

Socio-Political Implications of the Reformed Constitution in Assam (1920-28)

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The application of the representative system in Assam at the local level and the working of the reformed Constitution under Dyarchy could undoubtedly be viewed as moderate steps forward in the democratisation of the political process and notwithstanding the official control and weightage the system generated creative interest among the educated sections of the people who were provided with necessary drive and opportunity to exercise their leadership potential. Popular control though partial had its educative effect and ensured mobilisation of the people so much so that their socio-economic interests had to be highlighted by the elective representatives at various forums - a mechanism which ultimately got politicised through the dynamism generated by the Congress Swarajists whose activities had only made them mere eyesore of the Government.

Reformed Council

In the Council of 1912 there were 11 elected members. Since the Reforms of the Assam Legislative Council had contained 39 elected members, 33 from the general Constituencies, 1 from the Commerce and Industry Constituency and 5 from the planting Constituencies. In 1924 the Council passed a resolution recommending the extension of the franchise to women who were however debarred from the right to stand for election. The social background of the Council members elected in 1920, 1923 and 1926 reveals that lawyers by profession formed rather more than one third of the candidates for the last two councils and nearly one half of the elected members. With the members who depended for a livelihood on rent from land, they formed more than two thirds of the elected members.

There were very few candidates from the classes engaging personally in agriculture and the number of Mauzadar candidates had fallen off in 1923 and 1926 elections. Except for two men of business, one agriculturist, one minister of religion and the planting candidates none but lawyers or land holders was returned to the council in 1926. On a classification of Hindu candidates by caste it appeared that there were no candidates from the lower orders save for the first election, while only the following twelve castes in which one fifth of the population was tabulated at the 1921 census had secured representation by persons of their own number.'

Caste	Candidates (Total for three elections).	Members	Population in 1921
Bengalee Brahmins	10	3	54,184
Baidya	2	1	5,438
Vaisya	10	5	24,435
Kayastha	29	15	93,830
Sudra	4	nil	165,921
Assamese Brahmins	20	7	93,451
Assamese Kayasthas	24	12	25,719
Kalita	24	10	234,691
Keot	2	1	94,593
Koch	17	4	223,679
Ahom	10	3	210,429
Jogi/Nath	1	nil	161,410

Party System

The only organised party of the period was the Congress party and it is hard to trace the existance of any other party in the constituencies beyond the divisions between the communities and valleys which led to claims and counter claims ; e.g that there should be a medical school for the Surma valley and a leper hospital for the Assam valley. Save in so far as political considerations dictated support for or opposition to, Government or in so far as division ran on communal or territorial lines, policy at headquarters depended upon no organised opinion in the electorate. The Temperance Act, which transferred a function from the local bodies to a special electorate of all males not below the age of 20 and the campaign

against opium, represented the feelings of the educated middle classes which monopolised the Council. The general policy of resistance to taxation, the provision of a rural water supply and the extension of kalazar treatment, were measures desired and appreciated by all classes, but the actual initiative and the development of a programme lay with the Minister. On the other hand, certain items of the policy which predominated in the Council and the Ministry, such as the development of avenues of employment, technical and industrial schools, the provincialisation of posts and the grant of practically free professional education were such as the rural voters could have little interest in.

Impact of Non-Cooperation Movement

The introduction of Reforms was made against the background of the Non-Cooperation Movement. The movement had made permanent and lasting effect on the attitude of the people towards the then ruling elite. Hitherto Europeans and officials had been regarded if not as friends atleast not as enemies, but the movement created a feeling of animosity towards them and generated political consciousness among the people in general. It was officially admitted that the result of the movement was lessening of respect for Government and for those who supported Government. Many of the people held the conviction that Government measures were repressive and vindictive. The Government however took a complacent view in being able to assert its authority in course of the movement to maintain its image so necessary for retention of its hold. In Cachar the Non-Cooperation Movement created a great effect which subsisted for many years. The district was greatly excited over the Khilafat Movement and the one sponsored by Gandhi. As recorded by the Deputy Commissioner of Cachar in 1928 : "The effect of the Movement has not yet departed. On the one hand there is a great sprit of discourtesy ; no school boy will salute a European and no one will give a helping hand by, for example assisting to push a Europeans' car out of a hole in the road. On the other hand Government is considered to have acted weakly during the time of violent agitation and to have failed to support since those who remained loyal throughout those difficult days. Not only is disloyalty regarded as perfectly safe, it is openly spoken of as being far more paying than loyalty."² In Kam-

rup the Movement provoked feelings of hostility to Government and stimulated a lively interest in political issues. In Nowgong, the Movement equally produced a lasting effect among the people. As the Deputy Commissioner of Nowgong reported, "It did much to uproot their trust in the righteousness of British rule, and its chief result is to be found in a new spirit of defiance among the younger generation (the volunteers of that time) which is clearly manifested against the Government authorities"³ In Darrang the villagers were very much attracted towards the non-cooperation movement and the Congress leadership successfully maintained the political mobilisation of the masses even though many of them had no clear notion as to the implications of the Swaraj. In Lakhimpur the people became more articulate in identifying their grievances against British officials and the Govt. and Swarajists leaders provided the necessary inspiration in this regard. However, the message of Non-Cooperation could hardly reach the tea garden and ex-tea garden labour classes. In short, the Movement shook the apathy of the masses and the ascetic outfits of Gandhi had proved very much appealing to their heart.

Contribution of Press

During the period under analysis the province had still no daily Newspaper. Press actively was confined to weeklies or fortnightlies depending for current news and the formation of opinion upon the Calcutta dailies, some of which had a fair clientele in the towns. There were two English weeklies and much the same number of bilingual or vernacular periodicals as in 1920. The number of monthlies and other periodicals purveying not news, but literary and social matter to the educated class, had however considerably increased. One of the News-sheets only was definitely a party organ and adopted the Congress views. The press in general too had contributed towards the development of consciousness among the people. In the district of Sylhet vernacular newspapers were more widely read and the years following the Movement there developed four vernacular papers and one in English. The 'Desabrata' and the 'Jugabani' were said to have weekly circulation of 1000 each.⁴ The 'Janasakti' was then trying to make a wider appeal with an English supplement. The weekly 'Paridarsak' was also trying to attract subscribers. The 'Sylhet

Chronicle', an English Weekly, had also 500 subscribers. However it is the Calcutta newspapers which had the highest circulation in the district and which influenced public opinion. At the same time, the circulation of the 'Englishman' was on the increase. In the rural areas the news filtered down to the cultivators especially from the village school masters who were generally meticulous in reading newspapers. However, in Cachar the influence of the press was rather insignificant. At the height of the non-cooperation movement the Ananda Bazar Patrika and Basumati had a circulation of 150 each in Silchar.⁵ The Muslim paper "Mahommedia" had a very small circulation in Cachar. In Goalpara Calcutta newspapers were extensively read especially by the educated class and even some of the uneducated lot used to take the services of the former in getting the important items of the Newspapers read before them. People had also taken keen interest in a vernacular Weekly "Prantabashi" started in the district in 1927.⁶ In Kamrup, Darrang and Sibsagar the "Assamiya" and the "Times of Assam" had started influencing public opinion and the former had earned more popularity by emphasising local issues and problems and criticising Government for its failure. In Lakhimpur the "Times of Assam" had a circulation of 2500 and the "Assamiya" reached many villages of the district much to the annoyance of the officials. The uneducated masses seem to have developed a habit of imbibing their ideas mostly from the 'Assamiya' made known to them by the educated sections. The Government often felt alarmed as the popular leaders had started the practice of echoing anti-Government feelings generally through the press.

Popular interest in local Government bodies

The representative character of the local bodies had of course been much closer, especially in the case of rural members. The development of interests in representative institutions was spectacular during the working of Reformed Constitution. In Goalpara considerable interests was evinced at the time of election to the Local and Municipal Boards which was evident from the number of candidates seeking election.⁷ People with some education appeared to take greater interest in political matters since the non-cooperation days than before and the Congress Swarajists and workers were eager to work up the feelings of the masses in order to demonstrate

a measure of popular enthusiasm in such matters. The joining to the Congress Party of some of the leading educated members of the district was looked upon with apprehension by the Government and the Congress influence spread especially after the Congress session held in Assam in 1926. In Kamrup a similar interest was displayed and election to local and Municipal boards were more keenly fought and nominations more eagerly sought than they used to be. As recorded officially : "the deliberations in the meetings were more prolonged and perhaps more intelligent than heretofore." In Nowgong various low castes evinced interest in Local Board elections as a means of enhancing their social respectability. In Darrang one could notice keener contests than there used to be and there were relatively more candidates standing for election. In this district there existed a number of Raiyats' Association such as the Bishwanath and Naduar Sabhas which used to meet from time to time and pass resolutions on matters of local interest. These Sabhas were however dominated by local gentries but the part actually taken by the villagers was indeed impressive. These associations served a useful purpose in focusing attention on such matters as roads, schools, water supply, settlement of road etc. In Lakhmimpur, the Swarajsts dominated the local boards and municipality affairs and local mauzadars had to often submit themselves before their wishes.

Religious and Social Organisations

During the period under review there was an increased interest in religious and social organisation. In Sylhet Anjuman Islamias started more as quasi-political forums. In some places of the district Tabligh and Tauzim work had also been started by the Muslims. However, there were fewer developments in Hindu religious and social organisations. As reported by a non-official Hindu in 1928, "Only recently some religious movements such as the *Suddhi* movement among the Hindus and a corresponding movement among the Muhammadans have been sponsored by the elected representatives of the people but stripped of the task of religion, they are political organisations. As a rule purely religious organisations are seldom led by the elected members of the Council".⁸ In Cachar, the Naths, Patnis and Namasudras had social organisations for furthering their sectarian aims. Among the Mus-

lims of the district the Anjuman Islamia had also appeared as strong and efficient forums. In Goalpara a number of social organisations existed among the landholders, jotedars and the Bado community. There was a tendency to take increased interest in religious organisations by the Hindu and the Muslim Communities but "this was perhaps less marked here from elsewhere". In Kamrup a distinct revival of quasi-religious and social organisations was noticeable and in addition there was an increase in their number. These organisations had often discussed political issues when official circles termed their proceedings as 'pernicious'. The Deputy Commissioner of Kamrup made a frank admission and observed : "This revival was the direct and inevitable outcome of the unfortunate introduction of the communal element in the Reform scheme and is merely serving to keep alive and to extend the organisation of inter-communal jealousies which, though they were in existence before, have been greatly accentuated by the political recognition of separate communities."⁹ In Darrang, the Suts and Nadiyals started movements to press for their representation in Government service. In Sibsagar the Muslims, though fewer in number were strong upholders of their special claims. They desired separate seats on all public bodies and had obtained a higher proportion than their number warrant of seats in the high schools and were pressing for a share of excise shops. Significantly, the All India Hindu Mahasabha which attempted to unite the Hindus against the Muslims had received the support of Goramur Gossain but the age old bond of harmony prevented any overt clashes between the two. The lower castes in the district also started pressing their claims for recognition in Government service. The Miris held a large meeting in August 1926 to consider the improvement of their society and it was somewhat anti-Brahminical. The Chaodangs, the lowest sect of the Ahoms, too had represented for Government posts. The anti-Brahmin feeling was gaining momentum so much so that the Brahmins of Jorhat had to support an Ahom in order to defeat Rai Bahadur S. P. Barua in the 1926 election. In Lakhimpur, various attempts had been made to form association of members of backward classes such as Cacharis, Sonowals, Miris, and Ahoms. The elected representatives of the district like Nilmani Phukan and Laksheswar Barua also took special interest in the social advancement of the Nadial and Matak Community effectively.

Popular Control

As regards popular control there appeared divergence of opinion. The Congress party had preached that there was no control by the people under the Reforms. They were supported by the Newspapers. A section of the educated classes however realised that Government responded to pressure, an instance being the excise policy.

The Swarajist sections of the educated class were manifestly dissatisfied with the measure of popular control under the Reforms. Very little control over the budget was however a source of disillusionment even to the educated sections in general who clamoured for more of it. In the eyes of the educated classes the amount of control fell short of the demand : so the control actually given had not been fairly appreciated.

An analysis of the proceedings of the Assam Legislative Council shows that fortytwo motions would have ended otherwise than they did had the official vote not been used.¹⁰ Some of these affecting the interest of the people are listed below :

Recommendations would have been made for (i) the institution of agricultural schools ; (ii) giving effect to a previous resolution for the wholesale encouragement of hand spinning as an industry ; (iii) the introduction of spinning in schools ; (iv) the appointment of a committee to enquire into excesses of Government during the non-Cooperation campaign ; (v) a reduction of three lakhs in the amount of opium indented ; (vi) the abolition of the grazing fees ; (vii) the conversion of all middle vernacular schools - some 150 - into middle English Schools ; (viii) the closer of country liquor shops on festival days ; (ix) the appointment of a committee to advise on land settlement and reservation of land for grazing, with the particular purpose of stopping immigration from Bengal.

In short, the working of the Reformed Constitution in Assam had stimulated the socio-political consciousness of the people and the relation of the Council Members with their electorates had been determined largely by the prevailing consciousness of the latter and their preoccupation with local affairs. A Congress member thus declared on the floor of the Council : "Though our Constituencies are said to be ignorant so to speak, they are intelligent enough and they have got that instinct to discriminate between personalities and political issues."

References

1. Proceedings of the Government of Assam, Apptt and political department, 1920-'28.
2. J. P. Mills to the Commissioner Surma Valley and Hill Division, 22 March, 1928 ; Proceedings of the Government of Assam, Political Department, Nos-Rfm/ 8-19, 10 February 1928.
3. A. G. Patton to the Commissioner Assam Valley Division, 9 March 1928, *Ibid.*
4. File No. Confdl. Deposit-Rfm, Sept. '28 No.s. 29-36 (A.S.)
5. File No. Confdl. Deposit Reform, September 1928, Nos. 89-90 (A. S.)
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*
8. File No. Confdl. Deposit Rfm. -1928, Nos. 55-57. (A.S.)
9. File No. Confdl. Deposit Rfm, Sept '28, Nos. 2-17 (A.S.)
10. Proceedings of the Assam Legislative Council, 1920-28.