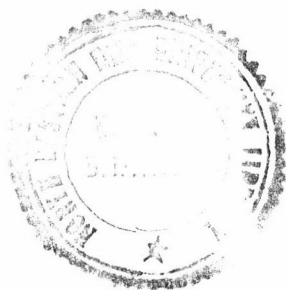


Planter-Raj to Swaraj Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826-1947

Amalendu Guha



People's Publishing House

CP

Ist Published: January 1977
Reprint: August 1988

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ISBN 81-7007-082-I

Printed by P.P.C. Joshi at the New Age Printing Press, Rani Jhansi Road,
New Delhi-110055 and published by him for People's Publishing House
Private Limited, Rani Jhansi Road, New Delhi-110055

F241
1487

In memory of my Father
Jaminisundar Guha (1873-1950)
of Manipur

Foreword

The Indian Council of Historical Research was presented with a request from the Minister for Education and Social Welfare, which he had received in 1972 from Shri Raj Bahadur, then Union Minister for Parliamentary Affairs, and Shri K.C. Pant, then Union Minister for Home Affairs, for bringing out a series of books on the role of the central and state legislatures during our freedom struggle to mark the 25th Anniversary in 1972 of India's attainment of independence.

The Council gladly accepted this assignment, and Professor Manoranjan Jha's work on *Role of the Central Legislatures in the Freedom Struggle* and Dr Amit Kumar Gupta's book on *North West Frontier Province Legislature and Freedom Struggle 1932-47* have already been published as a result of its efforts. The third book to come out in this series is the present work on Assam Legislature by Professor Amalendu Guha, Professor of Economic History at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta. The book has been written in consultation with an Editorial Board for the entire project, under the chairmanship of Professor S. Gopal, but like all other authors in this project Dr Guha has been given complete academic freedom to express views based on his research.

Professor Guha has not only presented a detailed account of the evolution of the Provincial Legislature of Assam in the context of general political developments in the Province, but has also provided valuable background for an understanding of the colonial

socio-economic structure. He has discussed the politics of anti-imperialism both in the legislature and outside it, and marked shifts within the national movement in economic objectives and political ideas, particularly in the context of peasant, and labour problems. Thus, the book, which is based on massive research, may be read as an authentic record of the role of Assam in the development of the Indian national movement, with a focus not restricted only to the leading party in the national movement, but also embracing other trends and elements, all of which together struggled in their own ways for liberation from colonialism.

The author has utilised the broadest possible range of sources in the relevant regional languages in local archives and private collections, and given a very full bibliography of published literature. Also of note is his use of quantitative data and statistics in elucidating the role of colonialism in stultifying the development of society and economy in northeast India, as well as the role of anti-colonial elements in endeavouring to break through the colonial strangle-hold.

1977 is the centenary year of the birth of Tarunram Phookan, a leading nationalist of old Assam. Like Chittaranjan Das in Bengal, he mobilised the middle class of Assam to combat imperial authority both within the legislature and outside it. It is fitting that this volume, which recounts the nature of the broader mobilisation that followed, should be published in this year.

I thank the author and all those who assisted him in completing the work, as well as the members of the Editorial Board for scrutinising the manuscript of this book in detail and Professor Syed Nurul Hasan, the Education Minister, for sponsoring this project.

R. S. Sharma

Chairman

Indian Council of Historical Research

New Delhi
1 January 1977

Introduction to Reprint

A thoroughly revised second edition of the present work was what I originally contemplated. Years passed by after the first edition ran out of circulation, yet I could not extricate myself from my day-to-day research commitments to do the job. Nor is there any more hope left that I shall be able to fulfil my ambition soon enough. It is under such compelling circumstances that I have at last agreed to a reprint being brought out to meet the standing demand for the book, accumulated over the years.

Finally, I must thank both the Indian Council of Historical Research and the People's Publishing House (P) Limited for making this reprint possible. My thanks also go personally to Professor Irfan Habib and Shri N.C. Chatterjee for impressing on me that the book should be made once more available to the reading public.

Centre for Studies in
Social Sciences, Calcutta
Calcutta
1 May 1988

Amalendu Guha

Prologue

This book on Assam—i.e. present Assam, Nagaland, Meghalaya and Mizoram—comes alphabetically first in a series in which the role of legislatures in the history of the freedom struggle and political change in the eleven Provinces of British India will be examined. I have stretched the period a little backward to begin from 1826, the year of British annexation of Assam, and have carried the analysis to 1950. The Frontier Tracts (present Arunachal) and the State of Manipur, which had some links with Assam, are however outside the scope of this study.

Historiography of modern Assam, as it stands today, practically stops at 1858. E.A. Gait, for example, devotes less than forty of the four hundred and odd pages of his book—a lucid work in the tradition of imperialist historiography—to the post-1858 period. He stops short of the Non-cooperation era even in its second edition that was brought out in 1926. K. N. Dutt's *Landmarks of the Freedom Movement in Assam* is but a bare 136-page outline, useful but inadequately documented. No other publication on the subject deserves mention here. Assam is one of those provinces where even an officially sponsored history of the local freedom movement has yet to come out. This lag therefore has forced me to look also for the wood so that I may not miss the trees. Chronicling has received no less importance in this study than analysis, particularly while dealing with the last phase of the freedom struggle.

My chief task has been to build the narrative chronologically for the century and a quarter under review and, at the same time, to treat it thematically as well. In the resultant periodisation, four distinct periods have emerged. Three chapters, one each, cover the first three periods—the years 1826-73, 1874-1905 and 1906-1920. The major task in these chapters has been to provide the background for an understanding of the colonial socio-economic structure that was shaken in the political turmoil of the Gandhi epoch to follow. In the remaining five chapters, covering this last period of about three decades, the emphasis has somewhat shifted from society and economy to the politics of anti-imperialism both in the legislature and outside it. The shifts within the national movement in political ideals and economic objectives, particularly in the context of the peasant and labour problems, have not been lost sight of.

The main focus, after 1905, has been on all political activities, centering round or opposed to the legislature that existed for the province. Hence, in my choice of source materials, over fifty thousand printed pages of relevant legislative debates and interpellations have been more important than unpublished government records for the same period. These have, of course, been supplemented by other usual primary and secondary sources. Proceedings of legislatures have one advantage that they carry not only the official but also the other versions of the events on record. Though not fortunate enough in my search for local private papers, I was nevertheless able to unearth a bundle of such papers labelled “leaders’ correspondence” in the APCC archives of the Congress Bhavan, Gauhati. I have amply used this material to make up for the dearth of official records for the decade 1937-47 to which it relates.

Individual freedom fighters or legislators, not receiving adequate coverage in this book, were not necessarily persons with a marginal role in the history of the period under review. This only means that either the necessary information was not available or the relevant micro-details were not found necessary for answering the questions raised.

Writing about this pre-independence decade has been the most difficult, yet exciting part of my task. Many of the actors and witnesses of this stormy phase of our history are still present amidst us, with all their sensitivities to what concerns them. This makes the use of a range of relevant materials for this study all the more difficult. Despite this limitation, I have not been shy of devoting as much

as one-third of the space of this book to this decade. I am nevertheless aware that, for a proper assessment of the events of this decade, more research will have to be conducted at the grass roots level. Mine is a spade work in anticipation of future research.

Errors of fact or interpretation, if any, remain mine alone.

Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta
Calcutta
1 January 1977

Amalendu Guha

Acknowledgement

I am honoured that the Indian Council of Historical Research, New Delhi, which commissioned me for this study has accepted it for publication. For financial support during the three and a half years I worked on the book, I have a debt of gratitude both to the Indian Council of Historical Research as well as to the Centre for studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, I joined in November 1973. For promoting my release and for facilitating my taking up of the new assignment, my thanks are due to the Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics, Poona.

I am grateful to Arvind N. Das, currently of the National Labour Institute, New Delhi and Manorama Sharma, of the Department of History, Dibrugarh University, Assam, for the research assistance they provided, each for six months, for collecting, arranging and even assimilating the materials. Thanks are due for their ungrudging help in the matter of access to some materials to Pabitrakumar Deka, A. C. Bhuyan and Homen Bargohain of Gauhati; and to Arun Ghosh, Kulanath Gogoi, Govindalal Ray and Anuradha Chanda of Calcutta. I take this opportunity also to thank my wife, Anima Guha, for sharing with me some of the stresses and strains that the writing of this book involved. The Cartography Section of my Centre is to be collectively thanked for preparing the map accompanying this book.

My friends and colleagues, S. K. Chaube, Amales Tripathi, Safiq Naqvi, M.S. Prabhakar, Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, Bipan Chandra and Barun De read and commented on portions of the manuscript.

Their scrutiny helped me avoid certain errors of judgment and style at the stage of revision. Barun and Bipan influenced considerably the rewriting of my final chapters, through their seminal ideas on some important aspects of Indian nationalism. For editorial help at the final stage, I am indebted to A. K. Gupta and N. C. Chatterjee of the Indian Council of Historical Research. My thanks go to my countless friends on the staff of various libraries at Poona, Bombay, Delhi, Calcutta, Shillong, Gauhati and Tezpur I visited in course of my work. My thanks also go to Sudhamay Sengupta, R. Girija and Gouri Banerjee who typed the manuscript.

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A Note on Spelling

In matters of transliteration and the spelling of proper names, absolute consistency has not been aimed at. Anglicised spellings of several surnames (e.g., Barua, Borooah, Baruah, Barooah; Bardaloi, Bardoloi; Phookan, Phukan etc.) are varied in usage; such spellings in a person's name often underwent changes even within his or her own life-time. Hence, what has been attempted in this book is only to maintain the same spelling of a proper name all through, except in quotes.

In the matter of transliteration from Indian languages, all borrowed English words (e.g., 'Congress') have been retained in their original form, and a simplified system of transliteration has been improvised to avoid diacritical marks.

Abbreviations

ACOER	Assam Congress Opium Enquiry Report (1925)
Ad. Rep.	Administration Report (Annual)
AICC	All India Congress Committee
AITUC	All India Trade Union Congress
ALAP	Assam Legislative Assembly Proceedings
ALCP	Assam Legislative Council Proceedings
ALECR	Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921-22
AOC	Assam Oil Company Limited
APCC	Assam Pradesh (Provincial) Congress Committee
APTUC	Assam Provincial Trade Union Congress
AS	Assam Secretariat Files (at Assam State Archives, Shillong; now shifted to Gauhati)
BPCC	Bengal Provincial Congress Committee
CID	Criminal Investigation Department
CPI	Communist Party of India
DCC	District Congress Committee
DIR	Defence of India Rules
DPI	Director of Public Instruction
DHAS	Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies (Govt. of Assam, Gauhati)
EBALCP	Eastern Bengal and Assam Legislative Council Proceedings

GI	Government of India
IAR	<i>Indian Annual Register</i>
ICS	Indian Civil Service
IESHR	<i>Indian Economic and Social History Review</i>
ILCP	Imperial (Indian) Legislative Council Proceedings
Imp. Gaz.	<i>Imperial Gazetteer of India</i>
INA	Indian National Army
INTUC	Indian National Trade Union Congress
IPC	Indian Penal Code
ITA	Indian Tea Association
K.W.	Keep with (Certain confidential Home Dept. files were so marked)
L.S.G.	Local Self Government
M.L.C.	Member, Legislative Council
NAI	National Archives of India
NMML	Nehru Memorial Museum and Library
NNC	Naga National Council
OEHFM	Office of the Editor of the History of Freedom Movement, Govt. of Assam
Pol. Proc.	Political Proceedings
RCPI	Revolutionary Communist Party of India
RIAF	Royal Indian Air Force
RIN	Royal Indian Navy
RPC	Rajendra Prasad Collection
RTC	Round Table Conference
T. E.	Tea Estate

Epilogue

The above survey of more than a century of nationalism in Assam and its interaction with electoral politics centering round the doled-out, half-hearted reforms tentatively suggests that its evolution in our country was simultaneously along two inter-twined tracks—one all-India and the other regional. Great nationalism grounded in a feeling of all-India unity; and little nationalism based on that of regional-linguistic unity. The former essentially suited to the interests of India's big *bourgeoisie*; and the latter largely related to the small *bourgeoisie*—the regional middle classes.

This two-track nationalism is nowhere so prominently traceable as in the case of Assam. In the long run, language there proved to be the stronger binding element than caste, religion or isolated localities. The incipient regional middle class did clash with its counterparts from other regions, but only up to a point. Beyond that they had generally coalesced to put forward a common front against imperialism. Despite strains and stresses in their relationship, they had moved in unison towards a fusion, the model for which need not be searched in western nationalism with no tradition as such of a federal process of its own.¹ Much of our misunderstanding of Indian nationalism has so far stemmed from a false framework of reference.

The involvement of Maniram Dewan in the national revolt of 1857 and of the new Assamese middle class in the modernist and tactically collaborationist politics of the last quarter of the nineteenth century indicate Assam's early identification with the then mainstream of Indian nationalism. This was despite the fact that early Congress sessions refused to take up matters of mere provincial importance on their agenda. At another level, the repeated outbreaks

1. One could, however, profitably look into the experience of Eastern Europe and the area that was the Czarist Empire.

of peasant struggles against the colonial tax policy—the *Raij Mels* of 1861, 1868 and 1893-94 as well as the Jaintia people's war of resistance in 1861-63—were in line with broadly similar peasant and tribal revolts in many parts of India. Unorganised Assam plantation workers, too, rose in lightning revolts at the individual tea garden level and had national support to their cause.

At the beginning of the next century, Assam like Bengal had enough grounds for reacting strongly to the Curzon Plan, but it did not. The yet incipient and unconsolidated Assamese middle class was neutralised by Fuller through the promise of favoured treatment henceforth in the matter of public services and promotion of its language interests. The Swadeshi movement and the Bengal terrorism could not strike their roots in the Assamese homeland. Nevertheless, their impact was not altogether absent. A number of political memoirs bear this out.

In fact, in the first two decades of this century, Assam passed through a period of introspection. The Assam Association (1903-20), the Assam *Chhatra Sanmilian* (estd. 1916) and the Assam *Sahitya Sabha* (estd. 1917)—all of them attempted to articulate their Valley's unsettled quest for a linguistic-regional identity, their concern over the Government-blessed opium evil and their desire to be administered at the lower level, at least, not by recruits from Bengal, but by sons of the soil. All these were no doubt important and legitimate issues, but they side-tracked attention from their root cause—the colonial rule. Until 1873 this rule had resisted all local pressures to allow Assamese a recognised status in the Brahmaputra Valley, which was then administered as a division of Bengal. Later, this recognition was conceded, but Assam proper and the populous Bengal district of Sylhet were forced into an involuntary partnership in the newly-constituted Assam province. Imperialism encouraged ethnicity to play a divisive role and thus hinder the growth of nationalism.²

The separation of Sylhet, the eradication of the opium evil and the restrictions on land-hungry Muslim peasants' immigration from Bengal into the Assamese homeland—these were believed to be issues on the solution of which depended the very existence of the Assamese 'race'. But it was also increasingly realised that the planter Raj that tyrannised over the entire people was at the root of all these problems.

2. See appendix 13

The first rustlings of the storm that was Gandhi did not therefore fail Assam's ears. By 1921 the Assam Association voluntarily liquidated itself to usher in the formation of the Pradesh Congress. Little nationalism yielded its hegemony to great nationalism, even in the arena of local issues. Great nationalism, though challenged from time to time and put to test by intricate issues of local and communal interests, very much held its ground through the remaining three pre-independence decades. Gandhiji's stand on linguistic provinces helped the process.

The biggest event in the 1920s and early 1930s was not the dyarchy and the elections, but the Non-cooperation and civil disobedience. The role of legislature in politicising Assam was minimal up to the introduction of the 1935 reforms. During the sixteen years of dyarchy, the Congress (Swarajists) chose to be present in the legislature only for six consecutive years, 1924-1929, and had no occasion to regret its decision. The only other organised party in the House until 1937 was the European party. It was only after a substantial widening of the franchise that year that Congress decided in favour of a policy of responsive cooperation, alternating with struggles. Yet in the subsequent decade, the debates in the legislature were overwhelmed by the stirring events outside.

The Assam experience, however, does not suggest that "the constitutional reforms of 1935 granted almost full self-government in the provinces" and that "Indian politicians had prizes worth fighting for".³ For one thing, the permitted autonomy was self-defeating. The politicians had to swallow an upper House and a strong European lobby built into the legislature as well as a 'white' Governor with special responsibilities and wide discretionary powers, which were indeed exercised on several crucial occasions. For another, Bardoloi, the Congress politician and statesman, would not have chosen to give a walk-over to Saadulla to form five of the six ministries during the period from 1937 to 1946, had the prize been worth fighting for, or if the nationalist struggle had only been a fight for prizes.

The opium monopoly, a source of provincial revenue, second only to the land tax, was imperialism's weakest link in Assam. And it was there that the Congress struck hard. Congressmen—many of them petty planters themselves—attempted during their short

3. Quote from Anil Seal, *The Emergence of Indian Nationalism: Competition and Collaboration in the Later Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1968), p. 350.

ministerial tenure to tax the tea industry to relieve the Government from its heavy dependence on the tainted excise revenue. They gave substantial relief to the depression-hit peasantry. These helped strengthen the Congress mass base. However, the Congress policy of refusing settlement of wastelands with the post-1937 immigrants alienated the Muslim peasants. The immigrant question quickly matured into a political crisis, in the last pre-independence decade. During the controversy over "grouping" under the Cabinet Mission Plan, a demand for the self-determination of Assam was brought into the limelight to forestall its threatened inclusion in East Pakistan. That danger having passed off, little nationalism once more anchored itself on the firm base of great nationalism.