

ASSAM IN INDIAN INDEPENDENCE

Arun Bhattacharjee

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Can there be a book on the role of Assam in India's freedom struggle? The answer must be an emphatic "No". What Assam did during India's freedom struggle is an integral part of the nation's achievement as a whole.

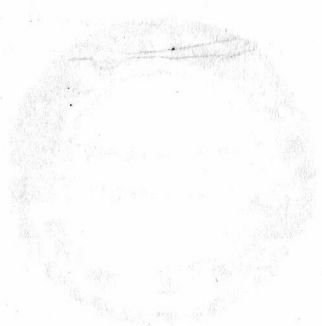
Yet, there may be a historical assessment of how a single unit participated in the pan-Indian co-operative venture. In a book of India's freedom struggle there is practically no mention of Assam and how the freedom-spirited people of this region rose to the occasion to break asunder the shackles of the foreign domination. The present study purports to fill up this lacuna by throwing light on this aspect of our national struggle for freedom.

This is perhaps the only book that brings Assam in limelight while delineating India's freedom struggle. Maniram Dewan was the martyr in the 1857 uprising which is otherwise called India's First War of Independence. Mention has been made of Anandaram Dhekial Phukan's regeneration of Assamese literature which was a part and parcel of the national movement. In the early twentieth century there was an emergence of a group of Assamese elite who were imbued with the advanced political ideas and acted as the torch-bearers of a radical patriotism in Assam. Of the early champions of nationalism, mention may be made of Nabin Chandra Bardoloi, Tarun Ram Phookun and Chandra Nath Sharma. Towards the final phase of the struggle the field was held by Gopinath Bardoloi and Bishnuram Medhi. In addition, Kanaklata Baruah's martyrdom in the Quit India Movement in 1942 which deserves to be delineated in flaming letters of gold has also been given sufficient coverage.

Dr. Arun Bhattacharjee, M.A., Ph.D. (b. 1939) is a prolific writer of books on historical literature. His area of specialisation is Ancient Indian History. His works include: *A History of Modern India, A History of Ancient India, Greater India, A History of Great Britain, Bharatvarsha, History of India (From the earliest time to 1989), Subhas Chandra Bose and Indian Freedom Struggle, The Father of the Nation, India Wins Independence, Icons and Sculptures of Assam, World Revolutions, History of Political Thought, A History of Europe (1453-1789), A History of Europe (1789-1945), etc.*

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Arin Chatterjee

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Arun Bhattacharjee

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Opinions

"I must not omit to mention that out of nearly seventy-eight Assamese pleaders fifteen have suspended practice, probably the highest percentage throughout India."

—Mahatma Gandhi

"The Civil Disobedience Enquiry Committee has finished its long tour in Tarun Ram Phookun's house. We had the privilege to meet and hear the views of some of the bravest and trusted of Gandhiji's followers—young men holding high the torch of faith, amidst cruelty and devastation of illegality and unrestrained repression, strong and cheerful in spite of darkness and depression all around. If India had such youths of courage and faith, serving the cause in all her provinces, there would be no doubt of the early attainment of such goal."

—C. Rajagopalachari

"The Constituent Assembly had no right to change the structure of the plan. Grouping was an essential part of the plan. The provinces must first group and could thereafter, if they wished, separate. The Assam Congress leaders did not agree and Gandhiji after some hesitation gave his support to the interpretation suggested by the leaders from Assam."

—Mohammad Ali Jinnah

"Gopinath Bardoloi, the Premier of Assam, however, persisted in his opposition and submitted a memorandum to the Congress Working Committee opposing the grouping of Assam and Bengal as

proposed in the Cabinet Mission statement. . . . In the meantime, however, Gandhiji's views changed and he gave his support to Bardoloi. Jawaharlal agreed with me that the fears of the Assam leaders were unjustified and tried hard to impress them with his views. Unfortunately they did not listen either to Jawaharlal or me, especially since Gandhiji was now on their side and was issuing statement supporting their stand. Jawaharlal, however, remained steadfast and gave me his full support."

—Maulana Abul Kalam Azad

"It is difficult to think Assam without Gopinath Bardoloi. He had indentified himself with the interest of his state, and for years the political life had so much intermingled with his great personality that we had come to think of these two entities being always synonymous."

—Sardar Vallabhbai Patel

Preface

During the freedom struggle, the Indians all over the country fought hand in hand to drive out the foreign power and to attain Independence. They never thought for a moment that they were speakers of a particular language or follower of a particular faith. As a matter of fact, the goal of independence which was the eye of the needle made them all united and one. It is only after independence that the Indians began to identify themselves with a particular region, religion or language.

India is an amalgam of different ethnic and linguistic groups. Assam is a unit in that socio-political whole. Like other units of India, Assam also effectively participated in the freedom-making process. It is neither desirable nor feasible to assess the exact role of Assam in India's freedom struggle. To say that Maniram Dewan, Nabin Chandra Bardoloi, Tarun Ram Phookun and Gopinath Bardoloi did was Assam's contribution to India's freedom struggle is the same fallacy as to say what Mahatma Gandhi did was Gujarat's role in the Indian national movement. Such a regional or communal approach must be banished from any book of Indian freedom struggle. The appropriate course will be to know Assam's participation in India's freedom struggle. And hence the present title *Assam in Indian Independence*, which attempts to delineate a true historical perspective how Assam advanced on the national scene in attaining independence of India. This alone should be the lesson for our young generation.

The Author

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- Plate II.** *Karmavir* Nabin Chandra Bardoloi
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- Plate VIII.** Padmanath Buragohain, Gangaovinda Phukan, Ghanashyam Baruah, Tarun Ram Phookun and Prasanta Kumar Baruah as delegates from Assam to the Montague-Chelmsford Committee at Calcutta in December 1917
- Plate IX.** (above) Gopinath Bardoloi participating in the Civil Disobedience Movement at Guwahati in 1930.
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- Plate X.** Long before the *Azad Hind Fauj* Benudhar Sharma organised the *Charing Fauj* at Sibsagar.
- Plate XI.** Hemchandra Baruah among the Congress workers in Assam after release from jail at Guwahati in 1931.

Plate XII. Bhulabhai Desai along with Hemchandra Baruah, Gopinath Bardoloi and Tarun Ram Phookun at Guwahati in 1936.

Plate XIII. Subhas Chandra Bose along with Gopinath Bardoloi and others at Shillong in 1938.

Plate XIV. Mahatma Gandhi received by Gopinath Bardoloi and others on his arrival by steamer at Shualkuchi Ghat in January 1946

Plate XV. The first Congress ministry in Assam under Gopinath Bardoloi in February 1946

Plate XVI. Gopinath Bardoloi at the Constituent Assembly at Delhi in 1949.

1. My Maternal Uncle cannot be Greater than My Country

You surely know the names of Martin Luther, Sankaradeva and Rabindranath Tagore. Who were they? They taught the message of love, freedom and progress. They were great fighters, though they did not fight in any battle-field. The hearts of the people were their battle-fields. Their message made the people understand the evils of slavery, subordination and ignorance. Martin Luther was a German, while Sankaradeva and Rabindranath were Indians. But geographical barriers did not separate them. It is said that the revolutionary flames do not brook any geographical frontiers.

All have heard the names of Sivaji, Maha Rana Pratap Singh and Lachit Barphukan. Who were they? They were great warriors. Unlike Luther, Sankaradeva and Rabindranath, they actually fought in the real battle fields. Against whom did they fight? They all fought against the Mughals. Can they be called the freedom fighters of India. The answer is an emphatic "No", because they did not fight to make the whole of India free, but only their own areas and regions free. So their outlook was rather narrow.

Moreover, they did not fight against any foreigner. Were the Mughals foreigners? The answer is that originally the Mughals might have been foreigners, but later on they became Indian and made India their home. If this is so, are the act of heroism of

Sivaji, Rana Pratap Singh and Lachit Barphukan meaningless for India's freedom struggle? The answer is that they have some value as lessons for inspirations or as examples of heroism during the real freedom struggle. Whenever any freedom fighter's spirit was dampened he could recharge his dim battery from the heroic examples of Sivaji, Rana Pratap Singh and Lachit Barphukan. But they by themselves cannot be regarded as the heroes of Indian freedom struggle.

Assam is a land of freedom-spirited people. The people of Assam are uncompromising freedom fighters. The mighty Mughals could not storm Assam despite attempts for as many as fourteen times. We have already made reference to the name of Lachit Barphukan. He stands like a peak among the noble fighters of Indian history. He is truly called the Nelson of Saraighat for his display of rare heroic resistance in the fights against the Mughals in the Battle of Saraighat near Guwahati.

Lachit is said to have killed his maternal uncle for negligence to duty in defending his country with the words: "*Desotke momai dangar nahaya*" which means "My maternal uncle cannot be greater than my country". These words were perennial source of inspiration for the freedom-lovers all over the country. This incident as well as his heroic resistance against the Mughals saved the Ahom kingdom and infused enthusiasm in the hearts of the prominent freedom fighters like Maniram Dewan, Pioli Barua and Kanaklata Barua, about whom we shall know in details in the pages that follow.

The other important freedom fighters that Assam fielded were Hemachandra Baruah, Chandra Nath Sarmah, Navin Chandra Bardoloi, Tarun Ram Phookun, Jyotiprasad Agarwala and Gopinath Bardoloi. Of them only Jyotiprasad Agarwala and Gopinath Bardoloi lived to see the dawn of Indian Independence. All other persons mentioned above died before the independence materialised. Their works have been delineated in the book in a befitting manner.

But one thing to be remembered is that what Assam did in India's freedom struggle is only a facet of the entire story. So we have to go ahead rather cautiously in making Assam's participation in India's road to independence historically analysed. Our story must be recast on the background of India's freedom struggle in general. Thus the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre, the Ilbert Bill, Indian National Congress, the Khilafat Movement, the Non-cooperation Movement, the Civil Disobedience Movement, the Cripps Mission, the Quit India Movement, the Azad Hind Fauj are events of great importance shaping the activities in Assam.

Similarly, the freedom fighters in Assam must be treated as the camp followers of the Indian leaders like Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Mahatma Gandhi, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhas Chandra Bose. It is not possible to record all the freedom fighters in Assam or outside Assam in a small book like the present one save and except by putting on record that their works deserve to be written in letters of flame in our national movement.

Before we go to study our story we should know the utility of the study of the present book *Assam in Indian Independence*. Students of all countries of the world know how their country became free after throwing the yoke of the foreign rule. Thus the students of the USA know how their country under the leadership of George Washington fought to liberate their land from the thralldom of England. But in India the students know very little or nothing about the saga of sacrifice of the Indians to make the country independent. The parliament of India was alive to this indifference on the part of the Indians to know the glorious story of freedom movement. So in 1976 some Fundamental Duties were inserted by the parliament in the Constitution of India. So we find a new Article in the Constitution as Article 51-A(b) which reads:

"It shall be the duty of every citizen of India to cherish and follow the noble ideals which inspired our national struggle for freedom."

The present book makes an attempt to focus the attention of the students on the ideals that inspired our national movement. These ideals were non-violence, secularism and national unity. During the freedom struggle our national leaders sacrificed their family ties, loyalty to language or loyalty to their own regions to the altar of loyalty to the nation. If any clash came between the loyalty to the nation with loyalty to language or region the latter must be subordinated to the former.

The real ideal of our freedom struggle is that we are Indians first, Indians second and Indians last. We

have no identity except as the citizens of India. If our status as the citizens of India is clouded by any religious or regional or linguistic consideration, we must be in a position to nip these narrow considerations in the bud. Assam moved on India's road to independence with such ideals. This is the lesson of our present study. So the present work is not only a book of national independence but a book of national integration also.

We shall now take up the study the saga of sacrifice of lives of those freedom-loving souls and the associated events in a historical narrations.

There were various causes responsible for the insurgency of 1857. The policy of annexation was used by Viceroy Lord Dalhousie created a general discontent among the princes of British India. It was Dalhousie who swallowed the pearl of Andhra after another on the ground of 'salute to the state'. This created uneasiness in the minds of the Indian princes and rulers who were afraid that they might fall on their own account. Coming to the West Indies Canning made the acquisition of land easy for the Europeans by issuing a special law called 'Waste Land Rules', under which large areas of hill land were alienated to the Europeans in the hope of getting them to settle down in milder climates and in building up large-scale plantations. In Africa and Nigeria this process led to emergence of plantation colonies.* According to Public Chamberlain's book "The plantation labour in the tea gardens in Assam was

* K. M. Panikkar, *India and the World*, p. 140.

Other Books of Similar Interest

- Agricultural Development in Assam—Umananda Phukan, Rs. 120**
- Anatomy of Rural Poverty in Assam—A. Ahmed, Rs. 175**
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