

THE NON-COOPERATION MOVEMENT IN THE ERSTWHILE DISTRICT OF DARRANG

Ajit Konwar, M.Phil
Assistant Professor, Department of History
Jengraimukh College, Majuli, Jorhat

ABSTRACT:

This paper is an in-depth study of the role of the undivided Darrang district (present Darrang and Sonitpur districts) of Assam in the Non-Cooperation Movement. The Non-Cooperation Movement was an important event not only in the district but also in Assam and other parts of India. Though a number of highly useful and scholarly works have been written on this epic struggle in the Indian context, such works are extremely limited so far as Assam is concerned. Projection of the significance of this great struggle in proper historical perspective, however, is not possible unless a micro-level study of the contributions of the various scattered places of Assam. In this respect, the erstwhile district of Darrang had a larger share in the planning, preparation and progress of the movement. It is a pity that in spite of their heroic contributions, the people of the district have not received the recognition they deserve. Therefore, an attempt is made here to present a critical analysis of the part played by the people of this district in the Non-Cooperation Movement in Assam. It is expected that the work will throw new light on the history of the freedom movement in the erstwhile Darrang district.

1. INTRODUCTION:

The erstwhile district of Darrang formed an integral part of Assam during the colonial period. It has a long history of freedom struggle and has a larger share to the success of India's national war of independence. Following the British occupation of Assam, the district witnessed the growth of political awareness and national consciousness, particularly during the second half of the nineteenth century. With the dawn of the twentieth century the national movement gained momentum and the people of the district started to join the movement by protesting the British colonial rule. In the subsequent period the people of the district contributed significantly towards India's freedom by participating in all the major movements and events. However, the Non-Cooperation movement was quite different from all other important events during the course of India's struggle for independence. This particular movement was the first organized mass movement that the district had ever seen and thus laid the ground for strong mass agitation in the subsequent period. Besides, this movement was signified by larger participation of people from various parts of the district.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS:

The methodology followed in the preparation of this study is historical and analytical. Attempt is also made to make the work objective so far as possible. Primary sources used in this paper are contemporary literature, public and private records, biographical works and autobiographies, personal letters and diaries, newspapers,

journals, periodicals, etc. Secondary sources such as published books, journals and periodicals, newspapers, etc., are also used in this work.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION:

Great unrest prevailed in India during the closing year of World War I. The Rowlat Act, the Jalianwala Bagh massacre, the Martial Law clamped in the Punjab, failure of the Montague-Chelmsford Reforms which were announced towards the end of 1918 and the dismemberment of Turkey by the British following the Treaty of Sevres in May 1920, created widespread resentment among all the sections of the people of India. On the suggestions of Mahatma Gandhi a programme of non-violence non-cooperation was unanimously accepted by the all party conference held at Allahabad on 9 June 1920. As per the decision of this Conference, a resolution supporting the programme of non-violent non-cooperation was passed in the special session the Congress at Kolkata in September and same was adopted in the plenary session at Nagpur in December of the same year.¹

While attending the special session of the Congress at Kolkata, the Assam Association delegation, comprising N. C. Bardoloi, Chandranath Sarma, Faiznur Ali and others found themselves divided on the issue of non-cooperation. After returning to Guwahati, they started a propaganda campaign, seeking the support of the Assamese intelligentsia for the forth-coming movement. The moderate leaders like Ghanashyam Baruah, Gangagobinda Phukan, Taraprasad Chaliha etc. opposed the very idea of participating in mass politics. But they were outvoted in the special session of the Assam Association held at Guwahati on 11 and 12 October 1920, where the decision to launch the movement was adopted.²

The most remarkable feature of the Non-Cooperation Movement in Assam was its intense mass appeal. Following the decision of the All India Students' Conference held at Nagpur in December, 1920 the students of Assam launched a strong movement for boycott of educational institutions. As a result, thousands of students struck schools and colleges and large batches of them enrolled themselves as volunteers to spread the message of non-cooperation. Boycott of foreign goods, propagation of *khaddar* and *swadeshi* and picketing of liquor and opium shops, boycott of government and government aided schools and colleges, and law courts was also successfully carried out.³

The people of the Darrang district contributed significantly for the success of the movement. At the request of Hemchandra Baruah, Chandranath Sarma and Omeo Kumar Das, a group of students such as Kumudchandra Sarma, Daksharam Barua, Bagiram Saikia, Joyram Saikia, Kashiram Hazarika, Ramakanta Sarma and Phatikchandra Sarma, and led by Tilakchandra Sarma, General Secretary of Cotton College Students' Union, decided to go on strike. They put up a notice in the college notice-board, announcing their decision of boycott classes and left the college. Following them, another fifty students left the college and joined the movement.⁴ Lakshmidhar Sarma of Biswanath and some other students of Assam who were then studying in Kolkata left their college and came back to Assam to start organizational and propaganda work.⁵

The boycott agitation of the students indirectly led to the demand for setting up of national schools and colleges in place of government and government aided educational institutions at different places of the province. At Tezpur a *Jatiya vidyalaya* functioned from the private residence of Chandrakumar Nath near the Hazara *Phukuri*. This school was established and run by some prominent Congress leaders of the district viz. Omeo Kumar Das, Lakshmidhar Sarma, Hemchandra Barua and others.⁶ At Chatia, an attempt was made to start a national school with one hundred students. The responsibility to manage this school was given to Tilak Sarma.⁷ At Mangaldoi town a school was started by a few local residents namely, Kumudram Bora, Tapeswar Sarma and Loknath Goswami. They resigned their practice at the bar and started organizational work in the Mangaldoi area.⁸ Under the leadership of the teachers of the school, the students paid visit to the neighbouring villages to collect information about the prevalence of opium addiction among the villagers. The students also regularly picketed shops selling excisable articles. Students and teachers moved from village to village propagating the message of non-cooperation and explaining to the people the evil effects of opium-eating.

In Darrang district the movement was actually led by Omeo Kumar Das, Chandranath Sarma and Lakshmidhar Sarma who organized several meetings in places like Gohpur, Helem, Gamiri, Bedeti, Biswanath, Chatia, Nagsankar, Jamuguri, Dhekiajuli, Orang, Mangaldoi etc. One day while Lakshmidhar Sarma and Omeo Kumar Das were helping some students to picket a shop dealing in liquors, they were by a woman named Mungri alias Malati Mam of Lalmati tea garden. Initially she was angry for being prevented from buying liquors, but soon became calm when she came to know about the harmful effect of liquor, and that the buying of liquor meant perpetuation of slavery. She instantly threw away the bottles from her hands and gave up the habit of consumption of liquor forever. The incident had a deep impact on her which inspired her to participate actively in the movement with the result that she later lost her life at the hands of police.⁹

With the progress of the Non-Cooperation Movement, the Congress workers and volunteers started extending their activities in the tea garden areas. Most of the tea gardens had their weekly *hats* or markets generally controlled by the local planters. The Congress volunteers frequently visited to these market places to propagate temperance among the labourers. The planters on the other hand, unable to stand the very sight of a Gandhi-capped Congress worker in the vicinity of the gardens, often resisted their entry in the gardens. As a matter of fact, the manager of Bedeti Tea Estate on one occasion thrown out one Mohanchandra Sarma, a Congress worker from the garden *hat*. The local Congress workers took it as a challenge and in cooperation with the villagers, established a new *hat* in a nearby village. In the process the former *hat* was completely deserted. On another occasion the manager of the Helem Tea Estate was physically assaulted by the agitated labourers.¹⁰ Under the leadership of Chandranath Sarma the movement gained further momentum. Nabin Chandra Bardoloi and Tarun Ram Phukan found in him their ablest lieutenant in the Darrang district. This nationalist young worker roused the dormant spirit of the Assamese youths and inspired them to dedicate themselves for the cause of the country.¹¹

Meanwhile the Assam Association met at Tezpur on 26-27 December, 1920, with Prasanna Kumar Baruah in Chair, to discuss the ratification of the resolution on non-cooperation adopted at the Kolkata Session of the Congress. The enthusiastic young workers erected a few gates at different places of the Tezpur town. The *Gate of Self Government* was built near the steamer *ghat*. The *Gandhi Gate* was erected near Padum *Pukhuri* and the *Shaukat Ali Gate* was erected near the main pandal of the Association. Each of these gates carried certain messages which reminded the people not to forget the agonies of Jalianwala Massacre, the wrongs done to the Khilafat Movement and the insult heaped on Mr. Phanidhar Chaliha on the floor of the Council.¹² The enthusiastic Congress workers, through some soul-stirring slogans called upon the people to participate in the Non-Cooperation Movement and asked them to be in readiness to sacrifice their blood for the attainment of self-government. These slogans also pointed out that co-operation with the British was equivalent to slavery contending that the British Government's motto of maintaining peace at any cost and of resorting to firing on unarmed people could not be accepted as a symbol of civilization. No doubt, these slogans went a long way to motivate the masses towards participation in the Non-Cooperation Movement.¹³ A resolution was adopted in this meeting which stated that the object of the Association, in the present situation, would be to work for the attainment of *Swaraj* by all legitimate means and to motivate the people towards this goal.¹⁴ Thus, the Tezpur Session of the Assam Association was virtually converted into a Congress forum and its politicisation was complete by the year 1920. The Association held its last session at Jorhat on 18 April, 1921, with Chabilal Upadhyay, a resident of Darrang district, in the chair where almost all the leaders of Assam valley were present. Besides condemning the recent eviction of Nepali graziers from Kaziranga Forest Reserves¹⁵ and police atrocities on them, the meeting discussed the non-cooperation programme and organizational matters.

Chandranath Sarma continued his organizational work by visiting a number of towns of Assam valley. Due to his untiring efforts, District Congress Committees were established at Dibrugarh on 12 February, 1921, and at Jorhat on 16 February.¹⁶ The foundation of the Darrang District Congress Committee was laid in a meeting held at the Tezpur Town Hall on 11 April, 1921. Chandranath Sarma was elected its President, Omeo Kumar Das, the Secretary and Lakshmidhar Sarma, the Assistant Secretary. An executive body of the committee was also formed in the same meeting. Some of the prominent members who attended the meeting were Lakhikanta Barkakati, Loknath Goswami, Mahabir Tiwari, Nagen Ganguly, Mahendranath Daw, Maheswar Goswami and others.¹⁷

The Bombay Session of the All India Congress Committee held on July, 1921, was attended by few Congress leaders of Assam who invited Gandhiji to visit Assam to boost the non-cooperation activities. The latter arrived along with the Ali Brothers, at Guwahati on 18 August, 1921 on a ten-day provincial tour. His visit inspired the people in both the valleys of Assam. He visited several places and in the meetings held at Guwahati, Tezpur, Nagaon, Jorhat, Dibrugarh and Silchar, bonfires of foreign cloths were made in presence of thousands of supporters and onlookers.¹⁸ Tezpur was preparing to give a rousing reception to Gandhiji where he arrived at 9 a.m. of 21 August, 1921. A large crowd gathered

at the Tezpur Steamer *ghat* to have a *darshan* of this great man. On the way to the residence of Haribilas Agarwala where he stayed, he was given a warm welcome by the people of the town. On that very day there was a *Mahila Sabha*, specially arranged for women which was attended by hundreds of ladies. At 4 o'clock in the afternoon he attended a public meeting at the Polo Field. A large crowd of about twenty thousand people coming from distant places like Kalabari, Gohpur, Gamiri, Biswanath, Chatia, Jamuguri, Haleswar, Balipara etc. assembled meeting. The two Congress leaders Muhammad Ali and Azad Sobhani, who accompanied Gandhiji in his Assam tour, made stirring speeches in the meeting. At the end of the meeting the people who were wearing foreign clothes threw them to a heap and bonfire was made by igniting them. This episode instilled patriotic fervour and sacrificing spirit in the hearts of all those who were present in the meeting. Gandhiji also observed a twenty four hour fast at Tezpur.¹⁹ This meeting of 22 August was attended by many tea garden labourers who came from Rangapara circle by a special train. On his advice, hundreds of youngmen took the pledge of temperance and vowed to preach against opium, *ganja* and other drug habit. The movement gathered further momentum during the three months after Gandhiji's departure.²⁰ His visit of Tezpur had tremendous impact on the tea-garden workers. During September-October 1921, further troubles erupted in Kacharigaon, Sonajuli and Dhendai Tea Estates of Darrang district. In these gardens, the labourers assaulted the managers of the supervisory staff. At Dhendai Tea Estate, they even assaulted the intervening Superintendent of Police on 14 October, 1921. As a reprisal to this act, the ring leaders were arrested and sent off to Tezpur for trial. The agitated labourers, demanding the release of the arrested persons, marched to Tezpur town. Realizing the gravity of the situation, the Tezpur District Congress Committee decided to intervene in the matter with a view of averting a serious situation. At their intervention, the labourers dispersed peacefully.²¹

In the district of Darrang, some leading women activists such as Chandraprabha Saikiani, Kiranmoyee Agarwala, Kiranbala Barkakati, Sarala Das etc. had already established the Tezpur *Mahila Samiti* (1919), with a view to carry out organizational work among the women of the district. Chandraprabha Saikiani resigned her service in the school and motivated a lot of women to participate in the movement. Gandhiji's soul stirring speeches, particularly his appreciation of the Assamese women for their outstanding work in weaving and spinning encouraged the women folk of the district in a big way thereby helping them to engage themselves in the constructive work of the Congress.

During the course of the movement a meeting of the women was held on 4 October, 1921 at the Garahabi Village of Biswanath which was attended by Omeo Kumar Das, Lakshmidhar Sarma and others. In that meeting the women were urged to boycott the foreign clothes and undertake weaving and spinning for promotion of *swadeshi*.²²

When the movement was on its height, there occurred a tragic incident at Chauri Chaura in Gorakhpur district of Uttar Pradesh on 5 February, 1922. A peaceful procession of several hundred processionists was attacked by the police. In retaliation, the agitated crowd chased the police party which hid itself inside a police station at Chauri Chaura. Unable to control their anger, the crowd set fire

on the building. All the twenty two policemen were thus burnt alive. On hearing this incident, Gandhiji suspended the movement with immediate effect. This decision of Gandhiji was ratified by the Congress Working Committee on 12 February, 1922.²³

The sudden suspension of the movement was a bolt from the blue for the Congressmen of Assam. Young leaders like Chandranath Sarma, who was ailing, was terribly upset and died soon after in July, 1923. Although the other freedom fighters, in general, were demoralized at this abrupt suspension, the movement expedited certain reforms in Assam. It forced the government to modify its opium policy which eventually led to the gradual decline of opium consumption in the province.²⁴

4.CONCLUSION:

The spirit of the Non-Cooperation movement worked even in the later phases of the India's struggle for freedom. Following the suspension of the movement, some leaders of the Congress directed their entire attention towards organizational activities in the village areas. In the district of Darrang, leaders like Omeo Kumar Das, Mahadev Sarma, Lakshmidhar Sarma, etc., traveled widely in the remote areas popularizing the ideas of *swadeshi* and boycott of foreign goods. These activities popularized the movement in every nook and corner of the district attracting thousands of people in the subsequent period. Moreover, the Non-Cooperation movement prepared the ground for protesting against the British rule in an organized way in Darrang district under the Tezpur District Congress Committee. Peasants, laborers, women and all other sections of the society started to express their agony through this common platform since this time. The strategy of 'not to cooperate' the British Government, which was the main principle of the Non-Cooperation Movement, continued to be adopted by the people of the district in the ensuing movements.

5. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT:

I sincerely acknowledge my heartfelt gratitude to my M.Phil supervisor Dr. S.D. Goswami, retired Professor of History, Dibrugarh University, Dibrugarh, who passed away on 1st September, 2012, for his encouragement and guidance in preparing this paper. I could learn a lot from Goswami Sir and his guidance will always remain a source of inspiration to me. I am always indebted to him.

REFERENCES:

- [1] Chandra, Bipan and others (1989), *India's Struggle for Independence 1857-1947*, Penguin Books, New Delhi, p. 186.
- [7] *Smaranika* (1992), Golden Jubilee Celebration of the Quit India Movement, Chatia, p. 6.
- [5] Deka, Kanak Chandra (1989), *Asomar Prasiddha Mukti-Yujaru*, Bina Library, Guwahati, p. 582.

- [13] Gogoi, Punya Dhar (1996), 'Life and Achievement of Omeo Kumar Das', Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, submitted to Dibrugarh University, Dibrugarh, Assam, pp. 27,28.
- [22] Sharma, Dipti (1995), *Mukti-Jujat Luit Poria Nari*, Students' Stores, Guwahati, pp. 38-39.
- [3] Dutt, K.N. (1969), *Landmarks of Freedom Movement in Assam*, Lawyer's Book Stall, Guwahati, (Reprint), p. 57.
- [12] Guha, A. (1977), *Planter Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826-1947*, Tulika Books, New Delhi, p. 73.
- [20] Baruah, S.L. (1985), *A Comprehensive History of Assam*, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, New Delhi, p. 542.
- [4] Das, Omeo Kumar (1969), *Ashohoyog Andolanat Asam*, Guwahati, pp.13, 16.
- [6] Das, Omeo Kumar (1969), *Ashohoyog Andolanat Asam*, Guwahati, pp. 17, 18.
- [8] 'Swadhinata Sangramat Mangaldoi', *Swahid Smritigrantha* (1969), Dhekiajuli, p. 83.
- [21] Bhuyan, Arun (1988), *Amiya Kumar Das*, Dhekiajuli, p. 45.
- [15] Guha, A., *op.cit.*, p. 75; Kshattray, Agni Bahadur (1996), *Itihasar Aadharat Asomar Nepali*, Biswanath Chariali, p. 91.
- [9] Das, Omeo Kumar (1983), *Jiban-Smriti*, PBA, Guwahati, p. 179.
- [10] Bhuyan, A.C. and De, S. (ed.), *op.cit.*, p. 49; Das, Omeo Kumar, *Jiban-Smriti*, p. 253.
- [14] Guha, A., *op.cit.*, p. 97.
- [17] Das, Omeo Kumar, *Jiban-Smriti*, p. 184.
- [23] Chandra, Bipan and others, *op.cit.*, p. 191.
- [19] Das, Omeo Kumar, *Jiban-Smriti*, p. 206.
- [24] Baruah, S.L. *op.cit.*, p. 542.
- [18] Saikia, Chandraprasad (ed., 1969), *Asomat Mahatma*, Guwahati, p. 5.
- [11] Barpujari, H.K. (ed., 1977), *Political History of Assam, Vol. I, (1826-1919)*, PBA, Guwahati, pp. 242-43.
- [16] Bhattacharyya, B. K. (ed., 1983), *Karmabir Chandranath Sarma*, PBA, Guwahati, p. 81.
- [2] Bhuyan, A.C. and De, S. (ed., 1999), *Political History of Assam, Vol. II, (1920-39)*, Publication Board of Assam (PBA), Guwahati, (Second edition), p. 10.