

## Non co-operation and *Khadi* movement in Assam

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The Non-Cooperation Movement, the first phase of the Indian struggle for Independence, ushered in a new era in the history of Khadi in Assam. It may be mentioned here that the Indian National Congress endeavored to balance its political programme of the liberation of the country with the socio-economic regeneration of the people. In this regard, Mahatma Gandhi, the sole arbiter of the movement announced a constructive programme in the Nagpur Session of the Congress (December 1920) which included such items as boycott of intoxicants like opium, liquor and cigarettes, removal of untouchability, promotion of Khadi and establishment national schools and colleges. This constructive programme generated a new type of awareness among the people which helped in giving a new dimension and direction to the national struggle.

So far the Khadi programme is concerned, the people of Assam did not lag behind in implementing this constructive programme. It is here to be observed that though Khadi was not widely known to Assam it had no doubt a long reputation in the realm of hand spinning and weaving<sup>1</sup>. During the visit of Assam in 1921, Gandhiji had had the opportunity of seeing a few Assamese looms and was very much impressed. He later on wrote in *Young India* :

Every women of Assam is a born weaver,  
No Assamese girl who does not weave can  
expect to become a wife. And she weaves  
fairly tales in cloth.<sup>2</sup>

Till the commencement of the national movement, however, there was no organised movement for upliftment of Khadi industry in the province. But with the beginning of the Non-Cooperation Movement it took a new dimension. The leaders of the Assam Provincial Congress Committee, such as Tarunram Phukan, Nabin Chandra Bardoloi, Krishnanath Sarmah, Kuladhar Chaliha, and Rohinikanta Hatibarua, inspired by Gandhiji's commitment to the struggle, took a

leading part in this regard. In Assam non-cooperation meetings were held at various places where the speakers called upon the people to boycott foreign cloth and use hand-spun and hand-woven cloth. Moreover, Gandhiji's maiden visit of Assam and his appeal to use Swadeshi cloth gave a new impetus to the people of Assam, Barring Dibrugarh, in all other towns of Assam which Gandhiji visited, bonfire of foreign cloths was made and the people took oath to use hand-spun and hand-woven cloth in place of foreign cloth and garments. In order to popularise Khadi, the District Congress Committee supply Charkhas and distributed cotton yarn among the people.<sup>4</sup>

In November, 1921, the Congress working Committee sanctioned an amount of Rs. 25,000/- to the Assam Provincial Congress Committee for implementing the Khadi programme in a more vigorous way<sup>5</sup>. However, as most of the frontline congressmen were then in jail, the amount could not be fully utilised.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, at the initiative of Nabin Chandra Bardoloi, who assumed the office of the General secretary of the newly formed Khadi Board, a Khadi School was established in Guwahati. Tarinikanta Dutta, a Khadi promoter of Bengal, who was asked to inspect the school was not at all satisfied with its working and recommended to the Secretary of the All India Khadi Board to withdraw the financial assistance.<sup>7</sup>

Bardoloi thereupon resigned the Secretaryship of the Assam Khadi Board leading to the closing down of the Khadi School<sup>8</sup>.

Understandably, after the suspension of the movement, the Assam Khadi Board was reconstituted with Khrishnanath Sarmah as Secretary and Jorhat was made its headquarter.<sup>9</sup> The newlyconstituted Khadi Board immediately plunged into action. Notwithstanding unfavourable political climate the members of the Board demonstrated great organising ability in making Khadi programme successful in Assam. Meanwhile, the Civil Disobedience Enquiry Committee visited Assam in August, 1922, in order to survey the existing political situation of the province.<sup>10</sup> The committee advised the members of the Khadi Board to establish at least one Khaddar depot in each district, fix the price of Khaddar cloth at price not exceeding that of foreign cloth and to allot funds to each district to compensate for the loss incurred on the sale of Khadi.<sup>11</sup> In the same month on Januna Das Gandhi came to Assam to popularise Khadi works. He visited Sualkushi and Palashbari, the two most important centre of Assam Silk and was

highly impressed by the workmanship of the local weavers.<sup>12</sup>

The visit of the Civil Disobedience Enquiry Committee gave greater fillip to the people of the province to make Khadi programme a success. At the initiative of Khrishnath Sarmah, Rohinikanta Hatibaruah and Kuladhar chaliha a Khadi exhibition was held at Jorhat in 1923.<sup>13</sup> Sankarlal Banker, the Secretary of the All India Khadi Board visited Assam and advised the members of the Assam Khadi Board to implement the Belgaum resolution of the Congress<sup>14</sup>, which stressed on producing two thousand yards of cotton thread by every Congressman per month.<sup>15</sup> As a first step the Assam Khadi Board opened Khadi centres at Barpeta, Guwahati, Nagaon, Barkathani, Dergaon, Chelenghat, Charing, Kakatigaon and Chungi.1 Greater enthusiasm was witnessed among the people of the erstwhile Darrang district to resort to cotton cultivation.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, the visit of the Civil Disobedience Enquiry Committee was followed by the meeting of Tezpur Jatiya Maha Sabha at Tezpur which advocated the revival of the *endi* and *muga* and emphasised on producing Swadeshi cloths.<sup>18</sup>

In 1925 a meeting of the All India Congress Committee was held at Patna to which all the members of the provincial Khadi Boards were invited. Krishnath Sarmah and Sankarlal Baruah attended the meeting as the representatives of Assam Khadi Board. Both Sarmah and Baruah met Sankarlal Banker, the Secretary of the All India Khadi Board, who suggested to them to implement the Khadi programme in a more vigorous way.<sup>19</sup> In this meeting Gandhiji formed the All India Spinners' Association as "an integral par of the Congress Organisation but with independent existence and powers."<sup>20</sup> Following this Rajendra Prasad came to Assam to gather first-hand information regarding the progress made in the implementation of Khadi Programme. He was profoundly satisfied with the activities of the Assam Khadi board and recommended to the All India spinners' Association to sanction an amount of Rs. 6000/- to it for more vigorously implementing the Khadi movement<sup>21</sup>

The Khadi Movement in Assam reached a new height of success during the Guwahati session (1926) of the Indian National Congress. The huge pavilion and the delegates' camps of the session were all decorated with Khadi which enthused Gandhiji to call the

place "a city under a Khadi canvas". With a sense of admiration Gandhiji commented on the Guwahati Session<sup>22</sup>.

In an incredibly short space of time erected in the midst of surroundings of great natural beauty on the banks of the great Brahmaputra, a city under Khadi canvas. The huge Congress pavilion itself was made of pure Assam Khadi .....

National leaders like Madan Mohan Malaviya and Rajendra Prasad also paid glowing tribute to the Khadi Organisers and the Assamese weavers for their cooperation in making Khadi programme successful.<sup>23</sup> Louding the Assam Khadi movement Rajendra Prasad wrote to Krishnath Sarmah later on<sup>24</sup>

The tradition of spinning and weaving which is in vogue in Assam, that way no other province can boast of it. The manner in which Mahatmaji wants to introduce Spinning wheel in every household, that already exists in Assam, but it needs modification to suit the modern times... Endi and muga is a kind of indigenous industry in Assam. It prevails permanently here. Now spinning and weaving, what exists in Nagaon district, is found in other district as well to a large extent. So, if the Congress workers endeavour Khadi organisation of Assam can attain much higher position.

As expected the Guwahati session of the Indian National Congress left an imprint in the mind of the Assamese people. In the course of his speech Gandhiji treated spinning and weaving not only as an economic programme but also as a weapon for the mobilisation of the masses for Swaraj<sup>25</sup>. Srinivas Iyenger, the President of the session, said that "Khaddar is the rediant symbol of our self reliance and of our power of resistance"<sup>26</sup> No doubt, the stirring speeches of the national leaders of Khadi injected the Congressmen of Assam to pursue the Khadi programme with a new hope. In the fitness of things Khadi programme received wide support from the Assamese people during the Civil Disobedience Movement.

#### Reference

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