



A Study of the Non-Cooperation Movement in Assam: Special Emphasis on Peasant Participation.

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Abstract: Following the principle of non-violence and led by Mahatma Gandhi, Father of the Nation, the Indian Freedom Movement was a glorious episode in the history of the Indian Subcontinent. The Non-Cooperation Movement of 1920 was the first phase of mass movement, where people from all walks of life and various part of the country offered full support and took an active part in the movement. In Assam, the movement was led by newly emerged middle-class educated people, and who were able to spread its ideas and programmes across different parts of the province. In response to appeals from the state leaders of the movement and in their desire for freedom from colonial exploitation and also relief from the oppressive taxes newly imposed by the British government, the peasants class of the Brahmaputra Valley extended all forms of support and cooperation and actively participated in the movement. Along with other segment of society, the peasants of Assam also demonstrated their patriotism and deep love for the country. This paper attempts to study the impact of the Non-Cooperation Movement in Assam and contributions and sacrifices made by the peasants during the movement.

Keywords: National Movement, Swaraj, Police Atrocities, Peasants, Collective Fine (Paikari Jarimana), Opium.

Introduction

With the advent of the British in Assam after the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826, the region witnessed significant transformations in its social, economic, political, and administrative structure . Like other parts of the country, the British economic policies had a major impact on Assamese society particularly on the lives of the peasants. Before Non-Cooperation Movement, India had already experienced movement for freedom struggle, such as great revolt of 1857, primarily leading by discontented Indian soldiers. In Assam too, similar uprising were witnessed, led by exploited peasants such as the Phulaguri uprising, the Patharughat uprising, and the Assam riots. Although these peasants revolts did not achieve immediate success, it had a significant impact in developing national consciousness of the common masses in the region.

In the context of the Indian National Movement, it is worth mentioning that the movement led by Mahatma Gandhi could not have succeeded without the participation and active support of all sections of the people. Along with other section of the society, the Indian peasants who form a major a segment of the population played a vital role in the freedom struggle of India. In Assam too, the peasant class made a remarkable contribution, along with all other section of the population, towards the Indian National Movement.

Methodology

The methodology used in this paper is descriptive-cum-analytical. The study is primarily based on secondary sources of information. Relevant materials and data have been collected from a variety of sources including books, articles, journals, published works, proceedings, and web-based resources.

The Non-Cooperation Movement in Assam

In view of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, the Khilafat agitation, and industrial unrest involving around two hundred strikes all over the country during the first half of 1920, Mahatma Gandhi decided to launch non-violent Non-cooperation movement, transforming it into a mass anti-British movement against the British Raj. To attain its objective of Swarajya (self-rule), and persuaded by Gandhiji, the Indian National Congress passed the resolution for the Non-Cooperation Movement in a special session held at Calcutta in September 1920. The resolution recommended the boycott of the legislatures, law-courts, schools and colleges, renunciation of Government titles, and the non-payment of taxes.

The Non-Cooperation Movement had a significant impact on the Assam Valley, just like in other parts of the Country. After a section of delegation from the Assam Association attended the special session of the Indian National Congress held at Calcutta in September 1920, a meeting was convened at Guwahati in October 1920, where it was resolved to extend their support to the movement. Accordingly they appealed to the people of Assam immediately boycott Government supported schools and colleges, suspend legal practice in the law-courts and boycott foreign goods as part of the Swadeshi programme. Leaders like N.C. Bardoloi, T.R. Phukan and Chandranath Sarma, accompanied by several volunteers, organized meetings in various places to spread idea and promote awareness of the Non-Cooperation Movement in Assam. The idea of Non- Cooperation Movement reached every corner of the region within a short a period of time. In support of the movement, the school students of Sibsagar refused to pay fees, and students in Mangaldoi boycotted their classes. Non-cooperationists held a number meetings, where it was decided to boycott all occasions welcoming the Viceroy, Lord Chelmsford, during his proposed visit.

After the formation of the Assam Provincial Congress Committee(APCC) in 1921, with Kuladhar Chaliha as President and N.C. Bardoloi as General Secretary, District Congress Committee were set up in each subdivision with village and Mouza committees at lower level. Congress volunteers were mostly active in constructive programmes, such as the campaign for opium prohibition. Hartals, meetings, processions, boycott of foreign goods and propagation of *khadi* and picketing became regular features in both urban and rural areas. As a result, the Non-Cooperation Movement achieved considerable success across Assam.

On the invitation of the delegates of the Assam Provincial Congress Committee (APCC), Mahatma Gandhi paid his first visit to Assam in August 1921. During his twelve days stay, several meetings were organized, which were attended by large gatherings of people. At the end of each meetings, supported his call for boycott foreign goods and throw off their foreign goods, even their personal cloth into huge bonfires. After Gandhiji's visit, the Non-Cooperation Movement gained its momentum in Assam. From then onwards, a large number of lawyers, teachers, government officials, teachers, students, numerous people from all walk of life actively participated in the movement. Liquor and foreign cloth shops were shut down and people were encouraged to wear khadi cloth. In connection with the movement, in November 1921, the National Volunteer Corps was formed, in which, 70,000 people from various part of the region enrolled themselves as a member. These volunteers became more aggressive and even insulted the Europeans and other government officials.

In response to the movement, the British government took all possible preventive measures to suppress it. Accordingly, censorship of the press was imposed, and writings on Gandhism was declared banned. Two Assamese papers *Assam Bilasini* and *Asamiya* and two papers in the Surma Valley were banned. The government then declared all associations of volunteers unlawful and enforced the *Prevention of Seditious Meetings Act, 1911* and the *Criminal Law Amendment Act*. Furthermore, a large number of areas in plains districts were declared as disturbed areas.

Afterwards, the Government intensified its repressive measures by demolishing Congress offices and arrested Congress leaders and other volunteers in a highly inhumane and injudicious manner. It was recorded that nearly 1,500 Congress volunteers were kept detained in various districts jail. In protest against the miserable treatment in jails, Deo Charan Tripathy undertook a fast unto death in Jorhat jail, where he died in December 1922. There were several incidents of police atrocities in several places of Assam. One such incident occurred in Kanaighat in the Surma valley, where six persons were died and many others injured when police opened fire on an angry crowds.

But when the movement was at its peak, its suffered a serious setback due to the Chauri Chaura incident, a village in the Gorakhpur district in the United Province, where 21 policemen were killed by infuriated mob. As a result of this violent incident, Mahatma Gandhi suspended the Non Cooperation Movement and appealed Congress workers to undertake the constructive programme and remain faithful to the principle of non-violence. In Assam, too, the sudden suspension of the movement led to demoralization among freedom fighters. Young leaders like , died in July 1922, reportedly due to the deep frustration caused by the abrupt suspension of the movement.

Involvement of Peasants during the Movement

With regard to peasant participation in the Non-cooperation movement in Assam, there were several records exist from across the valley. One active Congress worker, Kanak Chandra Sarmah, organized a number of meetings in various places such as Kuthari, Bagari, Amsoi, and Neli in Nagaon district, where Karbi tribal peasants extended their unconditional support to the movement. Highly influenced by the inspiring movement organized by Congress workers, a Karbi Mouzadar named Mohan Singh became an ardent supporter of the Non-Cooperation Movement and donated an amount one hundred rupees to the Swarajya Fund. Similarly in

Upper Assam and frontier regions of North East Frontier Agency (NEFA), present day Arunachal Pradesh tribal peasants, namely the Miris and Duflas participated in the movement by producing Swadeshi cloth and other commodities for daily use.

Tarunram Phukan and Nabin Chandra Bordoloi appealed to the people to refuse the payment of taxes by distributing the printed messages in various remote places.

In response to Gandhiji's call for the peasants of Assam to take an active part in the no-rent campaign, numerous peasants and other local people of Boko and Luki in Kamrup district decided not to cooperate with Government officials and refused to supply boats and labours to the government. People and peasants from the rural areas of Kamrup district refused to pay hat (market) tolls, land revenue and forest taxes. In particular, the peasants of Kachugaon, a Kachari-populated area of Kamrup district resisted to pay land revenue to the government. The non rent movement spread widely as a popular movement in the Darrang district, where people thought of intensifying the movement by refusing to pay land revenue to the government. In this regard, an exemplary act was taken by the people of the Holeswar Mouza, who refuse to pay land revenue. The Mouzadar of the respective jurisdiction reported the matter to the concerned authorities after failing attempt to collect the revenue. To assess the situation, B.C. Alen, the then Commissioner of the plains, visited the Mouza and found the situation grave. Consequently, a meeting was convened with the Mouzadars to discuss the issues, in which, it was decided to provide armed police support to assist them in the discharge of their duties. Accordingly, the armed police carried out the demonstration of marches through Mahabhairab and Holeswar Mouza in the Darrang district. As a result, the non-rent movement gradually spread from these areas to other districts of the Brahmaputra Valley.

The anti-opium campaign of the Non-Cooperation Movement had a great impact on the agricultural population of the Brahmaputra Valley. It is worth mentioning that the habit of opium consumption was deeply rooted and widely prevalent among the agricultural communities and some hill tribes of the region. A large number of peasants and local people abandoned their habit of opium consumption in response to the appeal of Non-Cooperation workers and Gandhiji's advice to 'finish opium and bring swaraj'. As a result, thousands of peasants enrolled themselves as active Congress workers in remote areas which led a sharp fall in the collection of excise revenue derived from the opium trade. The British Government declared picketing in front of opium and liquor shops illegal in order to discourage the people's anti-opium movement. The colonial government was alarmed and deeply concerned about the rapid progress of the movement and large-scale participation of peasants and people from different walk of life. In order to counter the movement, the British government undertook various measures such as publishing pamphlets, organizing counter-programme meetings and enforcing prohibitory order where necessary. However, several anti-Non-Cooperation Movement committees were formed under government initiative to carry out the countermeasures against the picketers. To create an adverse impact among peasants and agriculturist, the British Government published and circulated pamphlets exposing Gandhism and the darker side of the movement. Simultaneously, it resorted to unprecedented police atrocities against them, where the villagers and peasant class of the society became the primary victims of the police and military oppression throughout the region. At the same time, it imposed

paikari jarimana (collective fine) in areas such as Patharughat, Barnagar, and Boko area in the Kamrup district as punishment for supporting the picketers and maintenance of the punitive. Armed police raided the houses of villagers and seized their ornaments and other valuable items on the charge of not paying the *paikari jarimana*. In a few cases, the armed police even used elephants to destroy the granaries of the defaulters.

On 23 January 1922, the armed police lathi-charged the gathered crowd and burnt down a large pandal erected to accommodate people attending to celebrate a *namkirtan* (prayer house) at Nakachari, in present day Jorhat district. A similar incident took place at Barpeta, on Push Sankranti day, where the villagers were assaulted by armed police when they took out a procession singing *Harinam* (devotional song). Despite police atrocities and all the measures undertaken by the British government to crush the movement, the villagers particularly peasants never gave up their struggle or bowed before the British Raj. Instead they were determined to make every sacrifice to attain swaraj.

Conclusion

The Non-Cooperation Movement in Assam was initially led by the leaders of the Assam Association. Later, after the formation of the Assam Provincial Congress Committee, the responsibility for leading the movement was taken up by the APCC leaders. Leaders such as Kuladhar Chaliha, N.C. Bardoloi, T.R. Phukan, Chandranath Sarma and others took all possible steps to spread the ideas and programmes of the movement. The participation of all section of society such as lawyers, government officials, teachers, students, women, and peasants transformed the movement into a mass movement. Within a short period of time, it reached all sections of the people and every corner of the province.

The Non Cooperation Movement proved the importance and signification of peasants participation in the national struggle. It thereby it broadened the scope of the future course of the India National Movement. On the other hand, the peasants of Assam demonstrated their strength and potential to mobilize a powerful struggle against any form of exploitation. At the same time, the villagers and peasants of Assam prepared themselves to make any sacrifice for the future course of the freedom struggle.

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