

Growth of National Politics in Assam and the role of the Assam Chatra Sanmilian

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In this paper an attempt will be made to show the growing political importance of the student community of Assam in rousing national consciousness amongst all sections of the population in the Brahmaputra Valley. The period marks the beginning of National Politics in Assam and the students had much to do with it. The year 1916 saw the inception of the '*Assam Chatra Sanmilian*' (Assam Students' Conference), an organisation older than the *Assam Sahitya Sabha* and the Assam branch of the Indian National Congress. Therefore this organisation played a pioneering role in rousing popular consciousness and associating the province with the mainstream of the growing national movement in the country. As the annual sessions of this *Sanmilian* were attended by all sections of the people in the Brahmaputra Valley, it was through this Conference that the students made an attempt to bring about a social, economic and political regeneration. Important resolutions passed at the various sessions of this Conference gave the appearance that it was a forum where the national aspirations of the people were being nurtured. In this paper use has been made of the Home Political Files available in the National Archives, the Assam Police Abstract of Intelligence available at the office of the IGP, Special Branch, Gauhati, contemporary Assamese sources and these have been supplemented by secondary sources both in English and Assamese.

In 1916 was born the "Assam Students' Literary Conference", one of the oldest, if not the oldest students' organisations of India. The Assamese language had not received its due recognition during the period of the British administration in Assam, as Bengali was introduced as the Court language and the medium of instruction in schools in 1836. The reintroduction of the Assamese language as a medium of instruction in schools in 1873 remained largely on paper. The Assamese students took it upon themselves to work for national regeneration primarily through literary activities and contemplated the formation of the Assam Students' Literary Conference destined to play such an important role in the political struggle of Assam. Though the original purpose of the Conference was to give a fillip to the literary activities of Assam, in its very first session, after much debate and discussions, the

Conference was renamed the "*Assam Chatra Sanmilian*" thereby widening the scope of its activities.

The first session of the *Assam Chatra Sanmilian* was held at Gauhati on 25 December 1916 under the presidentship of Lakshminath Bezbaruah, the great literateur of Assam. The aims and objects of this Conference were defined in its Constitution as :

- (i) Improvement of the condition of the Assamese student community in all possible ways by giving them opportunities for organised action in any matter concerning their welfare, the development of their literary activities and supplementing the education imparted in schools and colleges by providing further scope for cultivating their mental, spiritual and physical faculties.
- (ii) This Conference shall have nothing to do with any political propaganda or political movements of any sort.¹

Thus began an era of selfless and dedicated service by this organisation for the uplift of the Assamese community and the nation at large.

Keeping in mind the political situation of the country, the *Assam Chatra Sanmilian* gradually enlarged the scope of its activities, and was instrumental in rousing political consciousness among the students and the people of the province. The third annual session which was held at Dibrugarh in the Puja holidays of 1918 holds particular interest as it was in the wake of the Montague-Chelmsford Reforms. At a time when such lively discussions were being held on the proposed reform ideas of Mr. Montague, the President of the session, Padmanath Gohain Barua, questioned the propriety of the constitution of the *Assam Chatra Sanmilian* which debarred students from holding political discussions.² At least a section of the national leaders realized the necessity of students gaining experience in politics and the prevailing conditions of the times had compelled the student community to take active part in politics which became a second nature with the student leadership.

As a proof of their political consciousness the students decided to invite eminent men of literature to preside over the various sessions of the *Sanmilian* with the twin objectives of acquainting the leading personalities and scholars of India with the conditions of Assam and inspiring the student organisations and the people of Assam with the spirit of nationalism. The session of the *Sanmilian* held at Tezpur in 1919 under the presidentship of Sir P. C. Ray, deserves special mention for more reasons than one. The

contribution of Sir P. C. Ray towards the people of Assam in imbuing the spirit of *Swadeshi* is unquestionable. Vividly expounding the economy of the province, he urged the students to exploit the vast resources of the province by taking to industry and commerce. He drew their attention to the valuable timber wealth of the province, the vast expanses of land lying uncultivated and the manner in which the alien tea planters were exploiting her extensive tea gardens. He pointed out that Assamese 'Endi', 'Mooga' and 'Paat' were famous all over the world and urged the ladies not to let the art of weaving die.³ Those words of Sir P. C. Ray had an overwhelming impact on the minds of the Assamese people as illustrated in the call which Omeo Kumar Das, on behalf of the student community, gave to the people of Assam to be self-reliant.⁴ A resolution was adopted to boycott all foreign goods and to promote the use of *Swadeshi* or indigenous goods.⁵ It is a matter of great credit that the students of Assam could inspire the people with the idea of self-reliance even before the Congress had adopted a resolution to this effect in 1920 in its special session held at Calcutta. Sir P. C. Ray also asked the students to prepare themselves to shoulder the responsibility of a responsible self-government.⁶ A song composed for this conference by Dandinath Kalita pledged the unity of all sons and daughters in the service of the motherland - "*Matri Sevak Santan Dal Aji Milichey.*"⁷

By the time of the fifth session of the *Sanmilan* held at Gola-ghat under the Presidentship of Dr. V. R. Bhandarkar, the students of Assam had already cast their eyes on a wider field of work. 1919 was a epoch-making year in the history of the Indian National Congress and the National Movement. It saw the imposition of the Rowlatt Act by the Government and the resulting massacre in Jallianwala Bagh of the Punjab. At this time the Muslims were agitated over issues in Turkey and they launched the Khilafat Movement as a protest against what they called the betrayal by the British Government. In August 1920, Gandhiji launched the Non-Cooperation Movement which was a direct outcome of the Khilafat Movement.⁸ In Assam, the older leaders held a moderate attitude regarding non-cooperation and as a matter of fact, "it is the students who began the movement in Assam."⁹

At the special session of the Congress held at Calcutta in September 1920 where the Non Cooperation Resolution was passed "the Assam Association delegates comprising of Nabin Chandra Bordoloi, Chandranath Sarma, Faijnur Ali and others found themselves to be divided on the issue of non-cooperation."¹⁰ As a

result the Assam Association delegates abstained from voting on the issue at Calcutta.¹¹ After their return from Calcutta a special session of the Assam Association was held at Gauhati on 11 October 1920 to discuss the programme of Non Cooperation in detail. This meeting was attended by the students of the Law College and the Cotton College.¹² From this time onwards the students were seen opposing the moderate views of the older generation for the students believed that without whole-hearted support to the programme of Non Cooperation India would never achieve her goal of freedom. Interestingly enough though it was unanimously decided at this meeting to take some steps for the boycott of all exisable goods promotion of hand-spun and *swadeshi* goods and the boycott of the forthcoming elections to the Councils, it was proposed that "the action on the withdrawal of boys and girls from the Government supported schools and colleges and the practice in lawcourts by lawyers was to be gradual."¹³ Some of the younger members like Chandranath Sarma, Ambika Giri Ray Choudhury and Trigunacharan Baruah demanded the immediate withdrawal of students from schools and colleges but the older leaders like Bordoloi and Phukan did not agree and therefore a "resolution calling for an immediate boycott of schools and colleges when passed by Trigunacharan Baruah, was in fact defeated."¹⁴ Even at a time when the political leaders of Assam were in two minds as to whether to support the administrative reforms of Sir Montague or to join the Non-Cooperation Movement, the students had already expressed their desire to leap into the movement by demanding an immediate boycott of schools and colleges.

The students of Assam saw in the Congress a potential base for their future plans of action and did everything within their reach to bring about a favourable atmosphere for the establishment of a provincial Congress Organisation. With the active support of the student community "the nationalization of the Assam Association was complete by the end of 1920."¹⁵

A student volunteer force was formed to erect the pandal. Working with great enthusiasm the students erected a number of gates near the *ferry ghat* which were named "Shaukat Ali Gate", "Gandhi Gate", "Swaraj Gate" etc.¹⁶ Student artists like Jagat Chandra Kachari and Pratap Chandra Dutta were entrusted with the task of organizing an exhibition of paintings to depict the political condition of India through pictures with a view to generate a new wave of political consciousness among the masses. These students were able to depict successfully how the Indian

cottage industry was languishing and how the **British Government** had ruined the native industry by imposing very heavy duties.¹⁷

The British Government could not have remained unaware of the growing political consciousness among the students and their obvious contribution in bringing about a national awakening. In November 1920, the Home Secretary of the Government of India reported :

“The most immoral is undoubtedly the mischievous attack which has been made on the youth of the country who are also to be sacrificed to the exigencies of a political campaign.”¹⁸

The Government believed that Gandhiji's conduct was disturbing the peace of educational institutions. At this critical juncture the students of Assam set out to remind the Assamese people of the brave dreams of Piyali Phukan and the revolutionary message of Maniram Dewan. They felt it was their responsibility to go to the villages to educate the rural masses about what was happening. Who was this man Gandhi ? - wanted to know the villagers. How could he dare to fight against the **British Government** without any weapons and win freedom ? Said a few - “Our ancestors were archers during the Ahom days ; give us an opportunity and see what we can do with our arrows.”¹⁹ The task ahead was not easy for the students.

The Nagpur session of the Congress was of far-reaching importance for it was at this session that the Congress decision to resort to Non-Cooperation was ratified. Political thinking in Assam at the time was mainly guided by Tarun Ram Phukan and Nabin Chandra Bordoloi, but both these leaders were opposed to the idea of Non-Cooperation in the beginning. So here again when a resolution was adopted for the boycott of schools and colleges, Assam had opposed the resolution.²⁰ Fortunately for Assam, simultaneously with the Nagpur Session of the Congress, the annual session of the All-India Students' Conference was also being held at Nagpur and Daiba Ram Talukdar, Sukdev Goswami, Kanak Chandra Deka, Bidyadhar Sarma, Tarun Chandra Bhattacharyya and Umesh Chandra Das were among the students from Cotton College who attended the Students' Conference at Nagpur. When these student leaders sensed the opinion of Tarun Ram Phukan and Nabin Chandra Bordoloi, they hurried back to Assam before the leaders could arrive.²¹ After the return of these students a “great sensation prevailed in the Cotton College boarding..... on the question of boycotting the college in obedience to the resolution passed by the All-India Students' Conference at Nagpur.”²²

Meanwhile the Assamese students in Calcutta set the example. In the beginning of January 1921 Prafulla Chandra Barua, a student of Ripon College, wrote to the Principal of his college, "I cannot continue my studies in an institution managed by the hands besmeared with the blood of many Punjabi brethren."²³ It is a matter of great pride for the student community of Assam that he was the first among all the students of Calcutta to boycott college during the Non-Cooperation Movement of 1921, and perhaps one of the first ones to boycott college in the whole of India.²⁴ Soon after him, other Assamese students of Calcutta like Lakhmi Dhan Sarma, Shiba Prasad Agarwalla, Nabin Chandra Barua and Umesh Chandra Bordoloi boycotted their colleges. No sooner did the news of boycott of colleges by the Calcutta students reach Gauhati, then young boys of Cotton College went from house to house and persuaded the leaders like Tarun Ram Phukan and Nabin Chandra Bordoloi to hold a meeting in the Curzon Hall. In the evening of 17 January, a meeting was held at which Chandranath Sarma announced his decision to suspend his practice as a lawyer in obedience to the resolution adopted by the All-India National Congress. It was also decided at this meeting that a National Fund would be started for the maintenance and education of the college boys deprived of maintenance by their parents for boycotting college against their will.²⁵ Steps were also taken to arrange for houses for accommodation of these college boys and it was decided that the boys would go on strike from 19 January. Not a single student opposed this move. In order to preclude the possibility of opposition by any student, a few students started picketing at the college gate. News of agitation in the Cotton College spread like wild fire all over the town. In view of the agitation Professor Roberts, the Principal of the Cotton College declared a month's holiday. The guardians of the students came from distant places to persuade their wards not to take part in politics. About one hundred and seventy students of the Cotton College took part in the strike. It is not wrong to say that "in Assam the real Non-Cooperation Movement of Gandhiji originated from the campus of the Cotton College."²⁶

By 22 January the Government reports admitted that, "with the exception of a very few boys almost the whole of the college students are apparently on strike now and the work of the teaching staff is at a standstill at present."²⁷ Inspired by the fiery speeches of Chandranath Sarma the students resolved to continue the strike until their goal of 'Swaraj' was achieved.

When the college authorities at Gauhati closed down the college, then Tarun Ram Phukan and Nabin Chandra Bordoloi arranged for the stay of the students in the house of Dr. Hare Krishna Das. It was now decided to engage the students for propaganda work in the villages in order to educate the rural masses of Assam on politics. On the instruction of the Working Committee of the Congress the APCC held a meeting on 27 November 1921 where it was decided to form the Assam National Volunteer Corps. Though a large number of people soon enrolled themselves as volunteers, students formed the bulk of the Volunteer Corps. The National Schools in reality became "Swaraj camps from which volunteers were sent out to every village in the district, to enrol workers and collect funds for Mr. Gandhi's army and treasury, the avowed object of which was to overthrow the Government as by law established."²⁸ It was from those Swaraj Camps that volunteers were sent out to enrol more volunteers, collect more funds, prevent the sale and consumption of exisable articles by force if necessary, to persuade the Government servants and the *Gaonburhas* to give up their appointments, to start "Gandhi Panchayats" in the villages and to dissuade the people from taking their cases to the law courts and to the police.²⁹ Excise shops were picketed, villagers were encouraged to writhhold payment of land-revenue and Government *hats* and fisheries were to be boycotted. The students made strenuous efforts to secure the boycott of *hats* particularly where this would unsettle the tea-garden labourers or cause inconvenience to the Europeans and the Government servants.³⁰ Tarun Ram Phukan wrote letters to the leading citizens of various districts which the students carried with them. They also carried with them paintings and pictures to be exhibited in the villages to teach the uneducated villagers about the Gandhian ideology of Non-Cooperation. These young students had little experience. Their only guide was their inspiration and courage which they derived from the sacrifices of Gandhiji. Not to be deterred by any hardship the young boys would often set out with only one set of clothes and a *Gamscha* at the most, and march through thick forests or knee-deep water spreading Gandhiji's message of *Swaraj*. They spread out to the most interior of the villages and succeeded in bringing about a national awakening among the villagers. The training of the rural masses had begun and the whole valley was vibrating with enthusiasm.

The volunteer organizations grow to such a degree that it caused genuine alarm to the district officials and "... the Government

decided to take action, declared the various volunteer organizations to be unlawful, and armed its officers with powers to deal with those organizations under the Criminal Law Amendment Act.³¹ A number of volunteers were arrested under this Act. Students who were arrested were either sentenced to rigorous imprisonment or left in some far off places.³² Most of the volunteers arrested under the Criminal Law Amendment Act in the various districts were students. Tuniram Hazarika compiled a long list of volunteers in North Lakhimpur who were forced to terminate their studies as a result of courting arrest as volunteers³³

Consequent to the boycott of the Government and Government aided schools and colleges a number of National Schools and Colleges were set up in different parts of the country. The Assamese students also felt the necessity of having such institutions in Assam. Chandra Nath Sarma, the pleader and the fire-brand leader of the Assamese students came to Gauhati and held a meeting with Tarun Ram Phukan, Kamakhya Barua, Bishnu Ram Medhi and others where it was decided to convert the Sonaram High School into a National School. Members of the Assam Association promised to donate funds for this purpose provided there were sufficient number of students willing to join this institution.³⁴ Great efforts were made to procure some land near the Sonaram High School for setting up a National College. The success of National School in Gauhati led to the setting up of many such National schools in the entire Brahmaputra Valley. National Schools were set up at Tezpur, Mangaldoi, Nowgong, Sootea, Rangiya, Palashbari and many other places.³⁵

The National Schools went a long way in providing education on nationalist lines. There was no fixed curriculum to be followed in those schools but their aim was to impart such education as would teach every one to be self-reliant and nationalist. At Tezpur while trying to decide what subjects were to be taught in the National School, students suggested subjects like Indian History, History of the Congress, Indian Economy, the Expansion of the British Empire, Commercial Geography etc. and those subjects were included in the curriculum. All the same time, boys were also taught how to make Japis.³⁶ In those national Schools the students got the opportunity to learn that the Britishers had not come to conquer India; they had come merely as traders. It was only due to the internal squabbling among the Indian people that they were able to become the rulers of India. If the Indian people could remain united the Britishers would be compelled to

quit India very soon.³⁷ These were the ideas which the students carried to the villages and the Congress was able to get mass support for their programme of Non-Cooperation.

Though the Non-Cooperation Movement launched by Gandhiji came to an end without expelling the Britishers from India, it was undoubtedly the first political struggle in which the students were involved in large numbers and their ungrudging sacrifice for the cause of the nation had won for them a high pedestal in the minds of the simple rural masses of Assam. This in itself was a remarkable contribution towards national awakening. The Student organisation displayed a remarkable degree of political consciousness since its inception in 1916. They endeavoured to bring about a national awakening through their thought-provoking articles, social service programmes and their selfless and dedicated service to the nation. When the political movement for the freedom of India began the students responded to the call of the nation by giving up their studies against the counsel of their guardians and the elders who wanted them to remain confined to their academic pursuits. The Congress had made a special reference to a group of boys from Assam who had displayed great political maturity during the Non-Cooperation Movement. In his concluding speech at the eighth Students' Conference held at Nowgong, Rev. C. F. Andrews congratulated the leaders and the office-bearers of the student organization acknowledging that, "there is a patriotism here of the best type, looking to the larger whole of India and yet cherishing the individual life of India."³⁸ The Congress saw in the students of Assam a potential base for their future plans of action, for they could provide radical leadership as well as command mass support. "As a matter of fact, so far as Assam is concerned in one sense the student organization was the spearhead of the national aspirations of the people of Assam, in another sense it was the precursor of the National Congress in Assam and yet in another sense it was an appendage to our national movement and national organization - the Congress."³⁹

Notes & References

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