

LANDMARKS
OF THE
FREEDOM
STRUGGLE
IN
ASSAM

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LANDMARKS OF THE FREEDOM STRUGGLE IN ASSAM

Published by
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TO
With a foreword by
BISNURAM MEDHI
and Introduction by
K.K. DUTTA M.A., PH.D., P.R.S.
PATNA UNIVERSITY

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By
K. N. DUTTA, M.A., B.L.



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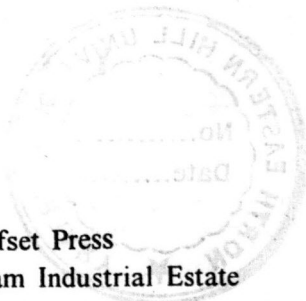
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"This is not the prison-cell,
O brother, this is not the jail;
This is the great wastage of the
Firm and dirt with sweetening agencies."

Songs of the Cell—A. O. RAY CHOWDHURY
PREFACE BY THE AUTHOR

TO THE MEMORY OF

GIRISH CHANDRA RAI CHOWDHURY

WHO WAS A GANDHIAN IN

THOUGHT, DEED AND

WORD AND AN

IDEAL TEACHER

I. THE PERIOD OF EARLY INFLUENCES, 1885-1900

- New Phase of Popular Uprisings—Rail-rods
- The Proletarian Uprising, 1881.
- The Jhansi Rebellions, 1850-1852.
- The Marathi Revolt and Rising of the
Eamra Lohani.
- The "Asian Riots", 1894.
- The Role of the Hero.
- A New Awakening.

**III THE PERIOD OF PREPARATION AND GROWTH OF POLITICAL
CONSCIOUSNESS, 1901-1920**

"This is not the prison-cell,
O brother, this is not the jail ;
This is the great washing of the
Filth and dirt with sweltering agonies."

Songs of the cell—A. G. RAY CHOWDHURY.

"These deaths, injuries, humiliations and atrocities are the price of liberty, a price a country is asked to pay for its desire to be free. Our people know that and therefore they are determined as never before to *do* or *die*. Untold miseries may be heaped on our people but the caravan of India goes on to its destined goal—*independence full and undiluted.*"

—GOPINATH BARDOLOI

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In presenting this book to the public I have placed myself under a debt of gratitude to Sri Mahendya Mohan Chowdhury, General Secretary, A.I.O.G., for his most concrete literary message and to Sri Manmohan Mohan, former Chief Minister of Assam, Sri Chandra Kumar Das, former Minister of Education, Assam, and Dr. K. K. Das, Dean of the Faculty of Arts, Patna University, and General Secretary of the Indian History Congress, for their helpful and kindly replies to the Foreword, the Background and the Introduction of the book respectively. I received very valuable help from Sri

PREFACE

An attempt has been made in the following pages to indicate the landmarks of the freedom struggle in Assam. Only the broad facts and salient features of that inspiring story of the people's yearning for freedom as expressed first through plots and insurrections against the alien rulers, then through popular outbursts of indignation against unpopular measures, and finally through the discipline of a unique non-violent struggle, have been laid out in this brief narrative. There are enough materials to fill up the skeleton with nerves, tissues and flesh. Plots and rebellions were no doubt sporadic and disjointed, and resistance movements localised, before the Indian National Congress launched upon the final struggle for liberation of India on an All-India basis. Nevertheless it is possible to piece them all together in a complete chain to show that the urge for freedom had throughout given the people over the hills and plains of Assam, as over the rest of India, an ideal to fight for and live for.

I must acknowledge my obligations to a large variety of authorities, mainly to the published reports and histories of the Indian National Congress and the published and unpublished reports of the Assam Congress Organisation, to some published reports of the Government of India and the Assam Government bearing on the political movements, to some standard works of well-known authors on the History of India and the History of Assam, to a large number of Government records that I came across in my studies and to other sources of information too numerous to mention. The Bibliography given in Appendix I is mainly suggestive.

In presenting this book to the public I have placed myself under a debt of gratitude to Sri Mahendra Mohan Chowdhury General Secretary, A.I.C.C., for his kind congratulatory message, and to Sri Bisnuram Medhi, former Chief Minister of Assam, Sri Omeo Kumar Das, former Minister of Education, Assam, and Dr. K. K. Datta, Dean of the Faculty of Arts, Patna University, and General Secretary of the Indian History Congress, for their having kindly written the Foreword, the Background and the Introduction to the book respectively. I received very valuable help from Sri

Das in the shape of suggestions and informations for incorporation in the book while its chapters were being drafted. I am grateful to Sri Debeswar Sarma, Minister of Finance, Assam, for his kind help in getting the book published. I am also grateful to Sri Mahadev Sarma, Secretary, Regional Committee for Assam for Compilation of the History of Freedom Movement in India, for help received from him in writing out the book and especially for his having kindly made ready an Assamese rendering of it for simultaneous publication.

I have also to acknowledge my gratefulness to Sri Ambicagiri Roy Chowdhury, Editor, Deka Asom, to Dr. Umesh Chandra Bardoloi, Director of Health Services, Assam, to my cousin Sri K. Datta, M.A., Assistant Director of Public Instruction, Assam, to Sri G. C. Goswami, Electrical Adviser to the Government of Assam, to Dr. H. K. Barpujari, M.A., PH.D., Prof. of History, Cotton College, and Sri Satish Chandra Kakati, Editor, Asom Bani, for advice and information received from them in various ways. Sri Tankeswar Bora, Sri Krishna Kanta Majumdar, Sri T. Gogoi, Srimati Kamala Chowdhury, Sri Horendra Nongkynrih and my daughter Hemasree—all of them rendered help in preparing the manuscript and my thanks are due to all of them. Lastly, I must acknowledge my hearty thanks to Sri Bichitra Narayana Dutta Barua of Messrs Lawyers' Book Stall Gauhati, and to Sri K. C. Pal, Proprietor of the Nabajiban Press, Calcutta, for having so gladly co-operated with me in getting the book printed and published in time.

In conclusion I would like to express the hope that the importance and interest of the subject as a whole, in the context of our newly-won freedom, may induce the readers to forgive the short-comings of the book which, I am conscious, are many. My object has been to present the contributions of Assam to the freedom struggle in broad outlines and the very limits of my endeavour have precluded my dealing with districts or individuals in any detail. I have also omitted from the purview of this book any appraisal of the positive achievements of British Rule in Assam.

Shillong,

25th December, 1957

K. N. DUTT

FOREWORD

Assam, known as Kamarupa in ancient times, has a glorious ancient heritage. She has a history going back several centuries before the Christian Era. That history is full of heroic deeds done by valiant kings and generals and great humanitarian works done by well-known saints and seers. Bhagadutta, Kumar Vaskar Burman, Shri Harshadev Burman, Lachit Barphukan, Sri Sankardev, Shri Madhabdev, are amongst the many historic names that adorn the pages of her history. Though united with the rest of India at all times culturally and geographically, politically Assam was an independent State till the advent of the British power in 1826, when the six-hundred years old rule of the Ahoms came to an end. Assam was thus one of the latest victims of British imperialism in India, but it is gratifying to note that she was also one of the earliest to rise in national self-consciousness forging ahead her destiny in resurgent India.

No sooner did the British establish their rule in Assam than there began a series of plots and insurrections in the hills and plains of Assam to overthrow that rule. Heroes like Peali Barphukan and Teerut Singh took up arms against the British whom they considered as usurpers, within four years of their coming to Assam. They sacrificed their lives in the struggle. When 1857 came, Assam produced in Maniram Dewan a martyr to the cause of freedom of the country whose exploits are perhaps not yet as well-known throughout India as they should be. After this we come across a period of popular uprisings which are in many respects unique in their nature. Through them the people gave proof of their desire to be free from alien rule. With the dawn of the present century there developed associations and organisations like the Assam Association which ministered to the growth of political consciousness amongst the people of Assam.

When the struggle for freedom began under the banner of the Indian National Congress and the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi

Assam did not lag behind other provinces of India in participating in that struggle in all its phases. Assam had her leaders and selfless workers in both valleys to plunge into the non-violent struggle risking all penalties that repression brought with it. The people of Assam gave ample proof of their love of freedom by making remarkable contributions at every stage of the Congress Movement since 1920 to 1947.

I am glad that Shri K. N. Dutt has tried to present in these pages a brief but interesting account of all the salient features of Assam's contribution to the struggle for freedom of India. The presentation is, I believe, factual and objective on the whole, and I am happy to note that the publication has been timed to synchronise with the 63rd Session of the Indian National Congress to be held in Assam in January, 1958.

25. 12. 57

BISNURAM MEDHI

THE BACK-GROUND

In the perspective of Assam's past history the story of the freedom struggle in Assam has a unique interest of its own. Assam came under British occupation only in 1826 when the British power in most other parts of India had been consolidated. Before that, except for roughly a decade from 1816 to 1825 when the Burmese invaded Assam and conquered her for a while, there was an independent State in Assam. The ruling power of that State, the Ahoms, held sway for nearly six hundred years and defended the State heroically against all invasions from outside. There were repeated Mogul invasions and some of these were led by renowned and powerful Generals of the Moghul Emperors. But even these were repulsed by the Ahom Generals. One of these Generals, the most heroic amongst them, was Lachit Barphukan who beat back the powerful Moghul army led by Raja Ramsingha of Ambar in 1671 inflicting on him a crushing defeat at Saraighat. Even during the fateful days of Burmese invasions when the power of the Ahoms had declined, both Chandrakanta Singha and Purandar Singha, who had ascended the throne one after the other for short periods, made repeated attempts to drive out the Burmese by their own strength. But the sun of the Ahoms had set, and Assam passed into the hands of the British who came ostensibly to help the Assamese people to get rid of the Burmese and meanwhile occupied the country. Freedom to the people of Assam was therefore a question of life and death and they could not but engage in all kinds of efforts to regain freedom when it was once lost. The progress of the freedom struggle in Assam needs be viewed against this background. And true to the traditions of her people, Assam made remarkable contributions at every stage of the struggle.

The book *Landmarks of the Freedom Struggle in Assam* written by Prof. K. N. Dutt, presents the story of the freedom movement in Assam during British Rule. Having been engaged for sometime in research work in the records of the Assam Secretariat and then in the work of collection of materials from the

records of the Government in general for the History of the Freedom Movement Prof. Dutt has acquired a first-hand knowledge of the source-materials for that history. By his valuable contributions to the historical literature of Assam and especially by his research papers contributed to the Indian History Congress, some of which are mentioned in the Bibliography attached to this book, he received wide appreciation from the historians of India. He has also a personal and intimate knowledge of the Congress struggle for freedom. He came out of school in January 1921 in response to the call for Non-co-operation and worked as a Volunteer for about a year. In 1930 he came forward to organise the Kamrup Academy at Gauhati started in defiance of the Cunningham Circular and was the Head of that national institution in its formative period at a time of great political unrest in the country. Afterwards he worked for years as an able and efficient Professor of History always keeping himself in touch with all public questions.

I have gone through the book Sri Dutta has written with great interest. He has presented Assam's contributions to the freedom struggle in a series of bold clear pictures avoiding details, except in so far as these have been necessary to make the story lively. The opinions expressed in the book will, I think, be commonly acceptable. The account of the struggle as given by him is factual and the public will judge how facts have been marshalled by the writer and presented within the small compass of this book. Viewed chronologically the events and episodes described by the writer from period to period may not at first sight appear to have an underlying string of unity, especially with regard to the earlier half of that story. But the writer has succeeded in a great measure in unfolding a more or less continuous and unified story of the urge for freedom manifesting itself in different forms at different periods. The latest or the most recent periods are the most difficult to deal with historically because they belong to the living past, or in other words facts are within living memory and many who were directly concerned in the struggle are also living. But I believe Sri Dutt has executed his assignment in this regard with a dispassionate and objective outlook.

INTRODUCTION

In this work Professor K. N. Dutt of Assam has indicated the landmarks of the Freedom Struggle in Assam on the authority of various sources. As in other parts of India, so in Assam there were feelings of discontent against growing British political supremacy since it fell under its influence. The writer has referred to the rebellion of Gomdhar Konwar, a Prince of the Ahom ruling dynasty, who was supported by Peolia Bargohain and some old nobles of the Ahom Court as the first attempt in this respect. His rising was suppressed. But there were insurrections of the Khasis in 1829 and of the Singphos in 1830. The year 1830 was particularly significant as "a year of revolts in Assam," which have been studied and described in detail in this work. Teerut Singh, the leader of the Khasis, surrendered after a heroic resistance in 1833 and died soon as a prisoner at Dacca. Peali Barphukan and Jeoram Doolia Barua, leaders of the 1830 revolt in Upper Assam, were executed at Sibsagar in August, 1830. Four others including Konwar Ropchand and Bom Singpho were sentenced to fourteen years imprisonment at Dacca.

These earlier risings failed in their objects in the face of superior military organisation and administrative machinery of the British power. But from what the author of this book has stated, it appears that the new masters could not secure support and confidence of certain sections of the people of Assam. He has drawn our attention to a petition submitted by Maniram Dutta Dewan to Mr. Mills, a Judge of the Sadar Court, when in 1853 the latter visited Assam to report on the administration of that area. Maniram Dutta Dewan had earlier served as the Revenue Sheristadar of Upper Assam and afterwards as Minister of Purandar Singh on his restoration to the throne as a tributary Prince. Still Maniram Dutta Dewan analysed in this petition the evils of foreign administration in Assam and pleaded for restoration of native rule. The outbreak of the movement of 1857-59 in other parts of India encouraged him to think of challenging

British authority in Assam and he wrote from Calcutta secret letters to Saring Raja and some others for this. Sir Frederick Halliday, Lt. Governor of Bengal, observed in a Minute, dated the 30th September 1858; "It was about the sametime discovered by the authorities that some of these men, native officers and others, were in communication with the Sarang (Saring) Raja, Kandarpeswar Singh, residing at Jorhat, in whose house while proceeding on furlongh, they were reported to have held meetings by night. The old men of the disbanded Assam Militia had also been tampered with." Maniram Dutta Dewan was convicted of treason and hanged at Jorhat on the 26th February, 1858, along with Peali Barua. The Saring Raja was interned first at Burdwan and then at Gauhati, where he was kept as a political prisoner. Several others were sentenced to imprisonment or transportation.

The writer has pointed out how the period from 1860 to 1900 was marked by agrarian outbreaks as protests against the iniquitous economic burdens imposed on the people by the new masters, particularly the high rates of revenue. These were mainly the Phulaguri Uprising of 1861, the Jaintia Rebellions of 1860-62, the Manipur Rebellion and the Rising of the Eastern Lushais in 1891, the "Assam Riots" of 1894.

From the beginning of the twentieth century began a new period of national awakening, accompanied by a cultural renaissance. The formation of the Assam Association in 1903, as an All-Assam political organisation, was a significant event marking the growth of political consciousness in Assam in the stirring days of the first two decades of the present century when all throughout India the national movement gathered new momentum due to various forces. At the Nagpur Session of the Indian National Congress in December 1920, Assam was constituted as a separate Congress province. The author has discussed in chapters IV to VI the brilliant role of Assam, in the back-ground of All India events, in the subsequent phases of the Indian movement from the days of the Non-co-operation Movement till the attainment of Independence in 1947. In all phases Assam's response to the country's clarion call for liberty was enthusiastic, inspiring and fruitful. During the 41st Session of the Indian National Congress, held at Gauhati in 1926 there was spontaneous

and remarkable popular enthusiasm, and the Civil Disobedience Movement of the thirties added much impetus to it. The students took prominent part in all these phases of the movement and contributed much to their progress. Assam's heroic role in the Revolution of 1942, in the face of ruthless Governmental repression, has been well portrayed by the writer. This pioneer work of Prof. K. N. Dutt describing Assam's role in India's struggle for freedom is a creditable achievement, and I hope it would receive due appreciation from all.

DR. K. K. DATTA, M.A., PH.D., P.R.S.,
Patna University

British conquest of Assam

Assam passed into British hands in 1826 as a result of the First Burmese War (1824-26). Before this war took place in the history of Assam resulting in her subjection to a foreign power, there was no independent kingdom in Assam which had existed for thirty six centuries under the Ahom Kings—a unique record of dynastic rule in India. Taking advantage of the feuds and intrigues in the Ahom royal family and among the nobility during the opening decades of the last century the Burmese had several times invaded the country between 1819 and 1821 partly for the administration and establishing in its stead a Regency of Tonkin. The arrogance and cruelty of the Burmese in Assam and their aggressive rise provoked them to a war with the neighbouring British provinces whose dominions extended to the borders of Assam. This war, known as the First Burmese War, resulted in their ultimate defeat and humiliation. In the Treaty of Yandaboo that followed with the British on February 24, 1826, the King of Ava ceded the provinces of Assam and Tenasserim to the British East India Company.