalam, India Wins Freedom, Calcutta, 1964, p18

Phookan opposed the militant programs of the Congress. Kuldhar Chaliha, Navin Chandra Bardoloi disagreed and wanted to proceed their participation further. Perhaps that is why they could not be eligible for the leadership of civil disobedience Movement in Assam. On Jan, 27 1930, old leaders of APCC resigned and Bishnuram Medhi was elected the president and Tayyabulla the secretary to lead the struggle. The nature of civil disobedience was serious by boycotting of foreign clothes, drugs and closing the business centers which dealt with these products. Brahmaputra valley was involved in this movement rapidly and honestly. Sylhet was involved by attempting in Satyagraha. The first batch of Satyagrahis started their journey on April 6 to back the salt law on the Bengal Seacoast. It is notable that Mahendra Hazarika of Naughton helped organize peasants for the salt Satyagraha in Midnapore, Bengal.

With hartal and boycotting, picketing at the governmental organizations or institutions such as schools, colleges, courts etc. was also running. There were many processions in Sylhet. There were many voluntary youth associations such as Tarun Sangha, Yuvak Sangha, Sabuj Sangha, Chhatra Sammilan, Brati Balak Samiti. The youth from those Associations are Satyagrahi volunteers. At this moment in the month of April, the agitated youth attacked Chattagram Arms House. Garhwal soldiers of Peswar attacked Indian native people. But it is astonishing that Gandhi was silent enough on this occasion. Gandhi said to a journalist - *"a soldier who disobeys an order to fire breaks the oath which he has taken and renders himself guilty of criminal disobedience. i cannot ask officials and soldiers disobey for when i am in power, i shall in all likelihood make use of those some soldiers. if i taught them to disobey i should be afraid that they might do the same when i am in power."*⁷

This view seems to be very selfish. People who worship Gandhi's heroism were shocked no doubt on that remark. However, Gandhi was arrested for the second time on 5th may 1930. It was said government *"while mr.gandhi has continued to deplore these outbreaks of violence, his protests against his unruly followers have become weaker and weaker and it is evident that he is unable to control them"*⁸In 1931 Gandhi-Arwin pact was signed. According to govt. statistics 60 thousand Congressmen were arrested and according to congress statistics the number was 90 thousand. There were distinguished types of reaction on the event in Assam. The youth of Assam could not accept this H.K. Barpujari made a comment on this-*"when the pact was officially announced it provoked mixed reactions. The younger generation regarded it to be of little value unless an amnesty was obtained for all political prisoners including revolutionaries. but the older section accepted it as a move in the right direction."*⁹ The Brahmaputra valley was worried about Gandhi arrestation. On 7th may T.R phookan spoke at a protest meeting that school and college student need not involve in hartals. In spite of that between 6 to 15 of May the high schools of North Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh, Golaghat, Sibsagar, Nazeia, Zorehat, Nowgong, Tezpur, Guwahati, Nalbari, Palasbari and Dhanbad went on hartal for distinguished periods.¹⁰

It is remarkable that there was also women participation. Village women had to be congratulated for their help during the freedom struggle. Guneswani Devi of Nowgong was one of the women who went to jail for taking part in movement¹¹ The participation in civil disobedience movement also might be shown by a table-

⁷ Mukherjee Hiren, India's Struggle for Freedom, Calcutta, 1962p182

⁸ Ibid,p182

⁹ Barpujari H.K, Political History of Assam, vol .II, Publication Board, Assam p180

¹⁰ Guha Amalendu, Planter Raj to Swaraj, ICHR, Jan 1977, p139

¹¹ Ibid,p191

Table 1: No of Persons Arrested and Convicted for Civil Disobedience

District	Year Ending	31 st March	1931	1 st April 1930	13 th Feb 1931
	Arrested Under Ordinances	Arrested Under Penal Law	Total Arrested	Total Arrested	Total Convicted
Sylhet	467	312	779	892	616
Cachar	8	15	23	22	18
Goalpara	91	3	94	160	67
Kamrup	252	47	299	522	277
Darrang	11	20	31	50	14
Nowgong	96	222	318	555	130
Sibsagar	58	-	58	98	60
Lakhimpur	46	3	49	74	37
Total	1029	622	1651	2373	1219

(Data has been taken from 'Planter Raj to Swaraj' by Amalendu Guha)

Civil disobedience movement collapsed temporarily on 8th may 1933 and finally on 7th April 1934. In April 1934 Gandhi had a visit to Assam. Though that visit ended quickly Congressmen in Assam left their participation in politics and Gandhi also resigned the Congress membership.

In 1935, according to Indian Law 26 Assamese own their seats unanimously in the election, in 1937 Congress was the majority but it could not occupy legislature. By virtue of election procedure, Shadullha became the leader of the opposition on 1st April 1937 and it has existed up to September 1938. As Congress was divided in Assam, Gopinath Bardoloi was the next boatman but he was tailed to make Assamese happy. He imposed taxation in tea gardens and labor class revolt against Bardoloi. A new problem arrived on beginning of the line system and Bardoloi also resigned.

Call for Quit India and Assam: As Gandhi was against of any constitutional change during World War II, he was criticised from many angles and from many forum. As a result, communist party emerged in Assam and they made a protest movement with the socialists against War. In 1941 the communist party became stronger in Assam.

In the meantime, Sir Staford Cripps came to India with his proposal which was refused by the Congress. Congress called for Quit India on August, 8,1942. Next day Gandhi was arrested. Before arrestation, he spread the oath of 'do or die'. It was converted in massive mass movement rapidly. Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose also made an enormous excitement among the youth.

Women participation in August Movement was also remarkable. On 26th of August British attacked on mass during the armless procession. Kalai Kong and Hemram Bara have died on spot Tilak Deka of *Shanti Bahini* were killed by police on 28th. Police again attacked on 500 women who protested the ruthless killing. A pregnant woman gave birth to an immature child after being tortured. This child has died after three days. Bhogeswari Phookanani, ThagiramSuta, BaliramSuta killed before the bullets of police. On 20th September four women, Kanaklata Barua, Khahuli Nath and Tileswari Barua have sacrificed their lives.

Chandraprabha Saikia and Amal Prabha Das were tortured being arrested. Ratna Phookani, the granddaughter of Bhogeswari Phookanani was an arms collector of Naogaon district and pusalata Das were tortured ruthlessly¹².

Official Statistics of Congress Disturbance in Assam during August Movement

Table 2

Nature of Case	No
Police Firing	4
Fatal Casualties	15
Non-Fatal Casualties(Infllicted)	19
Non-Fatal Casualties(suffered)	17
Police-Stations Destroyed/Damaged	4
Government Buildings Destroyed/Damaged	64
Other Public Building Destroyed/Damaged	66
Private Buildings Destroyed/Damaged	61
Bomb Explosions	10
Explosives Discovered without Damage	9
Cases of Sabotage to Roads	43
Case of Imposition of Collective Fine	1
Defection from Government Service	Nil
Arrests Made	2,707
Estimated Loss to Government	Rs 2,84,582
Estimated Loss to other Parties	Rs 1,94,847
Collective fine Imposed	Rs 3,39,487

(Data has been taken from 'Planter Raj to Swaraj' by Amalendu Guha)

Students' Participation: Students' movement is a very significant and important episode in the freedom struggle of Assam. History of students' participation began in Assam in 1869. It is the early stage of students' Movement. In 1916 under the leadership of Chandranath Sharma, the first students' Organisation was formed and a student convention was held. This is chaired by Lakshminath Bezbaruah. The important members of this organization are Chandranath Sharma, Ambikanath Bora, Heremba Prasad Baruah, Gyananath Bora, Sarveswar Sharma, Kotoki Umesh Chowdhury, and Daiba Chandra Talukdar. This Assam students' convention unified all the students of Assam and it had a great role during the Non-Cooperation Movement led by Mahatma Gandhi. Statistics says the total strength of college students in 1919 - 1920 was 52,486. In 1921 - 22 it decreased in 45,933 and in secondary schools student. The students of college left their colleges and started agitation, picketing, a boycott organized and attended sabhas and samities. They matured the non-cooperation movement. They collected a fund for movement, they picketed alcohol, foreign goods etc. The students of schools also followed their elders. The students of Tezpur, Nalbari, Rangia, Jorhat, Dibrugarh, Goalpara actively participated in the movement. Assamese students were also greatly motivated by Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose. According to Subhas "youth movements are not reformatory but revolutionary. the youths of India are no longer content with handing over all responsibility to their older leaders and sitting down with folded hands or following like dumb driver cattle. they have realized that it is for them to create new free, great and powerful India".¹³ Nikhil Bharat Chhatra Federation also existed in Assam. students' leader Dadhi Mahanta, Kirti Bardalai, Chidananda Saikia, Dhireswar Kalita, Bhadra Krishna Goswami, Nandeswar Talukdar, jadu Saikia, Prafulla Goswami took initiative to melt Assom Chhatra Sammilan with Nikhil Bharat Chhatra Federation and it was renamed by 'Assam Chhatra Federation'. In 1940 Sushama Valley Chhatra Federation and Shilang

¹² Swadhinata Andolan Aru Assam, Ed. By Ramesh Chandra Kalita, Assom Prakashan Parishad, Guwahati, 2008, p140

¹³ Bakshi S.R, Revolutionaries and the British Raj, Atlantic Publishers' p9

Chhatra Federation mingled with Assam Chhatra Federation and made All Assam Students' Confederation which was much influenced by communist ideology.

CONCLUSIONS

Before the establishment of Congress, the Non-Co-operation Movement was led by the Youth in Assam. It was admitted by Congress Jayanti of 1935, though the senior members of Assam Association protested, there was a revolution in Assam in 1920 as Non-Co-operation Movement emerged spontaneously. Actually, people of Assam were much motivated by Gandhi and Gandhian ideology from far away. Gandhi seems to be a spiritual idol for them. So, when in 1921 Gandhi came to Assam, the platform for reception and acceptance of Gandhi was ready. Though Non-Co-operation Movement was considered as a first mass movement, Ganga Gobinda Phookan of Shibsagar strongly protested. According to Benudhar Sharma, the main target of G.G.Phookan was to praise of the British and to criticise Gandhi's Non-Co-Operation. Maybe Non-Co-operation Movement failed but its impact was deep. Boycotting of foreign goods made the British economically ill. According to Michael Edwards-*"the British felt that they had little to fear from Gandhi himself for they soon recognized him for what he was- an anti-western reformer. as long as Gandhi was in control of the congress they knew they had an ally."*¹⁴ Civil disobedience Movement had two phases. These two phases had their own constructive role. Gandhi organized and led successfully the Movement. As the situation demanded Gandhi again started the second phase but suddenly postponed the Movement. And it was a big blunder for the excited mob. For this act he was strongly criticised by Subhas Bose and Patel. They had an opinion that-*"we are clearly of opinion that Mr. Gandhi as an apolitical leader has failed."*¹⁵ The then leaders of Assam were Bishnuram Medhi, Jadab Prasad Chaliha, Dhaniram Talukdar, Hem Chandra Barua, Omiya Kumar Das et.al. They were not only surprised but dissatisfied.

Before Quit India Movement started in Assam, all the top level leaders were arrested. But the tide of the movement was as it is. A spontaneous flow of mass participation was running. And it was because Gandhi could inject the preaching of the movement among the mass. August movement was failed but it gave a positive message. The journey towards independence was much enhanced after this mass movement.

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