

# IMPACT OF QUIT INDIA RESOLUTION IN ASSAM: A HISTORICAL STUDY

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The Indian National Movement was undoubtedly one of the biggest mass movements modern societies has ever seen. It was a movement which galvanized millions of people of all classes and ideologies into political action and brought into knees the mighty colonial empire. The Political developments of the years immediately preceding 1942 movement in Assam, were characterized as much by sharpening of the local conflicts of interests as by a clearer pattern of their entanglements with the ideological conflicts serving as prelude to the great national struggle. Yet, there were no clear ideological alignments in terms of party organization. The Congress dominated the field but leaving the Congress and communal elements apart, broadly speaking, it was the freedom fighters who swarmed the two valleys-Brahmaputra and Barak. 2

## The Scene of Assam:

When the War broke out and the viceroy made the proclamation of 3 September 1939, according to which he declared India a belligerent and called upon its people to cooperate in Britain's War efforts, a Congress Coalition Ministry headed by Gopinath Bordoloi was working in the province. The APC discussed the situation arising out of the proclamation and expressed satisfaction at the attitude taken by the CWC towards the War. Jorhat District Committee even condemned the action of Government regarding on circulation of Defence of India Rules in Dibrugarh.<sup>3</sup> Yet the response of the Assam Congress to the call from CWC for resignation of Congress ministries in the provinces was lukewarm. Difference of opinion took place among the APC leaders on this point. Bogged down by local problems of land, language and religion and having a section of its member haunted by the spectre of Muslim Separatism, the APC began to fumble. A section led by its president, Md. Tayebullah, opposed the continuance of the Bordoloi ministry. Whereas others wanted to check the Muslim League, because they believed that it had been conspiring to make Assam a Muslim predominant province. Subhas Chandra Bose also opposed the resignation of the ministry. 4 Gandhi though appreciated Bose's view held that the matter should be left to Assam's discretion.<sup>5</sup> Finally the APC (Assam Provincial Congress) discussed the matter in a meeting held on 7th November, 1939 and decided to direct the ministry to tender its resignation not later than 15<sup>th</sup> November. After Bordoloi's resignation leading members of Assam Congress planned a fresh plan to install a new coalition ministry headed by Nichols Roy with necessary Congress support.<sup>6</sup> Ultimately, Saadulla ministry emerged again on the scene which earlier headed a coalition ministry and remained in power from 1<sup>st</sup> April, 1937 to 18<sup>th</sup> September, 1938. It took charge on 17<sup>th</sup> November 1939.

Saadulla had been allowed to form ministry in Assam on his tacit assurance that he would support Britain's War efforts in all possible manner. On the other hand a vigorous campaign was started to the Assam by the Congress against the war efforts. *Satyagraha* committees were formed in order to propagate anti-war message as per the direction of Gandhiji and Congress. This anti-war propaganda gained much popularity in Assam.

Meanwhile the newly installed Saadulla ministry was beset with a number of problems. One was the immigration of people from the eastern part of Bengal. The Assamese viewed this to be a threat to their culture and linguist identity. In July,1940, the Saadulla government contributed rupees one lakh to the war fund and adopted various devices to extract more money from the people for that purpose. Salaries of government officials were deducted; war-saving schemes of Assam Railways and Trading Company (ARTC) were introduced; and film-shows and archery competitions were arranged at different places. In some areas the *Mouzadars* even refused to accept the revenues from the peasants, unless the latter made a substantial contribution to the warfund. When the Local Boards were required to contribute, 11 Congress members of the Tezpur Local Board led by Jyoti Prasad Agarwala resigned in a body to record their protest against the contribution of Rs. 3,000/- to the war fund. Even village people in meetings places like Cheng a (Barpeta) used to hold resolving not to contribute to the war-fund.

The student community of Assam offered resistance to all the efforts of the government to raise money for the war-fund. The situation arising out of the immigration problem compelled Gopinath Bordoloi to proceed personally to Wardha and to seek permission from the Congress High Command for the legislators of Assam to resume their Assembly duties, which he obtained. The Cotton College students, who protested against rising of war-funds by holding a science exhibition in their laboratory, went on strike on 6<sup>th</sup> December 1941, following an incident of a student, being assaulted by an organizer of that exhibition. The students launched procession which was *lathi* charged by the police. Altogether 40 students were injured and nearly 200 were assaulted. Anticipating that the Saadulla ministry would soon collapse, the Congress legislators hatched a plan to install a Congress coalition ministry headed by R.K. Choudhury, who after the *lathi*-charge on the Cotton College students resigned from his ministership in the Saadulla Government. Unable to sustain protest and denunciation from people all over Assam, Saadulla tendered resignation as the Chief Minister on 12<sup>th</sup> December, 1941.

# Quit India Resolution and Its Impact on Assam:

8 August is a memorable date in the political history of India as well as Assam. On that day in 1942 the AICC adopted a momentous resolution which caused an outbreak of hostilities between the Congress and the Government, Earlier the Working Committee prepared and passed a resolution on 5 August which retained all the cardinal features of the Wardha resolution of 14 July but it went a step further in definitely resolving to start "a mass struggle on nonviolent lines on the widest possible scale...under the leadership of Gandhi." <sup>16</sup>

The 'Quit India' Resolution of the AICC (All India Congress Committee) created great excitement throughout the country. Gandhiji's call to the Indians was 'Do or Die'. But, before the AICC could start with the programme, the Government struck the first crushing blow by arresting Gandhi, the members of the CWC (Congress Working Committee) and a large number of Congressmen throughout the country on the very following day of the passing of the 'Quit India' Resolution. It also declared the Congress an illegal body. Such repressive measures created wide resentment. There were strikes, *hartals* and demonstrations all over the country. The British Government attempted to repress it by *lathi*-charge and firing. After the arrest of Gandhiji and other Congress leaders, the country became almost leaderless overnight. But the Mahatma foresaw such a situation would translate the 'Quit India' Resolution into action and guide the movement in the absence of the popular leaders. The resolution itself made a clear provision that the struggle must be carried on, leaders or no leaders, by the local Congress workers either individually or in groups. That being the mandate the local leaders in different Provinces and Districts drew up programmes to carry forward the movement to its final goal, which was a free India, free from the British tutelage.

In Assam also, all important Congress leaders were thrown behind bars within a week of declaration of the 'Quit India' Resolution. Following the centre's instructions, the Government of Assam also arrested the Assam Provincial Congress Committee (APCC) office-bearers and the leaders of the Congress on 9<sup>th</sup> August 1942. APCC President Md. Tayyebullah, Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, Liladhar Barua, Bishnuram Medhi, Dr. Harekrishna Das, Debeswar Sarma and many other Congress leaders were arrested. These arrests were followed by massive arrest of other leaders throughout Assam. Gopinath Bordoloi and Siddhinath Sarma were arrested on 15<sup>th</sup> August, 1942, on their way back from the Bombay session of the All India Congress Committee (AICC). They were arrested at Dhubri. The arrests of other leaders like, Omeo Kumar Das, Mahadev Sarma and Pitambar Deva Goswami followed suit the process lasting up to October.

Apart from the Congress Organizations, other organizations subscribing to the Congress ideals were also declared unlawful by the Government. On the 9<sup>th</sup> August, Congress socialist party, Hindustan Red Army and other 38 organizations were declared as unlawful by the British Government. This was followed by repressive measures on the people. But these could not deter the patriotic zeal of the people. With stronger determination, the masses of Assam initiated a

struggle of such dimension that the functioning of the Provincial Government almost came to a standstill for a few months.

The news of leader's arrests and imprisonment spread like wild fire within a very short time. Though the movement was designed to be non-violent and peaceful in character yet in certain cases, though few, it got out of hand and the people out of sheer zealousness took the lead themselves indulging in acts of violence such as setting fire to police stations and Government buildings, destroying bridges and telegraph lines, putting barricades on vital communication systems, pulling off railway tracks etc. Regarding the spate of violence an official report had this to say: "From the end of August onwards sporadic arson and interference with railway lines and telegraphs occurred in the Assam Valley districts, particularly Kamrup, Nowgong, Darrang (Present Sonitpur), Sibsagar, mainly in that chronological order". But by and large the movement remained predominantly peaceful. The Tezpur sub-division (now Tezpur is the head quarter of Sonitpur) in the district of Darrang among others provided such an example that shines bright in the pages of the history of India's freedom movement.

To face the emerging war situation, the Congress adopted the following strategy; without challenging the Government authority directly, it would try to strengthen its volunteer wing particularly in the rural areas, mainly to carry out constructive work and for maintaining peace and order. In the early part of 1942, the APCC (Assam Provincial Congress Committee) had built up an efficient volunteer organization, e.g., the *Santi Sena*, consisting of about, 20,000 workers mostly drawn from the rural areas. The *Santi Sena* was trained to meet any emergency arising out of the war situation. The functions of the *Santi Sena* were:

- (a) to organize night vigilance,
  - (b) to give first aid in times of emergency,
  - (c) to conduct campaigns for self-sufficiency in food and clothing and
  - (d) to look after *khadi* productions.<sup>20</sup>

The Santi Sena organization was not a direct challenge to the Government authority; nor were they to co-operate with the Government in its War efforts and with the police against the freedom fighters. Gradually the Santi Sena organization became so popular that it posed a challenge to the existence of the parallel official bodies like the Village Defence Party, and proved to be a useful instrument of the Congress. This led the Government to declare the Santi Sena organization unlawful along with the Congress Organization at all levels; the Government also seized many of the Santi Sena camps. R.K.L Nandkeolyar, an AICC Inspector of Congress Committees and allied organizations, commenting on the Santi Sena of Assam said that it would be able to give a good account of itself in putting down the anti-social elements and dacoits.

Youths and students also played a very active role in these activities, whether open or underground, in both the Valleys. A number of young men belonging to the Assam Valley and studying in Calcutta and other places outside the province soon joined the leaders and took up organizational work. In fact, after the arrest of the top leaders, it was they, who had been organizing the protest movements through strikes, *hartals*, picketing, processions and Sabotage activities. It was particularly they, who took the lead in organizing the *Santi-Sena Bahinis*.

# Impact of 42 Movements in Different Places of Assam:

The Quit India movement had its far-reaching effects in every districts and places of Assam. Assam's share of contributions in achieving the object of the movement was the largest.

In Kamrup district, the situation took a serious turn after 15<sup>th</sup> August 1942. People took to large-scale arson and destruction of Government property. Houses belonging to *mauzadars*, government pleaders, military contractors, *mandals* and some government collaborators were attacked and destroyed, particularly in the Barpeta sub-division. A most serious and organized attack took place at Sarbhog on 26<sup>th</sup> August, 1942. A group of people under the leadership of Brojanath Sarmah made a mid-night raid on the aerodrome at Sapna on the bank of the river Beki which was under construction since July 1942. They destroyed military dumps, the MES (Military Engineering Service) office, labourers, sheds, etc. At the same time another' section of the crowd attacked Sarbhog town and destroyed the post office, the police station, the inspection bungalow, etc. The incident was described officially as "an organized mob uprising" and the authorities finally rounded up a total of forty-three suspects but most of them were later released for lacks of evidence.<sup>21</sup>

On 25<sup>th</sup> September police and the mob clashed at three places near Pathsala on the occasion of the observance of "Nowgong Day." People mostly youths were provoked when the police after arresting three local Congress workers tried to drag them out to Pattacharkuchi from a meeting held at Jalah.

The Quit India movement took a serious turn in Nowgong. Nowgong retained its earlier reputation of being the most active district in promoting the cause of the Nation. The Bordoloi Committee Report characterized Nowgong as the political laboratory of the people of Assam in 1942. All the tactics from non-violent non-cooperation to uprooting of railway lines, destroying of the bridges and burning of the Government buildings, etc. were tried. Public meetings were held almost in every place for the purpose of explaining to the people the object and the true meaning of the Bombay resolution.

The administrative authority was forced to take the help of armed troops to deal with the situation in the district. Some areas of the district were declared as disturbed areas. The Inspector General of police reported that there was an atmosphere of mass rebellion in Nowgong district. Police

opened fire on the *Satyagrahis* in four different places, viz, Barhampur, Bebejia, Jongalbalahu and Barapuzia causing death to five persons and injury to a large number of Participants in the movements.

Soon after the arrest of the national and provincial leaders on 9<sup>th</sup> August, the people of the district expressed their resentment and protested against the repressive measures through meetings and processions. On 26<sup>th</sup> August 1942, on the ground of damage to the Bebejia Bridge, a military party raided Bebejia village near Nowgong and arrested about 400 persons including a large number of women. In Jongalbalah Ugarh village, near Raha, people became panicky over a rumor that more police forces would be coming to Nowgong from Guwahati. A group of people of the village apprehending police raid, started to cut the approach road to a bridge. Suddenly a military patrol party appeared from the eastern side and opened fire on them, killing two persons, viz, Hemoran Pator and Gunabhiram Bordoloi. Then came a most tragic killing of Tilok Deka, who used to guard the village at Barpuzia on 28<sup>th</sup> August 1942, at night, was shot dead by the military as he was blowing his horn to inform the villagers of their approach.

Along with the arrests of the Congress workers and leaders, the police also either destroyed or occupied all camps set up for the volunteers in the district of Nowgong. At Barhampur while the people were celebrating the occasion of recapturing the *Santi-Sena* Camp on 18<sup>th</sup> September by holding a public meeting and a community feast, the police took to action causing death to Lakshmi Kanta Hazarika, Thagiram Sut, Boloram Sut and Bhogeswari Phukanani, an aged lady. Thus a series of incidents took place in Nowgong district during the time of 1942 movement.

There were cases of Sabotage on the railways in several places, such as, near Shahajibazar in Habibganj, near Pani Khati and at Rangiya in Kamrup; at Kampur and at Puranigudam in Nowgong; near Safrai in Sibsagar; at Kachamari and at Sarupathar in Golaghat. <sup>23</sup> Kusal konwar, Secretary of the local Congress Committee at Sarupathar was executed on 15<sup>th</sup> June 1943 for alleged implication in the Sarupathar train derailment case and the other three co-accused were each given ten-years terms of imprisonment. <sup>24</sup> *Lathi*-charge was made extensively in the towns of North Lakhimpur, Dhalpur, Bihpuria, Dikhoughat, Tezpur, Dhekiajuli, Bihali, Barpeta, Sibsagar, Nitaipukhurri, Teok, Dergaon, Golaghat, Nowgong etc. <sup>25</sup>

The military also used to assault the people at the time of realizing collective fines and in raiding volunteers' camps and villages. The shooting of Nidhan Koch, a poor peasant of Goalpara, for his failure to pay his share of the collective fine created fresh indignation against the Government. The Government of the collective fine created fresh indignation against the Government.

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In the Surma Valley, too, there was warm response to the INC's call. The Congress workers there formed a war-council to take to widespread *Satyagraha*. Police stations at Lala, Badarpur and Biswanath were targets of mob-attack. Women also participated in the historic struggle and of them, the most active ones were Saralatbala Deb and Snehlata Devi of Sylhet. 30

Despite arrest movement continued unabated. In Assam the underground leader maintained contact with their Indian counterparts like Sucheta Kripalani, Achyut Patwardhan, Aruna Asaf Ali, Sadiq Ali and Jayprakash Narayan, who escaped from the Hazaribagh Central Jail on 9<sup>th</sup> September 1942 to guide these activities. Jyoti Prasad Agarwala and Gahan Chandra Goswami of Tezpur were the most noted among the underground leaders. Youths and students of both the Valleys played a very active role in these activities. The underground workers also carried on a vigorous no-tax campaign and encouraged the people to resort to arms against the British.

Like the other places of Assam, the Quit India phase of the movement in Gohpur sub-division was remarkable.

# Political Background of the Movement in Gohpur Sub-division:

Assam was noticeably drawn to the national mainstream in 1921, with the formation of the Assam Provincial Congress Committee (APCC). <sup>33</sup> Gandhi's visit to Assam, in 1921, had an electrifying effect on the people of Assam as well as on the people of Gohpur Sub-division. It caught the imagination of the people who backed it with spontaneous and massive response. <sup>34</sup> The 1942 upheaval Particularly in Kolabari, Barangabari and Gohpur was spontaneous and disciplined.

It is important to mention that before the start of the *Chaiduar Rayat Sabha*, unlike the *Jorhat Sarbojanik Sabha*, another socio-political organization came into existence in 1882 at Tezpur under the name of *Tezpur Rayat Sabha*. The formation of the *Tezpur Rayat Sabha* can be traced back to the demands of the time. The *Rayat Sabha* virtually came into existence to protest the land settlement policy of Mr. Ward, the commissioner of Assam, and to ventilate the grievances of the people. The formation and growth of the Rayat Sabha was due to the pioneering efforts of some of the prominent persons like Haribilash Agarwala, Lombodor Bora, Lakshmi Kanta Borkakati, Jaidev Sharma Pandit, Thakurdas Sharma. The Tezpur Rayat *Sabha* heralded an epoch in generating political consciousness among the peoples.

Thus, the Tezpur Rayat Sabha prepared the ground to form historic *Rayat Sabha* at Gamiri of Gohpur sub-division. The *Chaiduar Rayat Sabha* played an important role in the struggle of the people against the Government machinery. Though, in 1931, during the time of Irwin pact, while delivering speeches at *Chaiduar Sabha* of Gamirighat Session, many prominent leaders were convicted, yet repression of the Government could not suppress the work of these *Sabhas* which

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continued to function till 1947, the year of Indian Independence when the *Rayat Sabhas* were merged with the Congress.

Regarding the historical background of the movement, it can be said that there was a grand session of the *Chaiduar Rayat Sabha* under the dynamic leadership of late Jyoti Prasad Agarwala held at Gamiri in May, 1931, which greatly aroused the feelings of nationalism among the people of Gohpur. Garamur Satradhikar late Pitambor Goswami presided over the Conference. Prominent Congress personalities such as late Mahadeb Sarma, Laksmidhar Sarma, Chandra Probha Saikiani, Mahim Chandra Singha, Muktabala Baisnabi, Juwala Prasad Agarwala, Cheniram Das and many others took part in its deliberations and about fifteen thousand (15,000) peoples took part in this historic *Rayat Sabha*. Every section of the society attended in this *Sabha*. Men and women, girls, and boys, youths and students, played a prominent role to make it successful one. Batches of young volunteers throughout the days plodded their way to the venue with loads of sundry materials, rice and vegetable. Such activities helped to convey the idea of nationalism in greater spirit to the masses of Gohpur sub-division.

While they did so, some student volunteers from Barangabari sang in chorus some patriotic songs composed by Jyoti Prasad Agarwala. Few sporadic lines of Agarwala's patriotic songs written for this particular occasion are as follows:

Saju ha Najowan Saju ha Najowan
Toi Karibo Lagibo Agnisnan
.....
Bukur tezere dhui de aji
Bharatar Apaman!

So, this inspiring song sent both Kanaklata Barua and other inhabitants of Gohpur sub-division into a dreamland of joy and aroused a keen sense of Patriotism in their mind.

The versatile Jyoti Prasad Agarwala introduced for the first time an element of novelty in this session of the *Rayat Sabha*, which had never been attempted anywhere in Assam before. <sup>43</sup> He trained a select batch of boy and girl volunteers to ride on horseback and provide guard of honour to the President elected. These volunteers were wearing white uniform and Gandhi-cap. These volunteers on horseback had profound impression on the masses and such a unique spectacle to the gathering crowd that they were all praised and admired.

The conference was over, when late Mahadeb Sarma, Laksmidhar Sarma, Mahim Chandra Singha and Cheniram Das were prosecuted by the Government for sedition and sent to jail custody. This unwarranted action of the government aroused wide-spread resentment in the whole area of

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Gohpur sub-division. The fact of this prosecution of the well-known and respected leaders of the people contributed in shaping Kanaklata's attitude against the British rule.

The Chaiduar Rayat Sabha of Gamiri Ghat session undertook some strict resolutions against the prevalence of untouchability. The leaders and the people who actively participated in this Sabha adopted the most practical means of throwing a direct challenge to the British authority by boycotting British goods and liquor. In short, the Rayat Sabha was the earlier political organization to inspire and encouraged the people regarding socio-political activities. For the first time large sections of the people of Gohpur Sub-division were exposed to nationalist ideas and politics through intense political mobilization in the form of this Chaiduar Rayat Sabha. Hence, the part played by this Sabha was immense.

It is well aware to us that British Government had ruled every corners of Assam. Gohpur subdivision was a very remote place at that time. It was surrounded by forest areas and jungles. Road ways were not fully developed at that time. So, for the British the main way of business was searoute. They mainly transacted their import and export across the Brahmaputra. Moreover, at that time Gohpur sub-division was famous for bamboos and canes, which were very much essential for the British. During the time of World War II, in 1939, the British Government exported the bamboos and canes from Gohpur area to make temporary camps through Gamiri Ghat. Gamiri Ghat was the main river-port used by the British Government, through which entire transaction had done. The British Government transacted their trade from this river port across the Brahmaputra. Thus, the export of bamboos and canes largely contributed to the formation of public opinion against the British activities. In Gohpur sub-division, the *Chaiduar Rayat Sabha* greatly helped in generating political consciousness amongst the people. Influenced by the national feelings, the local people protested the exportation of bamboos and canes from their native soil. They expressed their anger by breaking all those bamboos and canes over night. These activities of the local peoples of Gohpur sub-division ultimately shows that they were no more wanted to live under the tutelage of British rule.

The Non-cooperation movement was a unique weapon invented by Mahatma Gandhi. The Non-cooperation movement (1920-21) is considered the first mass campaign (side by side Khilafat movement) against the British rule organized by the Indian National Congress under the leadership of Gandhiji. The Non-Cooperation movement affected every districts and state of India. It's main objective were boycott of foreign goods, gradual boycott of law courts, boycott of government education institutions and establishing national institutions. Its impact was also falling upon Gohpur sub-division of Assam. Non-cooperation movement served as a background for the people of Gohpur sub-division to take procession against the British activities of establishing opium *mahal*.

During the time of British rule in Gohpur sub-division the local people were very much addicted towards opium. British realized the weak point of local people and started to open *opium mahals* in the different areas of Gohpur sub-division. Their main aim was to divert people's mind from the feelings of nationalism by making them addicted towards opium. These measures adopted by the Government provoked an immediate reaction. Meetings, strikes etc. were organized to protest against such activities of British Government. It was in 1930 that Jyoti Prasad Agarwala and Bijoy Chandra Bhagawati raised their voice against it by visiting every corner of village. They made the people conscious by launching campaign against the use of opium.

Thus, the above mention political environment compelled the inhabitants of Gohpur sub-division to join in the freedom movement of 1942. After the announcement of great Quit India Resolution, every districts of Assam, including Gohpur Sub-division were ready to fight against the exploitative British regime. The people of Gohpur sub-division finally expressed their anger through this Quit India movement. Next chapter discusses the role of the people of Gohpur Sub-division in the historic Quit India Movement.

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