

## **Partition of Bengal (1905) : Its Impact on the Nationalist Upsurge in Assam**

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This is the centenary year of the great anti-Partition Movement directed against the partition of Bengal in 1905. Keeping this fact in mind herein an attempt is made to observe the nature of the anti-Partition Movement in Assam and to understand its impact on the nationalist upsurge particularly in the Brahmaputra Valley of the province. It is no doubt that the partition of Bengal (1905) was a sort of blessing in disguise for growing nationalism in India. The nationalism which had already grown among the Indian people due to some socio-economic and political reasons, was accelerated by this partition scheme of the colonial Government. The execution of the scheme during the Governor-Generalship of Lord Curzon was sharply criticised by the nationalist circle and it created a mighty upsurge in India, particularly in Bengal and Assam.

It is a matter of fact that one can not have understanding of the nature and effects of the anti-Partition Movement in Assam without a comprehensive study of the background of the partition of Bengal and formation of the new state, namely East Bengal and Assam. Since the British acquisition of Assam a game was played by the colonial authority regarding attachment of the province with Bengal. The East India Company annexed Assam in the first half of the nineteenth century and attached it with the Bengal presidency. But to the authority the size of the Bengal presidency consisting of Bengal proper, Bihar, Orissa, the whole of the United Province including Delhi, a portion of Central Province, Chotanagpur and Assam was enormously big. The "enormous population and the area of Bengal, overgrowing importance of Calcutta, constantly increasing congestion of business in Calcutta Secretariat, inability of the head of the Government to give personal attention to such a big province (Bengal Presidency)"<sup>1</sup> led to the demand for reorganisation of the Presidency from time to time. In order to have an efficient administration Sir John Lawrence, the Governor-General of Bengal, had already proposed to create a Chief Commissionership for Assam in 1867.<sup>2</sup> Guha writes that "the inconvenience of governing the Assam districts as a division of the unwieldy Bengal Presidency had long

been recognised. Quite different local conditions and the unique position thereof its European planters warranted the creation of a new province to ensure administrative efficiency."<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, Assam proper was constituted into a Chief Commissioner's province on 6 February, 1874 together with Cachar, Goalpara, Garo Hills and other hills districts. On 12 September the district of Sylhet was separated from Bengal and attached to the Chief Commissionership of Assam.<sup>4</sup> But the newly constituted Chief Commissioner of Assam was considered to be small from the administrative and economic points of view. In 1892, some officials in the foreign department suggested to transfer the Chittagong division of Bengal to Assam. Not only that, but the then Chief Commissioner of Assam Sir William Ward further suggested that the districts of Dacca and Mymensingh be also transferred along with the Chittagong division.<sup>5</sup> But the new Chief Commissioner Sir Henry Cotton dropped this idea assuming that such changes would "excite a stern protest".<sup>6</sup> The problem did not come to an end. Although Assam was separated from Bengal, the traditional jurisdiction of Bengal had remained unwieldy with the addition of Bihar, Orissa and Chotanagpur etc. The whole area was considered by the British administration too big to be administered by a single person.<sup>7</sup> In 1903, Sir Andrew Fraser, the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal raised the question of transfer of Chittagong division, Dacca and Mymensingh district to Assam.<sup>8</sup> Lord Curzon said at Dacca on 15 February, 1904 that "it is beyond dispute that Bengal must be relieved. No one Government and no administration can possibly, devote to nearly 80 millions of people the personal supervision, care and control which local Government exist. The interest of the people must suffer and they do suffer... No other local Government in India administers much more than half the number of the people that there are in Bengal."<sup>9</sup> Again on 18 March, 1904, Curzon suggested to create an executive council in Bengal and separation of Non-Bengali from Bengali in a public meeting.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the background for partition of Bengal and creation of the new state-Eastern Bengal and Assam was prepared. On 1 September, 1905, by a proclamation issued by the Government of India, districts of Dacca, Chittagong and Rajshahi Commissioner with the exception of Darjeeling and Malda, were separated from Bengal and added to the Chief Commissionership of Assam and thereby formed the new province to be known as Eastern Bengal and Assam<sup>11</sup> which came into existence on 16 October, 1905.<sup>12</sup> It may be mentioned here that the partition of Bengal and the transfer of Dacca, Mymensing and Chittagong to Assam was welcomed by the official circle and the tea planters of Assam. The planters

desired a "re-drawing of the provincial boundaries with a view to having the port of Chittagong and the plantation of North Bengal and Assam included in one and the same province."<sup>13</sup> Already in 1903, the Assam planters suggested to Curzon that if Chittagong was tagged to Assam and developed as an outlet to the sea, the prohibitive transport cost of tea could be substantially reduced.<sup>14</sup> H.H. Risely, the secretary to the Government of India, Home Department supported the project to "give to its officers a wider and more interesting field of war... a maritime outlet in order to develop its industries in tea, oil and coal."<sup>15</sup> It is to be noted that all these industries in tea, oil, coal etc. were dominated by the British and hence their ulterior desire was not to release Bengal from excessive territorial burden and make Assam financially benefited but to exploit the Indian people. The nationalist leaders of Bengal did not fail to understand the ulterior political motive of the colonial Government. The announcement of Lord Curzon that "...divide the Bengali speaking population,"<sup>16</sup> and the statements like Risely's "Bengal united is power... one of our main objects is to split up and thereby weaken a solid body of opponents to our rule,"<sup>17</sup> reflected the ulterior motive of the British Government's separation scheme. The nationalist leaders of Bengal regarded the partition scheme a nefarious device to divide the Bengali nationalism and determined to oppose it. Accordingly, as soon as the partition of Bengal became publicity known, spontaneous protest started in Bengal, procession, public meetings submission of petition and memoranda and press campaign became day to day events. But such moderate method of protest proved to be a failure. Hence, the political leaders searched out a new technique-*swadeshi* and boycott. This new method of boycott and *swadeshi* evoked response from all sections of people. The organisations like *Brati Samiti*, *Bande Mataram* and *Sanatan Sampradaya* prompted and propagated the *swadeshi* idea. The 16th October, 1905 was observed as anti-partition and Rakhi-Bandhan day. The observation of Rakhi-Bandhan day signified "the indissoluble brotherhood between East Bengal and West Bengal men, rich and low, between Christian, Mohamedans and Hindus born of the soil."<sup>18</sup> Rabindranath wrote, "the Rakhi ceremony will indicate that no monarch's swords, however powerful, can cut asunder the bond of union implemented by province amongst people forming one and the same race."<sup>19</sup> Soon the *swadeshi* movement in Bengal took the shape of a mass movement and spread to the rest of the country.\

The ant-partition agitation in Assam was not as strong as in Bengal. But its impact was not negligible at all. The Jorhat *Sarbojanik Sabha*

and the Assam Association<sup>20</sup> had already expressed their apprehensions of the partition scheme long before the partition became effective. Both the organisations feared that if the partition scheme is executed the Assamese Language would suffer, and the people of the province, particularly of the Brahmaputra Valley would lose their economic and political rights. It may be referred to here that even the Government of India presumed that in the newly constituted province the educated classes of the Bengal districts would appropriate almost all the clerical posts depriving the Assameses from their rightful claims. Hence, it said that "... unless special steps are taken to guard against it, they will undoubtedly absorb all the clerical posts which are now held by the Assamese."<sup>21</sup> Jagannath Baruah and Manik Chandra Baruah also suggested to the Government to make provisions for the reservation of certain percentage of post for the Assamese in different departments and establishment of the new province.<sup>22</sup> Apart from the economic and political questions the language problems also appeared to be more serious before the Assamese people. The speech of Lord Curzon in a public meeting at Mymensingh that "... Assamese... will be the one to disappear"<sup>23</sup> from the face of the earth made the people of the valley more conscious. Jorhat *Sarbajanik Sabha* held that Assam proper will secure only a small portion of the Chief Commissioner's attention, his very seat will be removed and the people will have to meet a keen and unequal competition of highly educated, enterprising and advantageously situated districts, (because of) which they are not yet prepared for the same."<sup>24</sup> It further argued that "when the Government of India do not propose to separate Orissa from Bengal owing to political association for a century, there is certainly very much less ground for cutting up Bengal proper into two portions; the people of both portions having been not only politically associated from the earliest historical times, but also forming one people both by language and race."<sup>25</sup> Similarly, the Assam Association expressed its view "that the historic name of Assam will be obliterated for ever, her language (will) suffer, and the removal of the seat of the Government to a place outside Assam proper and further away from the geographical centre will necessarily make her lose the amount of care and attention which it (has) at present received from the Government."<sup>26</sup>

Both the *Sarbajanik Sabha* and Assam Association expressed their apprehension in the partition scheme, but did not start organisational protest movement against it. Rather, Manik Chandra Baruah and Jagannath Baruah realising the fact that the Government was determined to execute

the scheme demanded the Government to take appropriate measures for the protection of the Assamese languages.<sup>27</sup> Manik Chandra Baruah suggested the “benign ruler to adopt adequate and timely means for our safety, so that we may live as a nation, speaking our own language and doing our work in the province.”<sup>28</sup>

On the other hand the local press expressed their mixed reaction on partition of Bengal and amalgamation of Assam with the new province. It felt that “ the situation of Assam when amalgamation with Sylhet district was bad enough but when tied with the advanced parts of the country... change was from the frying pan to fire.”<sup>29</sup> The advocate of Assam on financial ground expressed its view that the new province (Eastern Bengal and Assam) would be acting” as a sort of drag on the exhausted Indian exchequer.<sup>30</sup> Padmanath Gohain Barua ( 1871-1946) an eminent Assamese litterateur and the editor of *Assam Banti* raised an alarm at the prospect of the very name of Assam being obliterated forever in his editorial note on 10 July, 1904. He requested the Assam Association and *Sarbajanik Sabha* to take up the issue in right direction.<sup>31</sup>

The message of the Swadeshi and boycott movement in Bengal had their influence on a number of places of the Brahmaputra valley like Guwahati, Tezpur, Nagaon, Dibrugarh, Barpeta and Dhubri. Tying of rakhi as a mark of solidarity, popularising Swadeshi goods and boycott of foreign commodities had become universal.<sup>32</sup> At Dibrugarh, Barpeta, Guwahati etc. public meetings were held where both the Hindus and Muslims observed *rakhi bandhan* ceremony and took pledge of boycotting all foreign goods. Even the head priest of the Kamakhya temple of Guwahati appealed to the pandas, the grocers and the sweetmeat sellers not to accept foreign goods.<sup>33</sup> Swadeshi shops were opened in different towns of the province. Among these the Assam Valley Trading Company and B.N.Dey & Company of Guwahati were the most important.<sup>34</sup> At Tezpur and Barpeta local shopkeepers took the leading part in selling swadeshi goods. On 16 October, 1906, anti-partition day was observed in some places of the Brahmaputra Valley. In a number of places like Dibrugarh and Guwahati public meetings were held and processions were taken out with singing of patriotic songs and shouting of *Bande Mataram* and *Allaho-Akbar*. At Dhubri public *samkirtan* was organised which was joined by all the communities like Hindus, Sikhs and the Muslims.<sup>35</sup> At Guwahati, a group of students resolved to work for two days a week at the steamerghat and railway station and donate their energies towards the swadeshi cause.<sup>36</sup> Apart from this a number of students of Guwahati

made themselves busy in swadeshi programme. Narrating his personal experience Ambikagiri Roy Choudhury writes : "Then we had been school students. The boycott and swadeshi programme of this movement (anti-partition movement) greatly touched our heart and behind this fact was late Govinda Lahiri, the Manager of Assam Valley Trading Company of Panbazar (Guwahati). Following his advice we moved from street to street in a group giving publicity of the message of swadeshi and selling the coarse *dhoti* like canvas of Bangalaxmi Cotton Mill of Calcutta. We also made us busy with zeal in appealing the Assamese people to maintain the tradition of producing cotton thread and weaving traditional dress and requesting our Bengali sisters to acquire art of weaving.."<sup>37</sup>

In the wake of the swadeshi movement some educated young men like Ambikagiri Roy Choudhury, Raktim Bora, Triguna Barua and others came under the spell of extremism. Ambikagiri, who was believed to have contact with some of the revolutionary leaders of Bengal, started a revolutionary association called the *seva sangha* which soon developed into a terrorist organisation in the line of Anusilan Samiti of Dacca. He also wrote a drama *Bandini Bharat*. But the manuscript was intercepted by the police in 1906 and Ambikagiri was kept under police vigilance for about eight years till 1915.<sup>38</sup> Further, in the hostel of Cotton College inflammatory literature of the Jugantar type of Bengal was found. Of course, such extremist activities were not supported by a number of Assamese elite. Lakshminath Bezboruah criticised the idea of liberating the country through terrorist method. He, in an article '*Bom*' published in *Kripabar Barbaruar Bhabar Burburani* totally disapproved the cult of violence as a form of political struggle.<sup>39</sup>

"It was the swadeshi movement (origin of which was anti-Partition Movement) which brought nationalism from a realm of theory and sentiments into the field of practical politics which leavened the life of India as a whole..."<sup>40</sup> In spite of its limitation in Assam, the anti-Partition Movement contributed to the growth of socio-political awakening among the people of the province. The movement brought the people of Assam into close contact with the main stream of Indian nationalism. The swadeshi songs and dances of Mukunda Das and Manipuri girl Parvawati excited a number of students of Guwahati like Bishnu Medhi, Kaliram Baruah, Nidhiram Das, Trigunna Baruah, Kumud Bora, Pushpa Uzir, Pitambar Chakravorty, Raktima Bora, and Balek Lahkar with patriotic thrill. The anti-Partition Movement was the first organised movement in Bengal

against the colonial rule which did send its ripples to the Brahmaputra valley. It, nevertheless, introduced a new kind of political awarness among the people of Assam and thereby made them prepared for the future course of the national struggle. On the contrary, the role played by the Assam Association and Jorhat *Sarbajonik Sabha* against the partition scheme made the people of the Brahmaputra valley more conscious of their socio-political and economic existence.

#### *Notes and reference*

1. M.M. 'Ahluwalia , *Freedom Struggle in India*, Delhi, 1965, p.274
2. M.L. Bose, *Development of Administartion in Assam With Special Reference to Land Revenue, Justice and Police, 1874-1920*, New Delhi, p.4.
3. Amalendu Guha, *Planter Raj to Swaraj, Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam, 1874-1947*, New Delhi, 1988 (Reprint), p.27
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. H.K. Barpujari, (ed), *Political History of Assam, (Henceforth PHA)*, Vol-1.1826-1900., Guwahati, 1977, p. 176-177.
7. Proceedings of the Government of India in Home-Political Department, No-232 of September, 1874.
8. Home-Political-A, December, 1903, Nos. 149-60; Barpujari, H.K.(ed), *op.cit*, p.177
9. *Report on the Administration of the Province of Eastern Bengal and Assam*, 1905 -06, para 115 (henceforth RAEBA)
10. M.L. Bose, *op.cit*, p.6
11. *Ibid*; RAEBA, 1905-06, para.115
12. M.L. Bose, *op.cit*, p.70
13. Amalendu Guha, *op.cit* p.70
14. *Ibid.*
15. H.H. Riseley's letter, Home-Political-A, 3December, 1903
16. Bipin Chandra, and Others, *India's Struggle for Independence*, New Delhi, 1989, (reprint.125.

17. *Ibid*; S. Gopal, *British Policy in India, 1858-1905*. Cambridge, 1965. p. 270
18. Nemai Sadhan Bose, *The Indian National Movement, An Outline*, Calcutta, 19 (reprint), p.71
19. *Ibid*.
20. The Jorhat *Sarbajonik Sabha* was founded in 1884 at Jorhat under the initiative of Jagannath Barooah, a leading tea planter, for the purpose of representing the wishes and aspirations of the people. The Assam Association was formed in 1903 by a group of intellectuals led by Manik Chandra Baruah, Radhanath Changkakati, Prasanna Chandra Ghose, Mathura Mohan Baruah etc. in Guwahati, Goswami, P.D., *Manik Chandra Baruah and Aru Tenor jug* (In Assamese), Guwahati, 1970, p.54-55.
21. R.C. Kalita, *Partition Plan of Bengal and the Assam Association, in Proceedings of the North East India History Association*, 19th Session, 1998, p.247.
22. *Ibid*.
23. *Ibid*.
24. Letter from Jagannath Borooah, President, *Jorhat Sabojanik Sabha* to the Chief Commissioner, Assam, 10 February, 1904, cited in PHA, p. 180.
25. Cited in H.K. Barpujari (ed), *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, Vol.-V, Guwahati, 1985, p.252
26. Proceeding of Assam Association, 14 February, 1904, cited in Papers Relating to the Reconstitution of the providence of Bengal and Assam, Delhi, 1904 (reprint), p.104, p. 35-36.
27. PHA, p. 181.
28. R.C. Kalita, *op. cit.*, p. 247.
29. Home-Political-B, August.1911, No.64
30. PHA, p. 182
31. Amalendu Guha, *op.cit.* p.96
32. Md. Tayebulla, *Karagarar Chithi* (In Assamese), Guwahati. 1986 p. 23
33. *Ibid*; Bengali, 13 and 19 October and 21 December, 1905.

34. Abstract of Intelligence, East Bengal and Assam Police, Kamrup, 19 January, 1907.
35. *PHA*, p.184-187. It may be noted that a section of Muslims particularly upper and middle class Muslims stood against the Swadeshi movement in Bengal, Sarkar, Sumit, Modern India, 1885-1947, Madras, 1983, p.121-23. But in the Brahmaputra valley no such opposition from the Muslims were found.
36. Guha, Amalendu, *op.cit.* p.79.
37. Chandra Prasad Saikia, (ed), *Ambikagiri Roy Choudhury Rachanavali*, Guwahati, 1906,p.657.38. Roy Choudhury, *Ambikagiri, Mon Jivan Dhumuhar Achati* (in Assamese), Guwahati. 1973,p.16-26.
38. Roy, Choudhury, *Mor Jivan Dhumuhar Achati* (in Assamese), Guwahati, 1973,P16-26.
39. Sarmah, Satyendranath, *Kripabar Barboruar Rajniti*, in Saikia, Chandra Prasad (ed), *Lakshminath Bezboruah* (in Assamese), Guwahati, 1968, p.230-31.
40. Nemaï Sadhan Bose, *op.cit*, p. 77.