

## SUBHAS CHANDRA BOSE'S VISIT TO ASSAM IN OCTOBER 1939: ITS IMPACT ON THE STUDENTS OF ASSAM

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Subhas Chandra Bose's visit to Assam, on 6th October 1939, may be viewed as part of his programme of strengthening and organizing the Leftist forces in Assam.

Elected as the President of the Indian National Congress in January 1939, Bose was convinced that Gandhi would neither accept his leadership of the Congress organization, nor allow Bose to control the machinery of the Congress. On his part, Bose found it impossible to function independently and he would never condescend to be a puppet President. It was not possible for Bose to fight the Gandhi Wing either, for it had the advantage of being an organized group, acting under a centralised leadership; whereas the Left Wing, or the radical elements in the Congress, though numerically in a majority, lacked unity and organization. There was no other alternative for Bose but to resign the Presidentship of the Congress; he did so on 29th April 1939, with a sense of the urgency to organize the Left Wing under one banner, the Forward Bloc. With this objective, he toured several places in the country, and his visit to Assam was one of them.

In Assam, by 1939, there was a clear indication of the popularity of the radical or Left Wing forces, marked by a phenomenal awakening among the peasantry and the students, and to some extent among the workers also. In fact, with the visit of Soumendranath Tagore, the founder of the Communist League, in November 1938, a group of students, associated with the Guwahati Vyam Sangha, initiated the consolidation of all Leftist forces in Assam. This led them to invite Bose, the founder

of the Forward Bloc to visit Assam. Even Gandhi had remarked that Bose's popularity increased after he resigned the Congress Presidentship.

The students of Assam, as elsewhere, were not attracted to the organization of the Forward Bloc only because of their Leftist sympathies. They idolised Bose as a promising student leader. This idolisation of Bose dates back to 1916, when an English professor manhandled some of Bose's classmates, and Bose being a class representative, took up the matter with the Principal of the College and suggested that the teacher should apologise to the students whom he had insulted. The Principal did not agree and there was a general students' strike in the Presidency College. Before long, the Principal rusticated Bose from the university. Bose did not regret it. He wrote in his Autobiography, "My Principal had expelled me, but he made my future career."<sup>3</sup> The importance of this statement lies in the fact that till about 1916, Bose was not able to take any decision regarding his future career. Born and brought up in Cuttack, with politics a 'taboo' in the family, Bose showed no leanings towards politics; instead he was sought enlightenment by reading the works of Vivekananda and the teachings of Ramakrishna. He had a group of friends with whom he would discuss the teachings of Vivekananda and Ramakrishna, in school and outside. His parents then thought that a change of environment would perhaps reduce his eccentricities and help him to lead a normal life. So when he passed the Matriculation Examination in 1913, his parents packed him off to Calcutta. In Calcutta he found greater opportunity to realise his principles. He wrote: "I was separated from a small group of eccentric school boys whom I had gathered round myself in Cuttack. But in Calcutta, I found crowds of them." The new group called themselves the Neo-Vivekananda Group, whose main object was to give effect to Vivekananda's teachings. Politically, the group was against terrorist activity

and secret conspiracy. Gradually, he was attracted by Arabinda Ghose, the most popular leader in Bengal at that time who stood up as the champion of Left Wing thought on the Congress platform. Even at this stage, Bose left his home on a pilgrimage in search of a 'guru', in the summer vacation of 1914. However, two factors forced him to become politically minded, and to strike out an independent line for himself. Firstly, it was the behaviour of the British in the tram cars, streets and trains of Calcutta, and secondly, the Great War of 1914-18. Long before 1939, Bose was aware that an international crisis in the form of a war would break out in the near future in Europe, and that India should make the fullest use of that crisis in order to win her freedom. The Forward Bloc believed in an uncompromising struggle with British Imperialism for attaining India's Independence. This objective was to be reached through any possible means, unhampered by philosophical notions, like Gandhian non-violence. Thus, from 1916, Bose as a rusticated student resolved to fight for the national cause.

Although he went back to Cuttack, he was admired and supported by the students, not only in Calcutta but all over India, and moreso, in the neighbour state of Assam. Students in Assam also saw in Bose's life-career, the prospects of a great leader.

## II

When Subhas Chandra Bose came to Guwahati on 6th October 1939, as President of the All Assam Progressive Youth Conference, it is said that students lined up on either side of the road from Amingaon, in spite of the efforts of the local Congress leaders to foil the Conference by spreading rumours that Bose had cancelled his visit. It is also said that as Bose was seated in an open car, one of the students from Cotton College was trying to take a

photograph of Bose, but Bose's powerful glasses reflected light on the camera lens. The student asked Bose to kindly lower his head a little and to this Bose replied that he was a person who never bows to anybody, but he would do so now, just for the photograph. The next day newspapers in Bengal and Assam printed this photograph and quoted Bose's humorous remark regarding the 'lowering' of his head.

Devendranath Sarmah was the Chairman of the Reception Committee of the Youth Conference. In his address, Devendranath Sarmah pointed out that the object of their struggle should be to do good to the innumerable agriculturists and labourers in the country, and to achieve this end certain factors must be taken care of. First, all kinds of exploitation should end; second, the means of production should be converted to common property, by doing away with personal property; third, the class differences will have to be done away with; fourth, the system of production for grain should be changed; and fifth, the poor peasants and labourers should be the sole authority for the administration of the country till this social condition is reached. He said that all efforts should be made for the establishment of socialism in the country, in order to solve the problem of the peasants and labourers. He concluded:

This shows that the main problem of Assam is the problem of the peasants and labourers. Organization is necessary for the solution of this problem. There cannot be agitation without organization and no hope for change without agitation. It is essential to establish an organization on the foundation of the peasants and labourers.<sup>6</sup>

Devendranath Sarmah's address shows that Leftist ideology had taken firm roots in Assam, at

the time of Bose's visit, but the Leftists lacked proper organization. Bose too had realised that the Leftist force in Assam was rather weak, and that Leftists needed an organization on a sound basis. Bose advised the members of the Conference to speed up the activities of the peasants, students and labour organizations. Following this an Assam Left Consolidation Committee was formed, at the Conference.

Bose criticized the conciliatory attitude of the Congress towards the British Government at this critical juncture. He stated that in case the AICC supported the Government in war-measures without achieving national independence, the Forward Bloc would make vigorous effort to form a parallel organization. He was certain of receiving a nation-wide support of the students and youths and also the support of the CPI, for the latter also stood for an anti-war programme. He accused Jai Prakash Narayan of being a puppet in the hands of Jawaharlal Nehru. Bose condemned M.N. Roy, the leader of the Radical Congressmen for his opportunist mentality. Bose pointed out that the masses had supported the Congress with the hope that their objects would be fulfilled, but they were soon disillusioned. It was this disillusionment of the masses which created a division in the Congress into the Rightists and the Leftists. He stated that the Leftists were not responsible for this division:

When Congress became passive and unable to accept our programme, we thought it proper to organise ourselves. The organization of the Leftists was the task before me. This is the work of the Forward Bloc. The Leftists had agreed that if Gandhi and the working committee would launch a struggle for swaraj, all differences would be forgotten, but Gandhi was not prepared.

As President of the Congress in March 1939, Bose made a clear proposal that the INC should immediately send an ultimatum to the British Government demanding Independence within six months and should simultaneously prepare for a national struggle. This proposal was opposed by the Gandhian Wing, creating a complete deadlock within the Congress. This necessitated the organization of the Leftists. In organizing the Forward Block, Bose had two expectations - firstly, in the event of a future conflict with the Gandhian Wing, he would be able to fight more effectively; and further he could hope to win the entire Congress over to his point of view, some day in future. Secondly, even if he failed to win over the entire Congress, Bose could, in any major crisis, act on his own, even if the Gandhian Wing failed to rise to the occasion.

Bose argued that, once the Leftists were organized with the aims and objects of the Forward Bloc, the new organization would be able to bring about a revolution within the Congress and see India being independent very soon. He stated:

Our two objects should be: 1) Our mental preparation, and 2) organisational preparation. Observe the anti-war resolution of the Haripura Congress, which stated that we would not join any war, and if any war is waged we would remain aloof, and if British forcibly attempted to take soldiers from our country, we would oppose it. This was the clear verdict of the Congress. Therefore we must 1) remain aloof from the war, 2) struggle for the attainment of swaraj.

He further analysed Britain's position abroad, and argued that this was the opportune moment for the attainment of swaraj. He explained:

... We should be glad if British Imperialism is defeated. Mr. Chamberlain has always wanted to destroy Hitlerism. Our stand against the British Government is styled as supported by Nazis or Moscow. If Germany is defeated, it is a matter of great joy. In fact, Germany's defeat or win are both dangerous for the English. If Hitlerism is destroyed, communism will be established in Germany and France would follow and so Chamberlain and M. Daladier (of France) do not want Hitlerism to be destroyed. So I said that Germany's defeat or win are both dangerous to England.

With Russia joining the war, ... the British nation would be facing fresh problems. This is the right time to demand swaraj.

The organization of the Forward Bloc was kept very secret. Secrecy and silent organizational work were the main features of this organization. Its programme constituted of a vigorous anti-war propaganda so that no volunteers for the war may be recruited, to create a spirit of distrust and contempt among all sections of people against the British Government, capitalists and nobles. The Bloc devoted every drop of energy in organizing the peasants of the villages, tea garden labourers and other manual labourers. The Bloc members were also to organize students, male and female, to establish "the unit system" so that police may not crush the whole organization at a time. They were to live in secret and work in secret. The organization aimed at communism, being an upholder of Marxism and Stalinism, for the creation of a classless society.

The system of recruitment of workers was also discussed at the Conference of October 1939. This

Bloc was constituted mainly by the ex-terrorists. The party of the Surma Valley as well as of the Assam Valley was closely connected with the Chittagong ex-detenués, Anushilan Samity, Bandhab Samity, Bose Party and others. The recruitment policy of the Bloc was the same as the ex-terrorist party. At first the leaders would mix with the boys as a teacher or sportsman or would join debating clubs or an exercise ground or playground for playing knife and lathi. From this association with the boys, the leaders would select members of the party after judging the capacity and intellectual ability of the boys. The membership of the organisation were of three kinds: 1) Open members, with public constructive programme; 2) Sympathisers, who may help the Bloc with money and other indirect help; 3) Party members or Whole-time members consisting mostly of leaders and influential members. All the members would meet at a particular place, once a week, to discuss the progress of their work and submit their diaries and reports of respective areas. They obeyed no particular leadership. The resolution of the whole body was to be carried out by any means, and treachery to the Bloc was amountable to death sentence.

The Conference closed with two Resolutions. First, a Left Organisational Committee was to be formed with the following persons, viz., Upendranath Sarmah, Kirtinath Chowdhury and Devendranath Sarmah to work in cooperation with the All-India Left Wing members. The Second Resolution requested the All-India Congress Working Committee to withdraw the ban imposed on S.C. Bose, and demanded that the Government should release political prisoners of Bengal and the Punjab, and the Kishan and labour movement workers of other provinces. The conference also demanded the abolition of the Zamindari system, reduction of land-revenue and fixation of the minimum wages of the labourers.

Surprisingly the enthusiasm with which the students of Assam welcomed Bose petered out with his departure, drawing the students towards the Communist League rather than the Forward Bloc. In fact, the Youth Association and the Left Consolidation Committee did not function after Bose left and the students who had organized the conference, did not join the Forward Bloc.<sup>12</sup> The reasons for this could be that Left-Consolidation Committee suffered blows in 1939 and Bose's imprisonment in 1940.

The first blow at the Left-Consolidation Committee was struck by M.N. Roy. The Committee had decided to observe 9th July 1939 as an All-India Day of protest against resolutions of an anti-left character which had been passed by the AICC at its Bombay meeting in June 1939, notwithstanding Leftist opposition. M.N. Roy declared that his party, the Radical League, one of the component units of the Left Consolidation Committee, would not participate in the Committee's action on the 9th July, in response to Rajendra Prasad's (Congress President) appeal to the Leftists to abandon the call for the All-India Day. The next blow was struck in December 1939, when a breach between the Forward Bloc and the National Front took place, following the propaganda carried out by the National Front against the Forward Bloc, depicting the latter as a counter-revolutionary organization.<sup>13</sup> It was perhaps this development which reduced the attraction of the students to the Forward Bloc.

Shortly after Bose's departure from Assam in October 1939, the Forward Bloc had organized periodic demonstrations outside Assam against Indian cooperation in the war effort of the government; the Bloc tried for launching a national struggle for Independence. One such demonstration was the Anti-Imperialist Conference held at Nagpur. Six months later, there was yet another at Ramghar in March 1940. The demonstration was called

the All India Anti-Compromise Conference, which was convened by the Forward Bloc and the Kishan Sabha (Peasant's Organization). While the Congress Session at Ramgarh presided over by Moulana Abul Kalam Azad, did not come to a decision about the war policy, the Anti-Compromise Conference led by Bose and Swami Sahajananda Saraswati, the peasant leader, decided to launch a fight over the issue of the war and of India's demand for independence. Thus during the National Week in April (April 6th to April 13th) 1940, the Forward Bloc started its campaign of civil disobedience. Bose and other prominent members of the Bloc were arrested in July, 1940.<sup>14</sup>

Even after Bose's imprisonment, the campaign of the Forward Bloc continued with such increasing vigour that it stirred the Gandhi Wing also. The Congress withdrew its Delhi-Poona offer of cooperation and invited Gandhi to resume its leadership (September 15). Gandhi commenced an Individual Satyagraha campaign of Congress resistance to the British war effort in October 1940.<sup>15</sup>

Although the immediate object of Bose's visit to Assam in October 1939; the consolidation of Left forces in Assam under the Forward Bloc leadership was not achieved, yet it did much to increase the number of communist-minded students in Assam. After the Jorhat Session of the Assam Chattra Sanmilan (1939), where Leftist students took the leading role, the Leftist leaders, Mansoor Habib and Viswanath Mukherjee organized a section of Leftist students within the Assam Chattra Federation. This Federation included Bishnu Bora, Chhida Saikia, Siva Sen, Madhab Deka, Haren Duara, Prafulla Saikia, Nameswar Pegu, Bimala Barpujari, Amalendu Guha and Surjya Kanta Barpujari.<sup>16</sup>

For the first time, celebrations were organized on 7th November 1939, by Leftist students to mark

the anniversary of the glorious October Revolution, under the Presidentship of Tara Prasad Baruah. Towards the end of 1939, a joint session of the Assam Chattra Federation and the Surma Valley Chattra Federation was held at Silchar. This session was presided over by Choli Battliwala, a member of the Central Committee of the CPI, and attended by 600 representatives of both the Federations. Both the Federations resolved to work unitedly and to lead the masses in the struggle for independence. Protesting against the brutal firing on the Digboi oil workers by the local authorities incited by the ruling party in Assam, the Federations demanded the resignation of the Bordoloi Ministry. Prior to it, Prafulla Goswami and Bishnu Bora visited Digboi on behalf of the Assam Chattra Federation and at a mass meeting, attended by 10,000 people, condemned the Bordoloi Ministry for protecting British capitalism and assured the oil workers of the moral support and good will of the students. This was a clear indication of the growth of Leftist in Assam under the impact of Bose's visit to Assam in 1939.

Though the Forward Bloc did not gain its due place in Assam as elsewhere in India, students in Assam continued to idolise Bose as a hero. When some soldiers of the Indian National Army were put under trial in Delhi after the World War II ended, students in Assam organized protest demonstrations demanding the release of these INA men. On 6th November 1945, the Assam Chattra Federation demanded the release of the INA men who were taken prisoners of war by the British.<sup>18</sup> The Assamese students observed an "INA Day" at Dibrugarh and collected funds for the INA men held as prisoners of war. The students also observed 15th December 1945, as the "Anti-Repression Day" in the Brahmaputra Valley. In January 1946, a public road was named as "Azad Hind Ali" in Tengakhat and on 23rd January 1946, the 50th birth

anniversary of Subhas Chandra Bose was observed by the students with great enthusiasm. The release of the three INA officers in Assam (Shah Nawaz, G.S. Dhillon, and P.K. Sehgal) in January 1946 by order of the C-in-C was celebrated in Assam. Umesh Chandra Chowdhury in Bajali, Ramdas Tiwari and Udayan Singh in Guwahati, led students to organize the illumination of the private residences as well as the market places. The time now seemed opportune for organizing a volunteer force representing the Forward Bloc in Assam.

Regarding the future of the Forward Bloc, Bose wrote in his *Indian Struggle*: "if it is the product of historical necessity, it will not die. If it has a philosophical justification, it will surely endure. And if it serves the cause of India, of humanity and of human progress, it will live and grow and no power on earth will ever destroy it."<sup>20</sup> Although the ideals of the Forward Bloc was never realised, yet the personality of Subhas Chandra Bose continued even after 1945 to appeal to numerous people of India, especially to the students whom Bose regarded as "the hopes of the nation". Bose was a great upholder of the Leftist thought and movement in India, in his times.

#### Notes & References

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