

Nationalist Movements In Cachar Valley (1857-1947)

(ABSTRACT)

BY

Manjulika Bhattacharjee
DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY
SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

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ABSTRACT

THE NATIONALIST MOVEMENT IN THE CACHAR VALLEY

(1857 - 1947)

The title of the project is "The Nationalist Movement in the Cachar Valley" (1857-1947). It is an attempt to discuss the political movements in Cachar, Hailekandi and Karimganj districts of the Cachar Valley region of Assam in the perspective of overall national political scene. The work is the continuation of the dissertation entitled "The Cachar Valley During the Mutiny" for which I was awarded the M. Phil Degree of North-Eastern Hill University in 1986.

Though it is generally believed that the Sepoy Mutiny did not have any direct bearing on the subsequent political developments of Cachar Valley, we have some reasons for including the Mutiny as the starting point of our discussion. First, there are records to show that the rebel sepoys urged upon Indian Sepoys of the British side to join them and while doing so the rebels sought to hammer on the nationalist emotion of the latter. Thus the incident may be regarded as first pronouncement of nationalist feeling in the soil of the

Cachar Valley. Secondly, the rebels fought a series of battles in the Valley against the British and the turmoil thus created was destined to leave behind a deep imprint on the minds of the people which helped developing political awareness - a pre-requisite for the growth of nationalism. Thirdly, from oral tradition we can discern positive evidence to show that the down trodden people of the Valley had deep sympathies for the cause the sepoye were fighting for and the manifestation of this sympathy had found expression in long folk narratives which has been retained by the masses through recitals for more than a Century. Since history takes into account both immediate and remote causes, we think that the happenings during the mutiny are not as insignificant as normally believed in the context of the Cachar Valley.

1. STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

The situation of the Cachar Valley, political, social as well as economic, during the pre-independence days contained some distinctive features which prompted me to undertake the present work. These features may be summarised as follows :

i) Though within the political boundary of Assam, the Cachar plain, for all practical purposes, is a geographical extension of Bengal. It demarcates, in a general way, the

border between the riverine Bengal and the hilly Assam. So far as the linguistic and cultural affinities are concerned it is directly connected with Sylhet, the district which now forms a part of Bangladesh. This cultural and linguistic affinity with the rest of Bengal, which is regarded as the cradle of Indian Nationalism, had spontaneously plunged the region into the main stream of the Indian national movement.

ii) The province of Assam was constituted by the British in 1874 and the districts of Cachar and Sylhet (which then included as a sub-division of the modern Karimganj district of the Cachar Valley) was incorporated in the newly formed province to make it economically viable. The decision was not a popular one to the people of the Cachar Valley and the people agitated from time to time for re-union with Bengal. This demand for re-union was one of the major political issues that dominated the regional political scene for more than seventy years.

iii) The central leadership of the Indian National Congress had a national appreciation for this demand of re-union and hence the district Congress Committees of Cachar and Sylhet were allowed to function as constituents of Bengal Provincial Congress Committee. Though for the purpose of administration the Cachar Valley had been an integral part of the province of Assam, politically the region was tied up

with Bengal. All along this dichotomy had a mixed impact on the later political developments of the region, and this aspect is being examined by me critically.

iv) Tea Industry had been and still is a vital economic sector in Cachar. The community of tea-garden labourers is composed of immigrants, brought by labour contractors from distant lands like Bihar, Orissa, Central Province and other regions. On the other hand the white-collared jobs of the tea industry were, more or less, monopolised by the Bengalis. These jobholders were, socially and economically, associated with the general middle class stratum of the valley. The labourers, on the other hand, were dumped in their barracks and lived very much under ghetto-like circumstances. Seldom the white-collared workers did try to establish any fraternal relation with the down-trodden partners of the same industry. There are instances where middle class sympathy was with the European planters and not with the labourers. It is interesting to note that in the early twenties of the present century there was a great uprising of the tea-garden labourers, and this uprising attained a national significance for the time being. But since then we do not find any significant role of the labour class in the struggle for freedom. It is worth examining whether the attitude of the local middle class, regarded as the vanguard of the national movement, had any responsibility for which the garden labourers had failed to

perform their historic role as the only labour force of the region.

v) The population composition of the valley also contains elements of ethnic and communal complexities and contradictions. This factor, at times, hampered the process of consolidation of the masses behind the demand for independence. It appears reasonable to assess to what extent these contradictions were effective in determining the character of the freedom movement in this region.

vi) The course of history is a continuous process and political developments along with their social and economic dimensions take place not as independent incidents but as components of the overall historical process. It is not possible to compartmentalise all the phenomena which played roles, major or minor, in the formulation of the political movements of the region. Attempts are made here to examine the situation in its totality and we hope such attempts are capable of developing a better insight into the happenings that shaped the political destiny of the region under discussion.

2. SURVEY OF LITERATURE

Dr. J.B. Bhattacharjee in his book "Cachar Under

British Rule in North East India", dealt in detail the impact of the British Rule in Cachar. In fact, it is this book which inspired us to undertake the present project. The objective of his book was broadbased but he spared quite a number of pages on the regeneration of Cachar in the nineteenth century and subsequent culmination of this regeneration into the participation of the Cachar people in the struggle for India's freedom. So the work of Dr. Bhattacharjee is of immense value to any investigator who wants to make further studies on the subject.

The Government of Assam published three volumes entitled "Political History of Assam" under the editorship of some scholars. The project was undertaken to prepare a well documented work on the freedom movement of Assam since the days of the Mutiny. The volume had a wide region to cover and the district of Cachar was not adequately covered in it. However, there are some materials which is of some help to draw a primary outline of the nationalistic activities which took place in Cachar.

Dr. Amalendu Guha in his book "From Planter Raj to Swaraj" emphasised on the legislative history of Assam. But as background he also drew a general outline of the freedom movement in Assam. In the process Cachar also received some of his attention. His documentation with regard to Assembly

Proceedings is very important. Also we get from his book a glimpse of the growth and development of the leftist movement in Assam in general.

Sir Nirode Gupta, a veteran freedom fighter of Sylhet, compiled two books, one on the important personalities of Sylhet and Cachar, and another on the freedom movement in the same region. Both the books appeared to be helpful for our project. The two volumes of "Srihatter Itibritta" (Bengali) by A.C. Chaudhury and one volume of "Cacharer Itibritta" (Bengali) by U.C. Guha dealt with the history of Sylhet and Cachar till twentieth century, and these two books are important for the data they supplied on the socio-cultural situation of the region under discussion, in the early phase of the British rule.

Another book by Chanchal Kumar Sharma on the growth and development of the Communist Movement in the Surma Valley is also important.

Shri Brojendra Narayan Choudhury, a famous Congress leader who had been a member of the Central Legislative Assembly in the thirties, wrote an autobiography in which his personal involvement in the freedom movement was narrated in details. This Bengali book contains some valuable information which give us a deep penetration into the inner politics

of the Cachar Valley vis-a-vis the Brahmaputra Valley. Another Congressman, Sri Rabindranath Aditya, who was also the Chief Whip of the Congress Legislative Party in Assam Assembly in 1946, published a pamphlet which also contains some informations. Sri Upendranath Dhar of Mailakendi wrote a book on the terrorists' activities in the region, he himself being a member of one of the terrorist group.

Moreover, different weeklies and other periodicals published from time to time from Cachar, and a number of articles on aspects and personalities, which are published in these periodicals and elsewhere have some bearing on the freedom movement, are of immense importance.

Besides these books, some other books of general nature like "District Gazetteer", "Census Hand Book" etc. refer to some points which have been profitably utilised by us. It should, however, be noted that the publications cited here though important by their own rights, deal with specific areas without offering a comprehensive picture of the political movements in the Barak Valley during the 1857-1947 period.

3. OBJECTIVES

The objective of the present dissertation may be

summarised as follows :

- (a) To reconstruct the different stages of the freedom movement.
- (b) Trace the social, economic and cultural background that played a tangible role in determining the various causes of the movement.
- (c) To place the freedom movement of Cachar in the perspective of the national movement as a whole.
- (d) To examine the background for which different segments of the society participated in the movement.
- (e) To bring out the reasons for which some sections of the people remained indifferent towards the movement.
- (f) To examine in the regional context the contradictions, ethnic, linguistic and religious, which existed in the society, and to assess their impact on the different phases of the movement.
- (g) To formulate some general observations on the basis of the points mentioned above.

4. DATA

We have already mentioned some books and monographs

which we have found to be of help for our investigations. But since our plan is to investigate the matter in some details and we intend to cover maximum possible extent related with the topic, we obviously have gone for collecting data of more primary and basic character. We have classified these data in the following manner :

- i) Published official documents available in Delhi which include East Indian Constitutional Reforms, 1927, East Indian Constitutional Reforms, 1937 etc. we have consulted most of the documents and have found some of them important and relevant for our purpose.

- ii) Unpublished official documents available in the National Archives of India, New Delhi, Home Political Proceedings, 1921 to 1931, Proceedings of the Central Legislature, Proceedings of the Foreign Departments, Bengal Political Consultation etc. In fact we have consulted most of the Home Political Proceedings and Foreign Political Proceedings. It is unfortunate that some of the important documents are not traceable in the National Archives and some other are regarded as classified, and so not available for consultation. However, we have succeeded in tracing out some useful informations from the available papers, and these are profitably used in our investigations. We have consulted some of the proceedings of the Central Legislature.

iii) Unpublished unofficial documents and reports are available in Delhi, particularly the All India Congress Committee Papers, now preserved in Nehru Museum. We have consulted the proceedings of the All India Congress Committee, 1905-1931, and collected relevant information. The papers reveal some interesting features regarding the Congress movement in the Cachar Valley.

iv) Materials available in the Archives of the Government of West Bengal.

We went through some of the documents while working on my M. Phil Degree. We also collected at that time some materials, particularly with regard to the early phase of the British Rule in the Valley, which is of immense value for our present work. In Calcutta, we have utilised the materials preserved in the Jatindramohan Sangrahalaya, maintained by the National Council of Education ; Jadavpur where weeklies, journals and newspapers-published from Sylhet and Cachar are available. This valuable collection was donated to the National Council of Education by Late Prof. Jatindra Mohan Bhattacharjee.

v) The published official documents and reports available in Assam include Assam Legislative Assembly and Council Proceedings, History of Freedom Movement Records, Dispur,

Assam ; the political confidential reports are available at the Records Office of Assam Civil Secretariat. Some correspondences and other materials are available at District Record Office at Silchar. We have also consulted those materials.

vi) In some weeklies and periodicals in Cachar, a number of articles have been published from time to time on different aspects of the freedom movement in Cachar. Some of them contain valuable informations particularly with regard to local problems and dimensions. We have utilised some such articles written by some local freedom fighters, journalists and trade unionists, we also interviewed some prominent individuals who had direct link with the movement.

5. ORGANISATION

CHAPTER - I

This chapter deals with the historical background and socio-political developments of the Cachar Valley till the Sepoy Mutiny.

The early history of Cachar and Hailakendi districts of the Cachar Valley is obscure and hazy. The sculptural remains of Shuban hill and other ruins scattered around different parts speak of existence of a political power in the

region, but there is no means to ascertain their actual historical context. It is believed that the region formed a remote outpost of the Tripura Kingdom till sixteenth Century and then it was passed on to Koch Kingdom through the efforts of Chilarai. Subsequently the Kocha rulers built up a petty kingdom which became a part of the Dimasa Kingdom when Dimasa prince Lakshminarsayan married the Kocha princess. Since then the Cachar plains continued to be a part of the Dimasa Kingdom till 1832. Raja Govindchandra, the last ruler of the Dimasa house, died without leaving any male heir and the British occupied the territory by a proclamation. During this period of transition some Manipuri princes tried to take advantage of the situation. The most important of these princes was Gambhir Singh, who ultimately occupied the throne of Manipur. The British bought peace with him by sacrificing an important tract of land belonging to erstwhile Dimasa Kingdom.

Initially, the British tried to retain the indigenous system of collecting revenue and not to disturb the earlier administrative structure. But soon it became apparent that the old system won't do. So, some innovation had to be made and for running this new set up it became necessary to bring literate men from neighbouring districts of Sylhet. Also, the Dimasa royal house had encouraged immigration for utilisation of fellow tracts of land of Cachar plains and

that made Cachar a Bengali speaking region even before the advent of the British. The British occupation further hastened the process. The discovery of tea brought white-collared employees from Sylhet whereas the labourers were recruited from U.P., Bihar and Central province. Thus the British occupation brought about a change not only in the administrative set up but it also effected a demographic transformation.

The district of Karimganj has a different historical background. The district was a part of Banga-Samatata since not later than the tenth century and continued to be a part of Bengal during the days of the Sultanate and the Rughals. So, the district retained transactions with Indian main land throughout the historical period. The region was incorporated within British Indian territory as a component unit of the Bangla Suba in 1765 when the Company received the Dewani of Bengal. So, British occupation of Karimganj took place more than seventy years earlier than that of Cachar plains. Thus the region, for historical reasons, has an advanced social structure, political outlook and intellectual heritage than Cachar plains, i.e. Hailekandi and Cachar district.

CHAPTER - II

Chapter II deals with the impact of the Sepoy Mutiny in Cachar.

Initially, the Valley did not encounter any direct impact of the Mutiny. The Superintendent of Cachar in a number of letters said that the condition of his district was quite peaceful. But situation was changed when a contingent of rebel sepoyes from Chittagong reached Sylhet and then proceeded towards Cachar. A stiff encounter took place at Latu, a village of Karimganj Sub-division, in which both the parties suffered losses. Major Byng, the Commandant of the Company's troop was killed alongwith some other members of his contingent. Several rebels were also killed. The Superintendent of Cachar took precautionary measures and sent troop in different directions to combat the threat. A number of encounters in hilly surroundings took place and ultimately most of the rebels were either killed or captured. Tea-planters helped the government in collecting information as to the movements of the Sepoyes. The Superintendent of Cachar apprehended that there might be some tribal risings taking advantage of the situation. But that did not happen. Only some Manipuri princes tried to make liason with the rebels and march to Manipur. But the bid was successfully thwarted.

All written records state that the Mutiny could not make any impression on the native inhabitants of the Valley. But indigenous oral tradition manifests evidence to the contrary. It appears that a long narrative was composed depicting the rebels as heroes and this narrative is sung till

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this day by village bards. Thus it is apparent that rural folk had been sympathetic towards the Mutiny though they did not give any open support to the sepoys because of local constraints.

CHAPTER - III

Chapter III deals with the impact of the Bengali Renaissance on the Valley.

The Surma Valley districts of Sylhet and Cachar was not in the possession of an infra-structure to respond immediately to the new ideas generated by the new intellectual environment that grew around Calcutta through contacts with liberal ideas of the west. In this respect, Cachar was more backward than Sylhet.

During the Dimasah rule, no system of education worth the name was there in Cachar. So, the new immigrant middle class had to take initiative with lukewarm response from the Government for introduction of English education in the district. However, gradually the obstacles were effectively dealt with and by the end of the nineteenth century a moderate structure was built up to impart English education to the willing students. But the response of the native rural folk was unenthusiastic and most of the students actually came from

the immigrant middle class.

However, the introduction of English Education created an atmosphere for undertaking tasks related to social reforms. Installation of a printing press facilitated publication of newspapers. Kamini Kumar Chanda took initiatives to infuse modern ideas in the minds of the people. Lawyers and teachers took lead in debating over relevant social issues. Thus by the end of the nineteenth century the middle class of the urban or semi-urban areas became conversant with most of the social issues of the time. But social awareness thus created was yet to assume a political form.

CHAPTER - IV

Chapter IV deals with the question of re-union of Sylhet-Cachar with Bengal.

In 1874, Assam was made a Chief-Commissioners Province and two Bengali-speaking districts of Sylhet and Cachar was incorporated within the new province presumably for administrative conveniences. There was immediate reactions, mainly from Sylhet. The district of Sylhet was a permanently settled district and the Zemindars of Sylhet was apprehensive that their rights and privileges would be jeopardised in Assam because the Brahmaputra Valley was not a permanently

settled area berring a portion of Goalpara district. The Zaminders of Sylhet submitted a memorandum to the Viceroy where besides this apprehension, mentions were made of linguistic, cultural and social differences of two Valleys. The Viceroy rejected the memorandum but assured that the rights and privileges enjoyed by the people would not be interfered with.

In 1905, the re-union question came into prominence in the Surma Valley where anti-partition movement took the form of the Re-union Movement. Kamini Kumer Chanda of Silchar took prominent part in it and Bipin Chandra Pal, who originally hailed from Sylhet, inspired the movement by touring the Valley. The Surma Valley political conference became a permanent body in the wake of this movement and in its sessions agitational programmes were undertaken.

In the twenties of this century the re-union question featured prominently in the Central and State legislature. Kamini Kumer Chanda was the most vocal spokesman of re-union in Central Legislature whereas in the State Legislature Brojendra Narayan Choudhury was its most staunch exponent. The members of the Brahmaputra Valley also supported the move. But gradually a cleavage was created between the Hindu and Muslim members and the question was finally abandoned when a motion was lost in the State Assembly in 1937.

CHAPTER - V

Chapter V deals with the Non-Co-Operation Movement and the Civil Disobedience Movement.

Non-Co-Operation Movement, accompanied by the Khilafat Movement made a tremendous impact in the Surma Valley and this time, atleast, the district of Cachar did not lag behind its more advanced counterpart, the district of Sylhet. This was so because of the large-scale participation of the Muslims who came out for the first time to participate in active politics. A joint visit by Mahatma Gandhi and Ali Brothers added further impetus to the mass awakening. This movement actually brought about a qualitative change in the level of political consciousness of the people.

Whereas Non-Co-Operation Movement was conducted with the spontaneous support of the people, the Civil Disobedience Movement was a more organised Movement. Indian National Congress was now an organised body both in Sylhet and Cachar and under the able leadership of Brijendra Narayan Choudhury the Valley responded befittingly to the call given by Indian National Congress. Most important feature of the movement was the large-scale participation of women and students in the agitational and action programme.

The response of the Muslims in the Civil Disobedience Movement was lukewarm. By this time, Surma Valley Muslim League became an organised body under the leadership of Abdul Matin Choudhury and the party succeeded in alienating Muslims from the freedom movement.

CHAPTER - VI

Chapter VI deals with the Terrorist activities undertaken by different groups of revolutionary organisations in this Valley.

Side by side with the broad-based national movement there had always been a parallel stream of activities which did not conform to the creed of non-violence which was the basic theme of the Congress philosophy. A young section of political workers took their cues from different extremist groups operating from Calcutta, Dacca and Chittagong. Though the number of such workers were limited, but they exerted a good deal of influence over the political scene of the region. Almost all the outfits of the extremists like Jugantar Party, Anusilan Samity, Suhrit Sangha, Sakti Sangha and Bengal Volunteers had their men in the Valley and often the leaders of these organisations opted this valley as their safe hide out. Apart from these activities, in the thirties Silchar became the centre of a revolutionary group which undertook a

programme of liberating the north-east. Sanat Dutta was the leader of this group which took up the task of organising the tribes of north eastern frontier agency in right earnest. Most members of the group were arrested after the Tineukia Mail robbery. Sanat Dutta was arrested in Bangkok and served prison terms with his colleagues.

CHAPTER - VII

Chapter VII deals with the involvement of the peasants and workers in the political scene of the valley. The tea garden labourers of the valley, as early as 1920, launched a determined movement against the oppression of the British Planters and the movement attained a national significance and leaders of national stature like J.M. Sengupta and Dinabandhu C.F. Andrews took up their cause. Unfortunately, the local leadership of the Congress did not make a proper appraisal of this uprising and had failed to take follow up actions to consolidate the labourers. It is after two decades the leaders took up the task of organising the tea-garden labourers under the banner of Sylhet Cachar Cha Bagan Mazdoors Union which was sponsored by the Indian Trade Union Congress. At the same time some left-wing workers within the Congress took interest in organising the peasants. Arun Kumar Chanda himself took a leading part in the formation of some unions

in official and semi-official sector. This chapter has thrown some light on the contradictions that existed within the urban middle class on the one hand and the peasantry and the labourers on the other. This contradiction, in fact did not allow the down trodden class of the valley to play a significant role in the national movement.

CHAPTER - VIII

The last chapter deals with the last phase of the British Raj in the context of Cachar in particular and the subcontinent in general.

When the partition of India became a certainty, there was a forceful demand for the incorporation of Cachar within Pakistan. But the people of Cachar successfully resisted this threat and when the partition plan was announced Cachar remained with India though the neighbouring district of Sylhet, barring the four thanas of the then Karimganj Sub-division, was merged with Pakistan.

Even during the worst days of 1946-47, the Valley did not witness any large-scale riot but the impact of communalism vitiated the atmosphere before and immediately after independence. The last chapter has detailed the background of the partition. Also there is an attempt to discern a relationship between the past and the present which shows that the

legacy of the freedom movement with its positive and negative aspects exert influence on the socio-political developments of the Cachar Valley even after four decades of independence.

6. MAJOR FINDINGS

The investigation was undertaken to trace the developments, social, political and economic, which ultimately brought the Cachar Valley, a remotest corner of the country, into the main stream of Indian struggle for independence. Following are the major findings revealed in course of our investigation.

a) The Cachar Valley, comprising a part of the erstwhile Dimasah Kingdom and Karimganj Sub-division of erstwhile Sylhet actually formed two distinct divisions in respect of Social and Political advancement inspite of linguistic affinity between the two. Primarily, this difference owes its origin to the fact that Karimganj had all along been a part of Bangla Subha and was incorporated in the British territory in 1765. The Cachar Prince had been under a tribal ruling house and it was annexed by the British in 1832. So, the course of social development differs because of the difference in the course of the political history.

b) Though from the political records no evidence can be found to postulate any direct impact of the Sepoy Mutiny in the Valley, our investigation reveals that the people of the so-called lower segments of the Society had all sympathy for the rebel sepoys and this sympathy was expressed in folk narratives which the oral tradition has retained till this date.

c) The impact of the Bengal Renaissance in the Valley percolated at a slow pace and though some members of the urban middle class were imbued by the new ideas, the impact was only marginal on the common people.

d) When the Bengali speaking districts were tagged with the province of Assam in 1874, there were reaction in the Valley, but there was no major reactions in Bengal proper. It is only in the wake of the Banga Shanga Movement of 1905 that the leadership of Bengal showed some interest in the question of re-union of Sylhet and Cachar with Bengal. When partition of Bengal was annulled in 1912, this interest was lost again. Subsequently the question of re-union became a part of the Congress campaign but the issue did never receive proper attention of the national leaders since 1920. The leadership of the Valley were left to themselves to fight the issue.

e) A survey of the Valley's participation in the Congress

movements reveals that large-scale involvement of the people was more evident in the Non-Co-Operation Movement of 1921. It is so because Khilafat question inspired Muslim masses to participate in the movement. The Civil Disobedience Movement was conducted with more organisational ability but Muslims in general remained indifferent. Response to the Quit India Movement was concentrated in some urban pockets mainly because of two reasons :

- (1) In the thirties, some key positions of the Congress Organisation went to communists and since they opposed the Quit India Movement, full strength of the organisation could not be mobilised behind the Congress cause.
- (2) The expulsion of Subhas Chandra Bose from Congress alienated an active section of Congress Workers.
- f) Though objective conditions were there, no serious attempt was taken to involve the working class in the National movement. In the thirties, the Communists took initiative to mind this drawback, but Congress could not benefit much from this late venture as Communists parted way with Congress in 1942.

(g) Though the Cachar Valley was inhabited by diverge groups of people whose attitude towards gradual political developments was never alike and at times contradictory to each other, there was no largescale or prolonged violence in Cachar during the period under our study. This suggests ^{the} existence of a kind of social understanding that operated beneath surface-level contradictions manifested in the political arena. This positive feature still persists in the Cachar Valley where some of the old contradictions still play a significant role in the game of power politics, but social peace, though at time seriously threatened, has not been subjected to serious or prolonged disruption during the four post-independent decades.

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