

Assam Under British Rule and Journey Towards Independence

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Abstract:

The research paper widely focuses on the British rule in the Assamese soil, Freedom struggle and independence. It also follows the battles that change the juncture of Assamese history. As it was a battle ground not only for the Mughals and Assamese people but Burmese invaded as well, seeing the decay of Ahom dynasty created a fertile ground for British entry and Treaty of Yandabo. Assam is a state which lies on the north- Eastern border of Bengal bordered around by Bhutan and Bangladesh in the southern side and by various Indian states. The only path to connect it with the mainland is Chicken's neck which is in West Bengal. The state also has a mighty Brahmaputra River which makes it more biodiversity rich and makes a fertile ground for various wetlands, eco-tourism, agriculture and so on to flourish. The paper covers the overall dynamics of the situation and the state under Bardoloi ministry.

Keywords: British, Battles, Ahom, Mughals, Dynasty, Biodiversity, Eco-tourism, Wetland, Agriculture

1. Introduction

It was in the seventeenth century that Mughals came into Assam and a conflict arose between them and Ahoms. It was under Gaurinath Singha that he asked for help from Britishers. After the acquisition of the Diwani of Bengal in 1765 brought the East India Company into direct contact with the Ahom Kingdom. Captain Welsh's expedition was sent into Assam in September 1792. When he was instructed by Lord Cornwallis specifically regarding the economic potential of the region. The situation took a drastic turn when Gaurinath Singh died. Both of his successors Kamaleswar and Chandrakanta were mere puppets in the hands of Purnananda who was the prime minister during that time. But this was not liked by the Badan Chandra Barphukan; he was the viceroy in lower Assam. Buragohain sent a senior officer to arrest Barphukan and bring him to the capital. Barphukan fled to Calcutta to seek British aid. But he did not get any help from Britishers so he went to Burmese court. Which led to Anglo Burmese war 1824-26. This war ended with Treaty of Yandabo in 1826 under which Assam was ceded to the East India Company. Then the company appointed David Scott in 1823 he was the Governor General for the whole of the northeastern frontier of Bengal. He knew the situation is dicey and upper Assam cannot be touched that easily as the company was pressurising him to look into it. So, in 1828 he calculated that lower Assam

could yield revenue which was there to cover the expenditure resulting in the military occupation of the region. As upper Assam was the stronghold of the Ahom nobility. "On 7 March 1828, the President in council communicated to Scott its decision to permanently annex Lower Assam to its dominions."¹

As this was no easy task Assamese people soon realised and it confirmed their fears. These events lead to three uprisings in the regions. The first attempt was made towards the close of 1828 when a group of nobles under the leadership of Dhanjoy. He proceeded towards Jorhat but later on surrendered. A second attempt came in about a year later when Gadadhar Singha and the third uprising again led by Dhanjoy towards the close of 1829. By the middle of 1830 the rebellion was crushed and the principal leaders were arrested. Hence this was the last attempt by the nobility to expel the British from Assam. As these uprisings were ill organised and got no concrete movement and political acumen was missing so no support of people were involved. Soon Scott died. W.Cracroft was temporarily deputed in 1831 to officiate as agent to the governor general, north east frontier, and commissioner of Rangpur. Later on T.C.Roberston an able civil servant handled the matter. On 2 March 1833 Robertson, on behalf of the East India company, concluded a treaty with Purandar Singha at Gauhati. Under this treaty:

- The East India Company handed over the portion of Assam lying to the east of the Dhansiri river on the south bank of the Brahmaputra river and the territory lying to the east of the small river near Bishwanth on the north bank to Raja Purandar Singha.
- Raja promised to pay the company an annual tribute of 50,000 rupees out of an estimated revenue of 120,000 rupees.
- Raja will be bound by the principles of British jurisprudence and to abstain from the practices of the former Ahom rulers.
- Raja will have no power over the Moamaria country of the Bar Senapati or over the territory of the Sadiya Khowa Gohain.
- Raja got the protection of British protection so long as he remained loyal.
- Purandar Singha agreed to cooperate with the British in matters relating to the cultivation and sale of opium within his territory.
- He also agreed to ban sati within his territory.

So these were the provisions of the treaty. "In January, 1834 the government abolished the office of the political agent to the northeast frontier of Bengal and commissioner of Rangpur and instead created the post of commissioner and agent to the governor general for Assam and north east Rangpur."² Captain Francis Jenkins was appointed to this new post. Later on the company decided to take over the upper Assam and Lord Auckland the Governor-General endorsed it too. With this the Ahom monarchy which had ruled over Assam for almost six centuries came to an inglorious end. "The British annexed Cachar in 1832 and Jaintia Hills in 1835. In 1874, Assam became a separate province with Shillong as its capital. Sylhet was merged with East Bengal on the partition of India. With the partition and independence of India in 1947, the district of Sylhet (excluding the Karimganj subdivision) was ceded to Pakistan (the eastern portion of which later became Bangladesh)."³

The next big event in the chronology was the revolt of 1857. It was till 1874 Assam was being considered as a part of Bengal but after that it was separated and Sylhet was added and the whole area was brought under the chief commissioner situated at Shillong. But things were going to change soon as people expected the material progress under British rule. As Britishers came into the province of Assam they brought traders and bankers with themselves, tea gardens were opened, ports and communication mediums were developed for administrative efficiency. But things started to change when Bengalis got more preference in the services. As in the late nineteenth century Assamese literature was creating a framework among the people regarding Sonar Assam or fighting for Assam. Majorly three issues were brought into light: Language, Agriculture and Immigration.

As in the case of language Bengal became the official language in Assam in 1836 during that time no protest was seen but eventually this language policy backfired as in the recruitment process for the government services Bengalis got an upper hand. This created a feeling of resentment among the Assamese people. Which took the shape of protest and many missionary groups like Reverend Danforth of the American Mission, Anandaram Dhekial Phukan and many more organisations raised their voices. The second case of Agrarian unrest was regarding the increases in the taxation. As peasants were resisting the government this further led to the rise of the Phulaguri uprising in 1861. Matters became out of hand in 1892 when the Chief Commissioner William Ward raised the land rate by seventy percent and in some cases by hundred percent. The last issue was of immigration into Assam especially into the tea districts as many industries were opening up and gaining popularity among the other regions.

2. Freedom Struggle till Independence

After the uprisings were suppressed the next big challenge which came in the history of Assam was Partition of Bengal. The new province of Eastern Bengal and Assam comprising was placed under J.B.Fuller who assumed charge as Lieutenant Governor of the new province at Dacca. He even assured people nothing will be hampered but failed to impress them. Protest meetings were held in Tezpur, Barpetam Dhubri, Gauripur, Gauhati, Goalpara, Dibrugarh and many more places. The festival of Raksha Bandhan was also celebrated as a symbol of solidarity.

Meanwhile by 1885 Congress was formed which was the milestone in the history of the national movement in India. "It was in the second session of the Congress held at Calcutta which was for the first time attended by eight duly elected delegates from various associations of Assam. Devicharan Barua and Gopinath Bardoloi represented the Upper Assam Association and Joy Chandra Shome and Kamini Kumar Chandra participated."⁴

In the year 1882 one more group was formed named as Assam Association by Manik Chandra Barua. And the first session of it was held in 1905 in Dibrugarh. Meanwhile Partition of Bengal was also taking place but its impact was limited in the urban and semi urban areas of the region. In the town of Assam people started using Khaar instead of salt from Liverpool in England. In Assam regarding this decision both the Jorhat Sarbajanik Sabha and Assam Association express their apprehensions about the plan. Beside this some organisations took the violent face like Seva Sangha which was founded by Ambikagiri Raychoudhry, Raktim Bora and so on. Not only associations but literary work was also growing. "The

first of such associations was formed in 1872 by a group of students at Calcutta under the leadership of Ganga Govinda Phukan. They called it Asamiya Sahitya Sabha.”⁵ And in 1888 Assamese youth formed Asamiya Bhasar Unnati Sadhini Sabha. With their monthly Journal called Jonaki.

The coming years with the passage of acts like Morley Minto reforms in 1909 and Montague Chelmsford reforms in 1919 act as a catalyst in the freedom struggle. As the demand for self-government was not yet fully filled. Due to this in Assam the Goalpara session of the Assam Association in 1918 took a firm stand for self-government and demanded abolition of the repressive Rowlett laws. Then came the Non-Cooperation Movement in 1920 which was briefly discussed by the Assam Association in December 1920 which says that the object of the Assam Association is to work for the attainment of swaraj by all legitimate means and to educate the people towards this object. They were also ready to follow the directives given by the Congress. With this movement it made Gandhi’s visit to Assam in 1921 which eventually made the public more aware. Meetings took place at all the major towns of Assam where the pledge of boycotting the British goods were asked for.

In order to do this Assam Khadi Board was established with Jorhat as its headquarters. Many tea garden workers protested and demanded a huge wage increase if they wont get they will leave. A large number of women also participated in the movement like Girija Devi, Hemanta Kumari Devi, Dharmada Devi and so on. Later on the movement fell down as Gandhi got arrested due to the Chauri Chaura incident in 1922. After this Swaraj Party took over and its branch in Assam also took a hold by Trun Ram Phukan as President and Rohini Kumar Choudhary as Secretary and Gopinath Bardoloi as Assistant Secretary. And during the elections they collaborated with the The Assam Nationalist Party and raised important issues like abolition of grazing tax, prohibition of opium, reduction of land revenue and restricting the migrants from East Bengal. But eventually the Swaraj Party failed to achieve its objective. As they were carrying their struggle from inside the council.

The 41st annual session of the Congress was held at Pandu at the foot of the Kamakhya Hills in December 1926. Gandhi's participation in this session was a moral booster for many. The main purpose of the session was to enhance the spread of the Congress ideology among the Assamese. Many regional organisations were also formed like Asamiya Samrakshini Sabha founded by Ambikagiri Roy Choudhury. Rayats formed their own associations called Rayat Sabha or Krishak Sabha. In 1927 a meeting took place at Sylhet to condemn the Simon Commission. In 1929 when Congress met at Lahore at midnight on 30th December, they raised the Indian tricolour and pledged for Poorna Swaraj. Meanwhile the Congress decision to boycott the legislative council was received with mixed feelings among the leaders of Assam. “Tarun Ram Phukan, Gopinath Bardoloi and R.K.Choudhury were initially hesitant to implement the Congress directive for they felt that the time was not opportune for such a drastic policy.”⁶ After discussing alot Phukan resigned from the Central Legislative Council and many from Assam Legislative Council. And during this time Bardoloi and Choudhury formed a new party called the Assam Swaraj Party.

It was the year 1930 when Gandhi called for the Dandi March and the people of Assam also responded to it. Students also participated in it like Omeo Kumar Das and Hem Chandra Baruah appealed to the students to get involved in the movement but as most of the educational institutions. “In 1930, Pushpalata Das a

young satyagrahi who had joined the Banar Sena to propagate Khadi at the age of six along with Sarla Saxena, Punyaprava Barua and Jyotsna Majumdar, organised the Mukti Sangha to mobilise girls in the national movements.”⁷ Meanwhile in 1930 First Round Table conference took place but it was not represented by majority. And the very next year Gandhi Irwin pact was signed in May 1931 as the pact was dealing with withdrawal of Civil Disobedience Movement, release of political prisoners and so on. In Assam the pact faced mixed reaction as it was meaningless if it was not granted to all. It was in 1931 when the Second Round Table conference took place but it was not in the favour of Congress therefore the Civil Disobedience Movement resumed. It got popular in Assam as well. Picketing took place, boycotts and Swadeshi programmes took over in Gauhati, Tezpur, Dhubri, Mangaldai, Goalpara and Badarpur. Later on the government successfully suppressed the Civil Disobedience movement. “In August 1935, the British Government passed the India Act 1935 under which provided a bicameral legislature in Assam consisting of the upper house and lower house. And in the elections Congress emerged as the single largest party with 33 seats.”⁸ Gopinath Bardoloi was elected as the leader of the Congress Assembly Party. And therefore, from 1st April 1937 till 18 September 1938 Sadullah Ministry was formed. But it did not work out for long as he suggested Assam should be assigned the whole or at least a portion of the central excise tax proceeds on petrol and kerosine and expenditure by Assam rifles should be borne entirely by the Centre. It was later on 19th September 1938 a new ministry was formed by a Congress minister N.C.Bardoloi. “As the leader of the opposition, Bardoloi had been championing the cause of the tribals by demanding tribal belts for them and pointing out the lack of primary education facilities in the tribal and garden areas.”⁹ His ministry also passed the Assam Agricultural Income Tax Bill against serious opposition from the planters which was implemented through the Assam Finance Act. And this was the time when World War 2 was on the rise and Congress decided not to co-operate with the British government and Bardoloi's ministry resigned.

3. Towards Independence

As World War 2 started it had a deteriorating impact on the politics and the people of India and Assam. As Britain needed the cooperation from Congress but Congress declined it as they raised objections towards the government sending troops to China without the consent of the Indian people. Meanwhile in return demand for Dominion Status was going to be fulfilled. Considering this Congress decided to resign from the ministries. And it was decided in the Ramgarh session in March 1940 that a massive anti war campaign in the form of civil disobedience will begin. And after two years from this session on 8th August 1942 Gandhiji launched Quit India Movement.

Meanwhile in Assam the political climate was also shifting. In 1939 when the war broke out G.N.Bardoloi was working in the province as Congress had a coalition government. Later on Bardoloi has to resign as they want to carry out a fresh plan for a new coalition ministry. “The attention of Assam’s leadership was continually distracted from the issue of India’s national struggle against British imperialism. A more engrossing issue for them was that of a Muslim conspiracy to include Assam in Pakistan, accompanied by a threat to the cultural and linguistic identity of the Assamese, which then seemed to be far greater than the old threat from the Bengalis.”¹⁰ The major issue during this time was of immigration from East Bengal.

As it has got three facets: land, language and religion. Matter becomes so out of hand that G.N.Bardoloi has to proceed personally to Wardha and to seek permission from the Congress High Command for the legislators to resume their assembly duties. But soon after Saadullah ministry faced crises by the Cotton College students who protested against the raising of war funds. And by 1941 Saadullah submitted his resignation and Governor by proclamation took over the administration. Soon Assam felt the brunt of war as Japanese occupation of Burma created a panic among the people. And the next year Quit India Movement was declared whose resolution was accepted by the All-Indian Congress Committee. The Congress sanctioned an indefinite non-violent mass struggle on the widest possible scale under the leadership of Gandhi. It was mainly non-violent in nature as hartals, demonstrations, picketing and hosting of the Congress flag on government buildings. There was also the feeling of rebellion among the people as people attacked the government building, damaged railway track and so on. As a result, a number of ordinances were passed by the government. After a long struggle of eight weeks the movement was snuffed out.

It was the year 1946 Bardoloi ministry came back in power. In England it was the Labour Party which came in power and the ban was lifted from the Congress and elections were announced. And it was the same year when the Cabinet Mission was sent by England. The mission recommended the two-tier Federal Government, one at the centre dealing with foreign affairs, defence and communication and other in the provinces dealing with the remaining subjects. But the Assam Provincial Congress protested against it as the identity might have been compromised. And overall condition of the country was favouring the two separate nations hence on 3rd June Mountbatten Plan came into power and it says that power would be handed over by 15th August 1947 on the basis of Dominion Status to India and Pakistan. Therefore, on 15th August India celebrated with joy the first day of her freedom.

4. Conclusion

It was not an easy journey for the people of Assam as they have to face so many ups and downs. First, they have to face the Ahom faction then Mughals then Burmese and, in the end, its Britishers. The war mainly occurred due to the throne the Ahom prime minister wanted and there was disagreement between him and Badan Chandra Barphukan who was a viceroy and did not like the way kingdom was run so he asked for the help from Britishers then Burmese and therefore open the doors for foreign invasion. Which later on culminated into Anglo Burmese war and Treaty of Yandaboo settled it down and it came out as a British victory. From here Assam has to face the heat of the Revolt of 1857, Partition of Bengal 1905, Morley-Minto Reforms 1909 and so on which made a suitable ground for the uprising of local leaders and organisations. Such as Assam Association by Manik Chandra Barua, Seva Sangha which was founded by Ambikagiri Raychoudhry, Asamiya Sahitya Sabha by Ganga Govinda Phukan and so on. It was later with the coming of Mahatma Gandhi a catalyst towards independence took place. Whether its Non-Cooperation Movement, Dandi March, Quit India Movement it involved everyone from the region. Also, many local leaders get a platform to put their voice through Congress as well such as Gopinath Bardoloi who became a future Chief Minister of the state. All these shows the journey of Assam towards independence was full of challenges; as it was not only a fight for freedom but for identity, unity and opportunity as well.

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