CHAPTER - V
Ambikagiri’s Dream of a Resurgent Assamese Society

The foundation of any leadership position is drives of the aspirant leader and the needs of the other political activists in a particular political situation. It is a web of relationship within a specific context, changing as the context changes and with it the benefits a political leader can offer, particularly to political followers. Roy Chowdhury’s own drives and ideas composed his leadership. He had a clear vision of future Assam which he thereafter felt to be his utmost duty, if Assam was to be reformed, developed to play her destined role in world community.

In a multilayered, multicultural society like India anti imperialist struggle needs to be viewed from varied perspectives. It is necessary to review a number of components, part played by local agitation within the larger national agitation. The actual force of agitation varied within provinces over time as well as space. Roy Chowdhury was a central figure in the socio-political life of Assam, at a time when the nation was engaged in a complex process of confrontation with an impartial power, deeply entrenched on Indian soil. Inevitable fallout of the heightened European imperialism is that it brought the British with its commercial ambition to India. Rise of nationalism as a system of belief, an ideology as a political movement has been one of the formative process in the creation of the Indian Republic. It remains central to the process of conflict, providing a set of ideas about the political form for organizing resistance. So it is both ideology and social movement. Nationalism can therefore be seen as a reaction against imperialism and within this framework of the Indian nationalist movement Ambikagiri Roy Chowdhury needs to be place and the organization he directed. He was more closely associated with the social and political struggle of the age than any of his literary contemporaries. This phenomenon of one man’s varied role is particularly striking in the face of accumulating evidence of the roots and rational of political awareness and activity in modern India. There has often been local and particular concern as the sub-continent’s varied and uneven experience of change under the aegis of the British Raj. The British Raj generated different levels of political concern and different arenas in which those concerns were pursued. Similarly leaders operated at different levels according to
their perception and capabilities in styles appropriate to them in their particular experience of change.

A different kind of protest in the age of change and unrest was the protest initiated and led by Roy Chowdhury under the aegis of organization like Asom Jātiya Mahā Sabhā. As the names suggest these were organizations established and moulded by Roy Chowdhury with specific aims and objectives to be precise – invoke a distinct Assamese identity and work towards the enrichment of that distinctiveness. These organizations initially had a less overtly political role, one that led not to conformation with authority, but operating within the larger political context, eventually seen negotiating political space as is evident from subsequent activities. Set up with an objective of establishing Assamese nationality that means in institutional term a process that he initiated with the following two defined socio-political and economic goal:

i) Upholding Assamese nationalism within the Pan Indian Nationalism.
ii) Ideological connectedness with the Indian National Congress.

Asom Sangrakshini Sabhā

The year 1926 witnessed two very significant events in the history of Assam, Pandu Congress and the establishment of the Asom Sangrakshini Sabhā. In the 22nd session of the Indian National Congress, Ambikagiri Roy Chowdhury as a dedicated Congress activist involved himself fully to make the session a success. “A militant anti colonial activist, Roy Chowdhury was a major player in the Indian National Congress organization in Assam.”¹ An inspirational poet and lyricist, he composed the inaugural song of the first session of the Pandu Congress session.² In the same year he formed the Asom Sangrakshini Sabhā to promote Assamese sub nationalist interest with a goal “to form the Assamese nation by bringing together the high and low, the reach and the poor and people across the caste and religious divide.”³ The Sangrakshini Sabhā was started to unite the Assamese people, as the name suggests for the preservation of the Assamese society, “to save the Assamese nationality,

1. Sanjib Baruah, India against itself, p.78
3. Dekā Asom 1st Year 1st issue, 31st Ashadha 1857 Śaka,
facing a crisis of existence from different quarter.” From its very inception the Sabhā had a defined political role to play, “to ventilate the grievances of the local people.”

In this significant interregnum Roy Chowdhury devoted his time and energy for the organizational work of both Assam Pradesh Congress Committee (APCC) and Asom Sangrakshini Sabhā. The rationale behind the formation of the Asom Sangrakshini Sabhā was to protect the Assamese language and culture and nationality, existence of the indigenous people he perceived as threatened and launched his movement. The organization of the Sabhā, philosophy and program of action of the Sangrakshini Sabhā did never encompass any confrontation with the nationalist movement as conceived and executed by Roy Chowdhury. In fact Roy Chowdhury’s movement strengthened the mainstream of the national movement as a national organization. Bhupendra Roy Chowdhury reminiscences the auspicious beginning of the Asom Sangrakshini Sabhā, “it had an auspicious beginning on 6th April 1926 in the office of Chetana under the president-ship of Maulavi Mohibul Haque with a vow to preserve Assamese national existence.”

Regarding the organization, its aims and objectives a long narrative had been published in 7th year 9th issue Chetana wherein Roy Chowdhury embarked on a painful discussion of the deprivation of the Assamese and a critique of colonial cultural subjugation. Roy Chowdhury articulated the notion of a great Indian nation and for that matter resolving the regional problems and grievances becomes imperative. It is for strengthening and enriching a vast Indian nation (Bhāratiya Mahājāti). For him the self assertion (Atma Pratistha) by India’s nationalities (Jati) was not a negative and oppositional impulse vis a vis other Jatis, but a positive impulse about the pursuit of individual and collective self fulfillment. First and

4. PHA record, 13th January, 37th issue Asomiya file no-6 1929.
5. Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya, Ambikagiri Rai Chowdhury, p.15.
7. Ibid.
8. Kono lukar ba kono sampradāyar bā governmentar manat kibā sandesh dibar tilmano matlab manat narakhā koi keval Asomiya jātir ātmorakhay upāi āru sestā kariboiloikehe ukta sabhā sangathita karā hoise. (There should not be an iota of doubt for the government or any community regarding the aims and objectives of the Asom Sangrakshini Sabhā that has been formed with the sole objectives of upholding the interest of the Assamese nation and to initiate measures in this regard.)
foremost supplication of the Sangrakshini philosophy is to resist the threat to Assamese nationality and strive for uniting all irrespective of caste, creed, community and religion. Ideologically he was guided by the principle of Mahātma Gandhi. The Sangrakshini Sabha as envisaged by Roy Chowdhury became an exclusive political organization to uphold indigenous Assamese interest and its subsequent projection of the particular issues of Assam testifies the role played by it.

Sangrakshini philosophy and its cardinal principle ‘Assam is for the Assamese’ have most often been misinterpreted. In the works of Dr. Banikanta Kakoti it is nothing but an illusory misinterpretation. His philosophy is live and let live. His love for Assam is complimentary to his love for India. He said that all the states of India together comprised the great Indian nationality with every state having its own unique culture. Enriching all these uniqueness is necessary for the healthy growth of Indian nation. This wider nationalistic attitude is also clearly revealed in some of his songs written in Tezpur jail. Nevertheless in the face of all odds and constraints Roy Chowdhury proceeded to work towards the fulfillment of the Sabha to arouse the national consciousness of the Assamese.

In this context it is worth mentioning here the objectives of the Sangrakshini Sabha, clearly defined and outlined in 9 points. A highly significant aspect of this is the politico economic conception of Assamese nation with the final component being the Assamese people. Vigorously expressed in this is demand for exclusive right of

10. “Asom bāsi Bangāli, Marowāri, Punjābi bhāi Šakaloke kam je aponaloke Asomiyā jāti prakrīta sārthar lagat āponalokor sārtha samān kari loi Asomiyā jāti sangathita hoy uthāt sahāi karak. Āponalokeh Asom desāk ni jē desh būli dhari loak…” (I would earnestly request all the Bengalis, Marwari, Punjabis and Biharis living in Assam to merge your interest with the Assamese National Interest and enrich the organization of greater Assamese nation. Except Assam as your own...) “Jidare Jāpan Jāpanīr nimitte, Bhārat Bāharatīyar nimitte, Bihār bihārīr nimitte, Punjāb Punjābir nimitte, Seidare Asom Asomiyar nimitte.” (Just as Japan for Japanese, India for Indians, Bihar for Biharis, Punjab for Punjabis in the same manner Assam is for Assamese.) The way he realized it was more often interpreted as narrow provincialism. The fact of the matter is that the exclusivist assertion of Assamese nationality was getting overshadowed by an all encompassing pan India movement. The relevance of Roy Chowdhury’s movement, his clarion call to save Assam, his telegrams to All India leaders like Nehru & Azad, all these are referred to by Jogesh Das (renowned litterateur and former President of Asom Sahitya Sabha) and he laments that they could not quite grasp the significance of Sangrakshini movement.
12. Dekā Asom 2nd Year 8th issue, Šaka 1858, 29th Bhadro
the Assamese people on the resources of the province as it gets clearly revealed in objective number 2 of the Sabhā, Assamese people must possess legal rights on the land resource of Assam. The third objectives emphasizes on trade and commerce to be precise establishment and development of facilities for Assamese traders. Another objective which carries a very significant political relevance even today is the long term goal of a federated India and Assam being one of its strong developed and ‘necessary’ organ. It is in this sense of nationalism he clarified the conception of a sub-nationalism involving a movement aiming to firmly establish Assamese as a nationality. It is a sort of propagation and promotion of nationalism to survive and compete in the coming political setup. This promotion included a sense of identity and purpose reinforced by press, popular attitude and cultural trend. Roy Chowdhury’s idea also reveals a process of assimilation of all outsiders permanently residing in Assam with the Assamese national identity, a long term practical political idea inclined towards a federal Indian structure. In the constitution of Asom Sangrakshini Some of the points are: i) Preference for Assamese national interest in all matters of Assam. ii) Drinking water facility health care for every village in Assam. iii) Every Assamese must strive to enhance the pride of Assam and be a competent component of federate India.

Sabhā, subsequently renamed Asom Jātiya Mahā Sabhā it has mentioned in the most unambiguous terms “to form the Assamese nation by bringing together the high and low, irrespective of caste, creed and religion, to find a way of self determination by the Assamese people and to strengthen and enrich the Assamese nation as a strong organ of the Indian federation”13 and he always advocate that Assam should remain as an integral part of India with an equal status and right along with the other parts of the country.

This agenda itself was a revolutionary one, for the low born people were highly neglected at this time and were victims of discrimination in the erstwhile socio cultural life. Even the low-caste students were also not allowed to dine the high caste students. This kind of highly responsible to lead some students like Sonaram Chutiya, resulting the formation of Srimanta Sankar Sangha. Being a free successor of 16th century socio-religious reformers Srimanta Sankardeva, Ambikagiri could not and did not tolerate such a thinking of so called high and low caste and hence helouded his voice against this type of caste discrimination and stressed upon this agenda. For more details one may consult………… Mayur Bora, Sankar Sangha, “Bipathe Goise Neki”, 2012. Hem Kosa letter A, Mamoni goswami, Datal Hatir Unye Khowa Howda, life of Gunabiram Baruah etc. etc.
The *Asom Sangrakshini Sabhā* and subsequently the *Asom Jātiya Mahā Sabhā* are central to the political ideas of Roy Chowdhury, being Assam’s national forum.\(^{14}\) As has already been referred, on 6\(^{th}\) April 1926 there was an informal setting in Cetana office and Sangrakshini Sabhā came into existence as a political organization. The formal inaugural session of the Sabhā took place in May 1926 in the same tent, constructed for the annual session of the Indian national Congress under the presidency of Pitambar Dev Goswami the Adhikar of Garmur Satra of Majuli and from then onwards Roy Chowdhury was actively promoting Assamese sub-national agenda. In 1935 the Sangrakshini Sabhā was rechristened as the Asom Jatiya MahāSabhā with more or less same ideas and objectives. Major leaders of the Assam Congress held a cooperating attitude towards the Asom Sangrakshini Sabhā during its early phase, but later developments in Assam politics revealed pronounced difference between the Sabhā and the Congress, some of which has already been cited in the forgoing pages.

A strong, determined and passionately protective attitude of the Sabhā from its very inception converted it into a national forum.\(^{15}\) The vigour and vitality of the Sabhā can be gauged by the reach and the response it was getting from every nook and corner of Assam. Roy Chowdhury along with President Nilamani Phukan, organizer of the worker group, Madhab Ch. Bezbaruah and Mahendra Nath Dekā Phukan established branches of the Sabhā in different parts of Assam.\(^{16}\) Sangrakshini was then the only forum for promoting Assamese national identity and almost all the distinguish personality of Assam were associated with it.\(^{17}\)

Initial confusion and reaction notwithstanding Asom Sangrakshini Sabhā did establish its hold over Assam. For instance the list of delegates in the 10\(^{th}\) session of the Sabhā from Gawahati, Dwarkhchi, Barpeta, Tezpur and Naduar branches testifies the support and co-operation from distinguished personalities of Assam.\(^{18}\) The list included people like Gopinath Bordoloi, Jogendra Nath Baruah, Raghunath Chowdhary, Madhab Ch. Bezbaruah, Mahendra Nath Dekā Phukan, Gangaram

\(^{14}\) Dwijendra Narayan Goswami, “Ambikagiri Roy Chowdhury Āru Jātiya Mahā Sabhā”, in Dr. Ramcharan Thakuria (ed.), *Asom Aru Ambikagiri Roy Chowdhury*, pp.90-91
\(^{15}\) Ibid -91.
\(^{16}\) Ibid -90.
\(^{17}\) Ibid -90
\(^{18}\) Dekā Asom 1st Year 23rdissue, Śaka 1857, 6th Paush.
Chowdhury, Dhaniram Talukdar, Girish Ch. Chowdhury, Padmanath Gohain, Baruah, Ram Prasad Agarwala, Annada Kr. Padmapati etc. Just before the 10th session of the Sabhā (Nagaon session) secretary, Ambikagiri Roy Chowdhury formally requested all the branches to mobilize opinion on key issues like census, Sylhet, Domiciled, Assam University etc. and for their active participation. A list of 12 branches of the Sabhā and office bearers are mentioned in the formal request published in Dekā Asom.\textsuperscript{19}

According to this list besides the main branch at Guwahati there were other branches at Nagaon, Barpeta, Tihu, Dwarkhuti, Bisenola Tarani, Sotea, Jorhat, Sibasagar, NAshadhaKartika, Dibrugarh and Doomdooma. Launching of the Sabhā was a defining moment in Roy Chowdhury’s public life, a political choice, a response to the emerging situation, a resistance to dominance by others in Assam in different spheres. Operating within the political mainstream the Asom Sangrakshini Sabhā had an all Assam presence voicing concerns and workings towards the fulfillment of its already spelt out objectives. As is clear from the discourse entitled “Sangrakshini Philosophy”, the Sabhā under took a systematic projection and promotion of socio-economic and political concerns having serious implication for the future of Assam.\textsuperscript{20}

Sometimes distrusted and disliked by a section of the people for their perceived arrogance of Roy Chowdhury it becomes necessary here to highlight a letter published in ‘Asomiya’ (Weekly) regarding apprehension about the Sangrakshini Sabhā and its objectives and plan of action before the publication of the letter Roy Chowdhury published a leaflet outlining the aims and objectives of the Sabhā on 8-4-1926. On Sri Tarun Ram Phukan’s request Roy Chowdhury clarified the stand of the Asom Sangrakshini Sabhā in the context of Assam. So there was initial confusion regarding the organization and its relevance in view of the existence of Congress as the main organization. A parallel and in some ways a remarkably significant socio-political problems were thrust upon the consciousness of the Assamese people. The Sabhā as expected by Roy Chowdhury attracted immediate wide spread public attention when Roy Chowdhury clearly stated that the Sabhā does not have any intention of hurting any individual or community.\textsuperscript{21} Nor does it have any intention of creating confusion for the government regarding the organization. The Asom Sangrakshini Sabhā stood for the assertion, preservation and enrichment of the Assamese nation, and it is clearly

\textsuperscript{19.} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{20.} Ibid 2nd Year 1stissue, Śaka 1858, 29th Ashadha.
\textsuperscript{21.} Ibid 2nd Year 14th Issue Śaka 1858, 23rd Kartīk.
conveyed to the government as well as the Bengali, Marwari, Punjabi brothers living in Assam. It is a matter of survival for the people of Assam and he expected co-operation, co-option and accommodative attitude from all sections living in Assam. He also emphasized that self defence or self assertion is an integral component of human dignity. So he made an appeal to all for support and co-operation in carrying out the activities of the Sabhā. Asomiya carried a news item on Sangrakshini Sabhā and appreciated its great objectives in the larger public interest of Assam and suggested to keep the organization free from communal feelings. Regarding the apprehension created by the Sabhā we need to refer here to a letter to the editor published in Asomiya (weekly).22 This letter was written after the publication of the rules and regulation of the Sabhā on 23rd May 1926. In the very beginning the writer expressed his inability to understand the rules of the Sabhā. Moreover he raised an objection that the great Assamese nationality including Kachari (Bodo), Miri (Mishing) Lalung (Tiwa) is difficult to understand. His main objection is the word ‘including’. Perhaps the writer perceived it as a divisive attempt and failed to grasp the accommodative approach of the Sabhā. He even raised doubt that accepting Assamese language by outsiders living in Assam is not a practicable idea. But he failed to understand that Assamese was the lingua franca and permanently settled non Assamese accepting the language gradually was very practicable. In his long letter he even contradicted his own view on language and accepted whatever Roy Chowdhury had stated on the issue of language. He even sounded a warning to the tribes mentioned in the letter.

It is a clear indication of the doubts and reaction that the Sangrakshini Sabhā generated. Not with standing this the Sabhā did have a flourishing career, establishing branches in different parts of Assam. The strains of shaping and moulding an organization was enthusiastically shouldered by Roy Chowdhury and with more or less similar political ideology with the Congress he successfully integrated it into the political mainstream and helped sustain an effort prompting larger collection interest of Assam.

It should be mentioned here that the code of rules of the Asom Sangrakshini Sabhā was published in two issues of the Asomiya (weekly) on 23-05-26 and 30-05-

22. Asomiya Weekly 2nd Year 9th Issue, 2nd May, 1926.
respectively which unleashed a flood of reaction in the public sphere of Assam. It is really interesting that the Sabhā generated a political debate on it.

Now a close look on the issues taken up by the Asom Sangrakshini Sabhā. Significant perhaps in this context is that few attempts have been made so far as to incorporate these aspects into the broad framework of the freedom movement. In a brief essay entitled contemporary ‘Assam and Sangrakshini’ Roy Chowdhury aimed to relate people, objects and happenings into the understanding of his organization under some notion of common goal and interest. Two major issues taken up by Sangrakshini Sabhā were the separation of Sylhet and immigration from east Bengal having serious implication for the political future of Assam. It has already been mentioned elsewhere about the memorandum presented to Nehru when he paid a visit to Assam in 1937. In this memorandum it was clearly slated that, ‘Sylhet is essentially a Bengali district. Moreover the district of Sylhet is in a chronic state of deficit and unable to meet its own expenditure which costs nearly 20 lacs of Rupees of the more highly taxed Assamese rayats. The valley jealously has always been acute leading to stagnation. In Assam the transfer of Sylhet to Bengal is the problem of the problems. Therefore the Congress should leave no stone unturned to get the district of Sylhet transferred to Bengal and reconstitute Assam on the basis of linguistic homogeneity which is also one of the ideals of the Congress. “Moreover customs, manners, language, cultural religious tradition of Sylhet that are ‘diametrically opposite’ to the valley of Assam, having no historical connection is also stressed upon in the memorandum. Nehru’s response in this regard is highly significant here that underscores the disjunction between the two perspectives. The question of Sylhet’s separation and immigration, “Nehru said, “may be very important to you but in comparison to other big problems facing us today, they are very small.” But it was one of the key issues mostly debated in the public sphere of Assam and one of the issues consistently pursued by the Asom Sangrakshini Sabhā. Way back in 1934 Sangarakshini Sabhā decided to send delegate to England on the issue of the separation of Sylhet. Rohini Kr. Baruah represented the Sangrakshini Sabhā in Round

23. Dekā Asom 2nd Year 6th issue, Śaka 1858, 15th Bhadro.
24. Roy Chowdhury’s Memorandum to Nehru PHA record File No – P 4 (1)/22, 1937
Table Conference. On this issue Sabhā published memorandum, sent telegram and started correspondence, convened all party conference for the opinion of Assamese Muslims on the issue. Since 1924-25 separation of Sylhet was the most debated issue on Cetana. At various levels the issue was discussed and debated. On 9th August 1934 a joint delegation of Asom Sangrakshini Sabhā and Assam Association held a discussion with the Governor of Assam on the separation of Sylhet. The delegation included Gopinath Bordoloi, Chairman Muncipal Board, Dinanath Medhi, member local board, Keshab Dutta Barua, tea planter, Jogendra Nath Baruah, General Secretary Assam Association, Ambikagiri Roy Chowdhury, General Secretary Asomiya Sangrakshini Sabhā, Rohini Kr. Chowdhury etc. What the deputation urged was a homogenous federal unit for a province of Assam consisting of the Assamese people and with this end in view they pressed for the separation of Sylhet. “They would not mind a small province of five districts only.”

Meanwhile in an article entitled ‘Pandit Nehru and problems of Assam’ Gyananath Borah brought to focus the inability of Nehru to comprehend the worries and apprehensions of the people of Assam regarding immigration and separation of Sylhet. It also brings to light the different priorities on issues specifically relating to Assam and Pan Indian politicians. On the other hand Sangrakshini Sabhā was relentlessly pursuing the Sylhet issue and its committed engagement was getting appreciated. For instance editor, Āwāhan, Dinanath Sahrmah termed the separation of Sylhet as a national problem of Assam. He appreciated Sangrakshini movement for sending a delegate to England for raising this issue. In his editorial Dinanath Sharmah expressed hope that the Sabhā’s effort will bear fruit. Also published along with it was an appeal by Roy Chowdhury on behlf of Sangrakshini Sabhā for financial contribution. In this context Roy Chowdhury highlighted 12 points on why Sylhet should be separated, right from financial obligation to socio-economic and cultural implication and calls for reorganization of Assam separating Sylhet. In his presidential address Pramathnath Chakraborty presiding over the special Mangalddoi session of Asom Sangrakshini Sabhā stated that Sylhet is one of the main problems

26. PHA record File No – 12 (The Assam Domiciled peoples and Sattler Association)
27. Ibid.
28. Āwāhan 9th Year 1st Issue, 1859 Śaka, Aswin.
29. Ibid, editorial 5th Year 8th Issue, Jeistha 1856
30. Ibid, 5th Year 1st Issue, 1855 Śaka, Ashadhā.
hindering the development of Assam and urged upon the people of Assam to separate the district of Sylhet.31 Another relevant point here is the leaflet published by Asom Socio-Economic Studies prepared by Gyananath Borah elaborating on the pros and cons of Sylhet issue based on population pattern and very clearly he discussed the benefit for the people of Assam if Sylhet gets separated.32

*Sangrakshini Sabhā* led by Roy Chowdhury addressed this perennial problem of Sylhet and used every means at its disposal to raise the issue and successfully launched a movement on the issue initiating a historical debate. In the previous chapter reference has been made to the *Sangrakshini Sabhā’s* proposed move to contest election in 1937 and one of its objectives being the separation of Sylhet if elected to the Assembly. However this idea was dropped considering adverse public opinion.33 In 1936 *Sngrakshini Sabhā* in its annual session formally adopted a resolution on separation of Sylhet. The influence of the *Sabhā* has been quite apparent in the politics of Assam. Being a key organization the *Sabhā* played a central role in Assam politics with a sub-nationalist attitude compatible with the larger Indian nationalistic project.

Another painstakingly projected issue by the *Asom Sangrakshini Sabhā* was immigration, one of highly contested issue in Assam politics till today. Immigration to Assam has a long history, with an officially backed policy for economic necessity leading to a continuous inflow of the immigrants particularly from Mymensingh district. Very soon it assumed an alarming proportion. Indigenous people considered it a threat feeling that unless it was checked their economic and cultural life and their very existence would be obliterated.34 The large scale immigration led to a shift in the demographic balance in favour of the Muslims, encouraged by the government. Influx of the migrants not withstanding Sir Henry Cotton, chief commissioner of Assam, found even at the close of the 19th century over four fifths of the cultivable wastelands untouched by plough. What the chief commissioner wanted was to cover this with food crops, not with tea bushes, for Assam had to depend on Bengal for food grains.35

32. Ibid, 6th Year 10th Issue, 1857 Šaka, Kartik.
33. Dekā Asom 2nd Year 7th issue, Šaka 1858, 22nd Bhadro.
34. M. Kar ‘Muslim Politics in Assam, N.E. affair, July to December, 1973, Shillong, P.R. cited in PHA Vol-2 p.308
Ensuring food security in Assam was accorded a priority prompting the government to adopt the ‘grow more food’ scheme under this scheme; immigrants were encouraged to settle down in Assam. “The pressure on the soil diluvium in their home districts, availability of cheap, plentiful and fertile lands on easy terms in Assam in place of expensive and uncomfortable holding as sub tenants in Bengal drove the immigrants particularly of the districts of Mymensingh to move up into the valley and they formed during 1911-21 an appreciable element of population in all the four and lower middle districts.”

To restrict immigrant settlements in Assamese inhabited lands the line system was devised in 1916 by the officials of the Nagaon district. Enforced first in Nagaon in 1920 and Barpeta sub division of Kamrup district, compelling the migrants to settle in segregated localities, Viceroy Lord Wavell commented on this alarming issue, “the chief political problems is the desire of the Moslem Ministers to increase this immigration into the uncultivated government lands under the slogan of ‘grow more food’ but what they are really after is ‘grow more Moslems.”

The Asom Sangrakshini Sabhā addressed this pressing problem on a priority basis. The kind of resistance Sabhā generated to the issue is another dimension of the struggle waged by Roy Chowdhury. An overtly political movement launched by Sabhā taking up the issue of immigrants needs to be understood within the broad socio-political context. The immigrant influx affecting economic and social progress of the native people unevenly did create a structural and ideological condition for movement and Roy Chowdhury forever concerned and worried about Assam addressed it in words and action. Time and again his words emphasized the issue and with utmost sincerity pursued it at various levels. For instance during Nehru’s visit to Assam in 1937, he was presented a memorandum by Assamiya Sangrakshini Sabhā wherein an attempt had been made to appraise upon Nehru the gravity of the immigration problem hoping for congressional interference. Amidst the persisting uncertainties posed by the mounting pressure of immigrants Roy Chowdhury tried to bring the urgency of the issue to the notice of Nehru. He stated that, “from years together we have been standing face to face with extinction as a people. Mass

36. Ibid.
immigration of the Bengali speaking people from Bengal has been freely allowed in the face of strong opposition by the Assamese. Almost all the available waste cultivable lands in the valley have been occupied by the immigrants.”

Roy Chowdhury was a strong advocate of the ‘Line system’ devised to protect the indigenous people of Assam which according to him controls the settlement of land under immigrants. Quite apprehensive of the move by the then Assam Assembly to abolish ‘Line System’ Roy Chowdhury stated, “Now there is a pernicious move in the present Assam Assembly to wipe off all these demarcations.”

This alarmingly serious issue was officially acknowledged as is evident from a letter by S.D.O. Barpeta to D.C. Kamrup that speaks about the proposed classification of villages as classed village reserved strictly for indigenous people. Voicing his concern Roy Chowdhury over the inflow of migrants from Bengal particularly Mymensing made an appeal to the people of Assam to resist the colonial governments policy favouring immigrants. Sangrakshini Sabha has repeatedly been urging upon the government to stop the inflow of immigrants as it is almost likely that it would permanently alter the future of Assam and destroy the whole structure of Assamese culture. To resolve this burning problem and to ensure a secured future for the coming generation a movement is being launched by Sabha to press the demand for a land reservation law. He was witnessing wave of immigrants transforming the landscape of Assam. It is evident that he required a political organization designed to bring about desired results and Roy Chowdhury attempted it through Sangrakshini and subsequently Asom Jatiya Mahasabha. It is the emergence of the problem (immigration) that can be seen prompting a change of perspective. We do not see any sudden change in his conviction but a change in perceptions based on principle of assimilation for instance the proposed formulation of an Immigration bill with the help of Mymensingia’s (permanently settled) Sikhas, Nepali, Marwari etc. in the Nagaon session of Asom Sanrakshini Sabha. It is an accommodative approach for assimilation of outsiders into a greater Assamese society. Let us consider the 3rd

38. Ibid.
40. Asomiya 13th April 1929.
41. Āwahan 6th Year 3rd Issue, 1856 Šaka, Paush.
42. Dekā Asom 1st Year 23rdissue, Šaka 1857, 6td Bhadro
43. Ibid. 1st Year 41st issue, Šaka 1858, 25th Jeisha.
resolution of the Nagaon session (1935). It is clearly stated that those who had permanently settled and accepted Assamese as their language are most welcome.\(^{44}\) It implies an attempt to resist further immigration and assimilation of permanently settled people in Assam. Later on serious attempts were being made at organizational level for teaching Assamese language to those people.

At a time facing conflicts a plenty, conflicts around land, language, culture, seeking preponderance of the Assamese in Assam, Roy Chowdhury led *Sangrakshini Sabhā* through critical phases and the presence of the Sabhā as a socio-political organization was quite impressive in the public sphere of Assam. As a committed social organization *Sabhā* did quite a commendable work, for instance *Sangrakshini Sabhā* central flood relief committee can be referred to. In a natural disaster like flood *Sangrakshini* played a major role and quickly organized relief in Kamrup and Nagaon district. What is significant here is the highly organized and disciplined manner the whole exercise was conducted right from corresponding with the government to the formation of volunteer corps for relief.\(^{45}\) It also reveals the connectivity of the *Sabhā* with different section of the people. Infect Roy Chowdhury expressed gratitude to the proprietor of Picture House for his contribution to the flood relief fund.\(^{46}\) This is also very significant that an account of the expenditure and credit of the fund was made public.\(^{47}\)

Roy Chowdhury in his own words was, “relentlessly fighting for eleven years to ensure a secured future of the Assamese people in an environment marked by criticism, objection and confusion.”\(^{48}\) Negotiating public space while implementing the principles of *Sangrakshini Sabhā* he was confronting distrust from various quarters. Whatever he felt, did it in a determined and convincing manner. In a long narrative in *Dekā Asom* Roy Chowdhury regretted that his philosophy and constructive principles were misinterpreted. He tried to explain his resignation from *Sangrakshini Sabhā* in terms of a counter propaganda, indiscipline in the

\(^{44}\) Ibid, 2nd Year 1st issue, Śaka 1858, 29th Ashadha.

\(^{45}\) Ibid, 1st Year 41st issue, Śaka 1858, 25th Jeistha.

\(^{46}\) Ibid 2nd Year 1st issue, Śaka 1858, 29th Ashadha

\(^{47}\) Ibid.

\(^{48}\) Ibid, 2nd Year 25th issue, Śaka 1858, 3rd Phālguna.
organization, misdirected workers, power politics and finally Roy Chowdhury blamed himself for not being able to achieve the desired results.\textsuperscript{49}

As a whole Sangrakshini Sabhā did have an influence in the public sphere of Assam and it is quite understandable from the reach of the Sabhā and its dealing of crucial socio-political issues. Roy Chowdhury's dream of a vibrant Assamese society does have the contemporariness but his plan was not very clear because it contained more than one principle. The relative failure of the Sabhā can not be explained solely by the structural weakness of the organization alone. It is not easy to combine diverse principles of different tendency often resulting in political strain. Moreover all the time Sabhā had to function in an overshadowing atmosphere created by the larger nationalist struggle under the aegis of the Indian National Congress.

A disillusioned Roy Chowdhury resigned from the Asom Sangrakshini Sabhā. His political thinking closely related to the prevailing condition immediately got conveyed in the form of another organization the Asom Jātiya Mahā Sabhā. His political philosophy depended upon and first clearly brought into the focus of attention a desired level of socio-political charge of absolutely first rate importance based on a growing political self-consciousness.

The Asom Jātiya Mahā Sabhā following more or less the same ideology and agenda of Sangrakshini Sabhā formally came into being in 1936. Ratna Kanta Barkakati (renowned poet and contemporary of Roy Chowdhury) organized a huge public meeting at Dhing covering 8 revenue circles.\textsuperscript{50} In that public meeting formal declaration regarding Asom Jātiya Mahā Sabhā was made with its Head Office at Guwahati. Then veteran Sangrakshini worker Ratnadhar Sarmah established a branch of Jatiya Mahā Sabhā at Goreswar, Kamrup. This was followed by a number of branches at different parts of Assam particularly in the rural areas of Darrang and Kamrup. Even at Garo Hills a branch of Asom Jātiya Mahā Sabhā sprang up called Goalpara Branch.\textsuperscript{51}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{49} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{50} Ibid, 6th Year 19th issue, Śaka 1862, 17th Chaitra.
\item \textsuperscript{51} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
The relevance of the *Asom Jātiya Mahā Sabhā* needs to be understood in the light of the contemporary political happenings. The emergence of the *Sabhā* and subsequent political developments is of immense importance in the history of Assam. As is evident from the complexity of issues like immigration, census etc. These are issues shaped by socio-economic factors operating in the society.

It becomes imperative to understand the complex urgent, rapidly unfolding practical task of larger nationalist struggle and local resistance pursuing specific issues from different perspectives. It is in this context necessary to take cognizance of true facts of reality issues confronting this largely forgotten state and how these were addressed by organization like *Asom Jātiya Mahā Sabhā*. With a distinctly political and social agenda the *Sabhā* proceeded to take up issues like census, immigration etc. Few political activists have attributed such great significance on census and economic self reliance as Roy Chowdhury and through the platform of the *Sabhā* he expected to generate a public consciousness. He was quite explicit about the idea of an expanding Assamese society with a distinctive identity. Roy Chowdhury’s stress on establishment of control by the Assamese over the resources of Assam can be explained by his ever growing concern about the economic future of Assam. Antagonistic contradiction between the indigenous populace and outsiders perhaps prompted Roy Chowdhury to think in term of resistance in a most organized manner. His explicit advocacy of the line system is elaborately intertwined with a pro-immigrant government policy He was apparently disturbed by the growing number of immigrants and suggested retention of the line system and adopted an assimilative approach. It is indeed necessary to view the local and particular consensus on the Indian subcontinent’s uneven experience of change generated under the aegis of the Raj. The Raj generated different levels of political concern and created different arenas in which those concerns were pursued. Leaders operated at different levels according to their preparation and capacities in styles appropriate to them. Keeping this in mind *Asom Jatiya Mahā Sabhā*’s functional role can be analyzed and evaluated. 1941 census was a recurring theme in *Jatiya Mahā Sabhā*’s political agenda. A huge publicity drive along with a clearly defined plan of action prepared by Roy Chowdhury himself is truly evident of the enormity of the problem that people initially failed to comprehend. His effort was to resist a highly manipulated census in complete disregard of the interest of the Assamese people.
It is equally significant to discuss the program of action undertaken by Asom Jātiya Mahā Sabhā as a political pressure group within and outside Congress. The census issue was pursued in such a vigorous way that it led to a movement aimed at resisting the government move. Considering the objective of the Jatiya Mahā Sabhā, it appears almost same as the Asom Sangrakshini Sabhā to strengthen and enrich the Assamese nationality as a powerful component of federal India by bring together the high and low, the rich and poor cutting across the religious and caste divide. It also stressed upon the need to firmly establish the right of self determination. Very significantly Roy Chowdhury’s vision of Assam as a strong component of an Indian federation, which he wholeheartedly believed still has a relevance in view of the rising sub-nationalist tendency in varied forms.

The constitution of the Sabhā clearly mentioned that the Jatiya Mahā Sabhā would be based on the Gandhian principle of co-existence and non-violence and structurally it will be confined within the political boundary of Assam.\footnote{Constitution Asom Jātiya Mahā Sabhā, p.2, Composed in 1926 and amended in 1937.} Jatiya Mahā Sabhā made its stand very clear with regard to Congress in the nationalist struggle and reiterated that there will never be any contradiction with Congress objective and principles. In the 3rd session of the Goereswar Jatiya Mahā Sabhā, president Nilamani Phukan staled that Mahā Sabhā will never encourage communal feeling and will be playing supportive role to Congress highlighting specific problems confronting Assam. The Mahā Sabhā will act as ambassador to APCC and will bring to their notice all the burning issues of Assam.\footnote{Op cit, 6th Year 22ndissue, Śaka 1863, 21st Baishakh} “The Jatiya Mahā Sabhā is not a rival political organization of Assam.”\footnote{Ibid.}

There was no confusion, no ambiguity and the message was very clearly conveyed to the public. It was an attitude that thrives on co-option, accommodation and co-operation. Roy Chowdhury called for all shades and faith to come together and work within a comprehensive frame work towards resolving the issues of Assam. Roy Chowdhury’s assertion reflects contemplation for reconstruction be it in social, political or economic sphere. It is indeed necessary to refer to the problems highlighted by the president in the 3rd session of Goereswar branch, Asom Jātiya Mahā
Sabhā, since these were the issues relentlessly pursued by the Mahā Sabhā. All the issues namely, separation of Sylhet, immigration, wasteland settlement and language were previously addressed by Asom Sangrakshini Sabhā. Immigration was declared a national problem that remains one of the contested issues in the political sphere of Assam till today. All together 13 resolutions were passed in this session and almost all were related to land to be precise Saadullah ministry’s land scheme, reserve land management, line system and land grant.\textsuperscript{55} Much attention had been attached to land as a means of ensuring a secured future for the indigenous population. Roy Chowdhury highlighted the anti tribal attitude in the land settlement policy of the government of Assam. “It appears that the recent land settlement policy, the government had openly directed the tribal who were original owners of Assam proper to settle in the submontane areas where various fatal diseases were endemic, with a view to an exclusive tribal belt. Provisions for their protection had virtually been denied to them in the plains where they had been living since long.”\textsuperscript{56}

Let us consider the issue of census as pursued by Asom Jātiya Mahā Sabhā. Roy Chowdhury considered 1941 census as a matter of survival for the people of Assam and made a desperate attempt to create public consciousness on the census.\textsuperscript{57} His anxiety over the issue and efforts through the Jatiya Mahā Sabhā to establish Assamese as the majority community in Assam is indeed a matter of great significance. At another level Asom Jātiya Mahā Sabhā maintained correspondence with the government on census sending deputations letters, memoranda etc.

\textit{Asom Shikshā Prosār Samiti:}

Asom Jātiya Mahā Sabhā formed Asom Shikshā Prosār Samiti, its purpose being the spread of Assamese language among the permanently settled tea garden workers, Mymansingias, Nepalis, Biharis in Assam.\textsuperscript{58} It was an attempt to register these people as Assamese in the coming census of 1941. Asom Shikshā Prosār Samiti formed in 1939 had been reminding the people of Assam about their responsibilities

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid, 6th Year 23rd Issue, Śaka 1863, 29thBaishakh
\textsuperscript{56} APAI 1944-45 File No – 288 Ghy, 18-2-45.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid, 4th Year 11th issue, Śaka 1860, 12th Aghrayan.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.
in the coming census of 1941. Meanwhile *Asom Shikshā Prosār Samiti* formed a workers force to be fully engaged in census propaganda with a clearly defined line of action. *Asom Shikshā Prosār Samiti* since its inception worked towards building a greater Assamese society. This organization working under the aegis of the *Asom Jātiya Mahā Sabhā* and also served as a training school of organizational activity and social service Roy Chowdhury wanted this organization to be focused on its main objective i.e. to resist the government policy of proving Assamese as a minority community in the census of 1941.

*Asom Shikshā Prosār Samiti* has a national responsibility and it is in the national interest of Assam that primary schools with Assamese as the medium of instruction need to be established. For the proper functioning of the Samiti an executive committee with Kaliram Medhi as the president and Roy Chowdhury as secretary had been formed. Other members included Jogendra Nath Barua, Prabodh Ch. Bordoloi, Bishnu Prasad Duarā, Munshi Kabiruddin Ahmed, Sayed Tayyab Ali, Tirtha Nath Phukan, Kāshikānta Barua, Bhubenswar Barua etc. It represented people from different walks of life. “Even before the formation of the committee with the help of a group of enthusiastic students from Cotton Collegiate school, a primary school had been started at Manipuri Bastī, Guwahati where more than 60 non Assamese students are learning Assamese.”

Significantly this school is still functioning and Roy Chowdhury was able to receive a non-recurring government grant of Rs. 120 for the school in 1940.

59. Ibid, 6thYear 1stissue, Šaka 1861, 3rd Bhadro.
60. Dekā Asom, 6thYear 10th issue, Šaka 1862, 25th Kartik. [Rules & Regulation of Asom Sikshā Prasār Samiti, published in 6th Year 28th issue, Šaka 1862.]
62. Leaflet Asom Siksha Prasar Samiti.
63. Ibid.
64. Letter from the office of the DPI Assam dated 24th Dec, 1940.
   * Non recurring grant for the Manipuri Basti Assamese Primary School, Guwahati made under the budget head 37 education primary direct grant to non government primary school for the year 1940-41.
**Census of 1941 and emigrants problem:**

A vigorous propaganda drive was undertaken just before the census by Roy Chowdhury with a group of workers of *Asom Shikshā Prosār Samiti* to raise the level of public awareness. It was a concerted effort on the part of the Samiti as well as *Asom Jātiya Mahā Sabha* to safeguard the greater political interest of the Assamese people in view of competing factors at work to be more precise the pro-league (Muslim League) policy of the government coupled with a pronounced rivalry of a very influential section of Bengali from the Surma Valley. In view of the gravity of the situation Roy Chowdhury undertook an extensive tour of Assam. Lower Assam Regional Transport authority granted a taxi bearing no ASJ 199 for the tour of Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang and Nowgong with effect from 26th December, 1940.

In a public meeting held in front of Curzon Hall on 29th August 1940 attended by more than 1500 people Roy Chowdhury appealed to protest against the anti-Assamese policy of the Assam government. One of the resolutions passed (6th) in that meeting stated that all the permanently settled immigrants who had come before 1937 were requested to register themselves as Assamese in the census of 1941. The degree of importance attached to this resolution is vindicated by the subsequent activities carried by *Asom Jātiya Mahā Sabha*. Considering the present political scenario of Assam where immigration was a persisting problem what Roy Chowdhury offered seemed a practical solution of the problem. The plan he recommended since 1937 was to put an immediate halt to the flow of immigrants and assimilate the earlier settlers. Situating Roy Chowdhury in that particular political space would be relevant to understand the significance of a continuous campaign addressing the issues of immigration census etc. Roy Chowdhury considered the census of 1941 as a question of life and death for the people of Assam and called for an all out effort to establish Assamese as the majority community in Assam hence his stress on the spread of Assamese language among the non-Assamese settlers.

One of the accomplishments of *Asom Jātiya Mahā Sabha* was the response received from immigrants to register themselves as Assamese. In this context a notice

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65. Letter dated 26-12-40 from the secretary lower Assam Regional Transport authority.
66. Dekā Asom, 6thYear 3rdissue, Śaka 1862, 17th Bhadro.
served by a group of settlers to mention themselves as Assamese may be cited. A very touchy emotional line is attached in this notice “land that gives you food and shelter in your mothers land.” It was an emotional plea to their fellow brethren. Roy Chowdhury himself addressed a large public gathering at Khoirabari on 14th November 1940. Most of the audiences were immigrants and it was a highly successful propaganda drive. Immediately after the meeting they submitted a signed application to the census authority for their inclusion as Assamese.

Number of public meetings held at different places of Assam immigrants conveyed a positive response to Roy Chowdhury’s plea with regard to census. Another letter dated 31-10-40 signed by six tea garden workers may be cited here. Published in Dekā Asom this letter is evident of a consistent effort by Roy Chowdhury to assimilate tea garden workers into the greater Assamese society. In this context another application is worth mentioning, signed by nine leading immigrant settlers from Barpeta sub-division to the Assam premier Gopinath Bordoloi, wherein they mentioned about their effort to learn Assamese language and requested Bordoloi to include themselves as Assamese in the census.

Roy Chowdhury’s census campaign reflects an inclusive attitude toward the settlers and it did have a positive impact as is evident by a leaflet. The leaflet addressed to the Bengali peasant brothers ‘census related’ contained a resolution to the effect that – “we the Bengali Peasants living in Assam have resolved to register ourselves as Assamese.” The leaflet also reveals a convincing effort to make the immigrants understand that it is in their interest to accept Assamese. Significantly the leaflet was written in Bengali. Its signatories included a long list of Bengali Hindu peasants from Kamrup, Nagaon, Darrang and North Lakhimpur.

Every government move on census was discussed and analyzed by Roy Chowdhury. For instance F.W. Hockenhall’s confidential circular to tea garden

67. Ibid. 6th Year 4th issue, Šaka 1862, 31st Bhadro.
68. Ibid. 6th Year 9th issue, Šaka 1862, 18th Kartik.
69. Ibid, 6th Year 12th issue, Šaka 1862, 9th Agrahayan.
70. Ibid. 6th Year 14th issue, Šaka 1862, 30th Agrahayan.
71. Leaflet: Census related
managers on census and census superintendent Mr. Marrar’s instruction for tea garden workers on language caused serious concern for him. So he impressed upon the Assamese members of ABITA of the need to issue a new circular for the national interest of Assam. Roy Chowdhury was quite apprehensive of the community based census as it might accord Assam a minority status. So he sent a deputation led by Durgeswar Sarma to apprise the government of the confusing instructions of the census handbook. As is evident from his writings, he was not convinced of the government assurance and put more stress on propaganda work. Massive propaganda drive undertaken by Roy Chowdhury is a clear indication of the urgency of the situation created by a counter propaganda drive by pro league activists. A detailed account of the census tour has been published in Dekā Asom covering Upper and Lower Assam districts. In spite of all these efforts census result reflect a community based statistics i.e. based on religion. Roy Chowdhury from the very beginning was opposed to the idea of community based census and he considered 1941 census report as an anti Assamese politically oriented report.

The Assam Jatiya Mahā Sabhā indeed had a strong presence in the public sphere of Assam, a voice of protest a forum for resistance against all policies, actions and organization harmful to the interest of Assam. Let us consider the reach of the Jatiya Mahā Sabhā. It no doubt had a wider reach. “Ambikagiri Roy Chowdhury of Gauhati, President of All Assam Jatiya Mahā Sabhā requested of the public of Sibasagar to open a branch of the Mahā Sabhā at Sibasagar in order to unite all the classes of Assam irrespective of caste and creed into one Assamese nation.” At his request a provisional committee was formed with seven leading citizen of Sibasagar. Jatiya Mahā Sabhā such and influence is clearly evident in a letter written by some Rabindra Nath Gogoi from Margherita to Roy Chowdhury dated 16-9-47. Very much influenced by Roy Chowdhury’s ideal he expressed willingness as a member of Asom Jātiya Mahā Sabhā to represent Sabhā in the west block siding Forest department. He also requested Roy Chowdhury to accept their donation for Jatiya Mahā Sabhā. Apart from places like Dhubri, Sibasagar, Margherita, people from places like Namtidol

72. Dekā Asom, 6th Year 10th Issue, Śaka 1862, 25th Kartik.
73. Ibid, 6th Year 12th issue, Śaka 1862, 9th Agrahayan
74. Ibid, 6th Year 18th Issue, Śaka 1862, 10th Chaitr.
75. Ibid, 6th Year 19th Issue, Śaka 1862, 19th Chaitra
76. APAI 1945 File No – 288 Sibsagar, 28-8-44.
(Sibasagar) were enthusiastic about Jatiya Mahā Sabhā. From Golaghat Golap Ch. Goswami raised objective about the assimilation plan of the Mahā Sabhā. Umananda Barua from Accounts Office Digboi wanted Jatiya Mahā Sabhā to launch a vigorous movement for the protection of the rights of Assamese. He wanted Sabhā to play a more assertive role.

A very interesting letter needs to be referred here. A student of class eight from Bajali High School writes to Roy Chowdhury that he along with a group of students had decided to hold a meeting at a very interior place called Kaljira para and requested the presence of Roy Chowdhury. Nothing more is required to understand the reach and influence of the Mahā Sabhā.

Let us shift our attention to appeals and memoranda prepared by Roy Chowdhury as the secretary of Asom Jātiya Mahā Sabhā. It is also necessary to have an understanding of his perspectives. He appealed to the leaders of Assam proper in the name of ‘Dearest Mother Assam.’ “This is for the rescued of our Home Land.” He referred to the sinister plan that can easily be discerned behind the Muslim Legume’s demand, Cripps proposal and Reginald Coupland scheme for the inclusion of Assam proper in the north eastern regional Pakistan, for her annexation with Bengal. These have been followed by the Assam government’s pernicious land settlement policy, the ulterior motive being the settlement of all available cultivable land within 2-3 years by immigrants.

Let us now consider the official correspondence of Roy Chowdhury. We have already mentioned about the memorandum to Nehru in 1937. Moreover memorandum on the plight of landless Assamese to Nehru 1959 memorandum to the Governor of Assam Sri Sri Prakash on refuge issue, Memorandum on dual citizenship just on the eve of the constitutional making process, memorandum to rehabilitation minister Mohan Lal Saxena that Assam was not in a position to accommodate more than 50,000 refuges reflects a very protective sub-nationalist attitude of Roy Chowdhury,

77. Letter from Bhabani Prasad Borah and Prafulla Ch. Mahanta to Roy Chowdhury dtd-15-9-47
78. Letter dtd- 18-9-47
79. Letter dtd – 11-8-47.
80. Letter from Prafulla Ch. Khatoniar 11th Agrahayan, 1354.
who was in favour of strong provincial identity united in a loose federation. His attitude was not confrontation but it represented a response to the deeply alienating effect of an over centralizing tendency, and an anti Assamese political formation. It was a relentless attempt on the part of Roy Chowdhury to establish the distinctive Assamese nationality on a solid foundation and protect their exclusive right in political economic social and cultural sphere. Behind this nationalistic ideal we see his long term policy of welcoming immigrants who wish to identify with Assamese culture. His desire and persisting attempt for creating a greater Assamese society inclusive of all choosing to identify with Assamese cultural was necessitated by socio-political and geographical factors, hence his call for merger within the Assamese society.\footnote{Bhagagiri Roy Chowdhury, “Ambikagiri Āru Asom Jātiya Mahā Sabhā”, in A. K. Mishra, and G. Das (ed.), Asom Keśarî Ambikâgirî, p.147.}

**Muslim League’s Role:**

Quite explicit here is the growing tension over Muslim League’s plan and as a corollary the Assam government’s land policy and Roy Chowdhury was very much right in making these issues public. On 25\textsuperscript{th} August 1943 Jatiya Mahā Sabhā organized a public meeting protesting the land settlement policy declared by Saadullah Ministry on 24\textsuperscript{th} August, 1943.\footnote{Leaflet All Assam land policy protest day p.1.} The day was observed as a protest day. Opening up of the grazing and forest land for settlement of immigrants was as highly objectionable for Jatiya Mahā Sabhā and stressed need for maintaining grazing and forest reserve. The basic essentials in all the issue can be readily captured in the striking line, ‘Assam for the Assamese’ and all efforts directed towards the establishment of that pronounced exclusive right. In this context resolutions passed at the special emergent session of the Asom Jātiya Mahā Sabhā held on 4\textsuperscript{th} and 5\textsuperscript{th} June, 1944 at Sarupeta carry special significance.\footnote{Copy of the resolution.} Copies of the resolutions were also forwarded to His Excellency the Governor, the chief secretary, the Premier, the revenue minister the forest ministers and the agriculture minister for their consideration. Resolution no 3 vehemently opposes the waste land settlement policy ‘seriously damaging’ the national interest of the Assamese people and demands to
withdraw immediately the opening up of wastelands for settlement. It also called upon every Assamese to be united on strong national solidarity to safeguard their national existence. Another resolution scornfully repudiates the henious anti Assamese show staged at Barpeta on 7th and 8th April 1944 by a large number of the members of the Muslim League. This is an indication of a volatile political situation in Assam.

Land was one of the issues consistently pursued by the Asom Jātiya Mahā Sabhā on a priority basis. If we go through the resolutions passed at different sessions of Asom Jātiya Mahā Sabhā some of which has already been referred to, the importance attached to the issue becomes apparent. Roy Chowdhury, truly embedded to the idea of a strong Assamese nationalism, understood very clearly the value of land, and his political ideas had an implicit economic orientation i.e. control over the resources of Assam, hence his assigned importance on land. Reacting to the large scale preserve of immigrants in Barpeta Roy Chowdhury stated, “people of Barpeta have not understood the value of land, are exchanging bighas of land in exchange for a pumpkin.” He subsequently prepared a leaflet entitled, “Landless people of Barpeta need land.” Probably he understood the threatening inflow of immigrants to Barpeta. Roy Chowdhury perceived the confronting government policy on land and its serious economic implication in view of the land hungry immigrant’s land grabbing spree.

Now a close look at the other activities of Asom Jātiya Mahā Sabhā for promotion of Assamese national interest is relevant here. He used to send telegram on every matter he felt urgent, for instance a telegram to Jawaharlal Nehru, Prime Minister Indian Union for appointing good number of bonafide Assamese in Indian Foreign service. External service affairs department acknowledgement Roy Chowdhury letter dated 11th February 1947 and states the responsibility of government and Federal public service commission for adequate representation of different provinces, communities and areas. These are instances where Roy Chowdhury appears as an over anxious personality drawing wide spread public attention to issues like representation of Assamese in all India service and personality making whatever correspondence he felt required.

86. Letter from Tarlok Singh pvt. Secretary to Pandit Nehru, External Affairs Department. Dtd-14-3-1947.
Establishment of University:

Another issue pursued by *Asom Jātiya Mahā Sabhā* on a priority basis was the Assam University. Descanted with the policies of the government of Assam Roy Chowdhury immediately issued a notice for convening a public meeting at Guwahati to publicly reject the Assam University Bill. He was of the opinion that without proper discussion the Bill had been hurriedly passed by the select committee to set up the University at Shillong. He considered this another anti-Assamese move by the government and wanted to mobilize public opinion in favour of establishing the University at Guwahati in the national interest of Assam. Subsequently University Bill was publicly rejected in a meeting held at Curzon Hall Guwahati. A vital decision in the history of education was taken in the meeting to the effect that Assam University would be established at Guwahati from public contribution without government help. A continuous publicity campaign for the University testifies the concern of Roy Chowdhury and a contesting disfavourable opinion. Roy Chowdhury cited the contesting opinion of highly circulated *Yugantar* and *Amrit Bajar Patrika* and severely criticized their role.

In the public sphere of Assam Asom Jātiya Mahā Sabhā played a major role as a socio-political organization and succeeded to a great extent in creating a public opinion on major issues confronting Assam. The emergence of Asom Jātiya Mahā Sabhā at this critical juncture for Assam is indeed a welcome venture. “We are very happy about this massive organization and its assimilative approach towards non-Assamese living in Assam.”

Taking advantage of the all India movement some vested interests are working against the interest of Assam. Asom Jātiya Mahā Sabhā made an appeal to all irrespective of caste, creed and religion to declare themselves as

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87. Dekā Asom, 6th Year 19th Issue, Śaka 1862, 17th Chaitra. * [Another public meeting was completely devoted to Assam University. Held at Bajali on 9th February 1936, under the presidency of Nilmani Phukan put forward a scheme of the proposed University with Cotton College as the centre.]

88. Ibid, 20th Issue, Śaka 1862, 24th Chaitra.

89. Ibid, 25th Issue, Śaka 1863, 19th Jeistha.

90. Jayanti 4th Year 28th Issue, 11th December, 1941. 

* [An increasingly tense political situation prompted him to send telegram, Taiyaballuah president APCC. It says please adopt Jatiya Mahā Sabhā program into over and above Congress program to same Assamese nation] dated 2-9-47.

[Another telegraph to Gopinah Bordoloi stressed on the need to stop immediately settlement of East Bengal migrants 21-7-47]
Assamese. Appreciation and criticism not with standing Roy Chowdhury carried out his program through Mahā Sabhā with much conviction and determination as the general secretary of the organization.

Credibility of the Asom Jātiya Mahā Sabhā can be measured in the constructive organizational program taken up by it. One of its major but less acknowledged accomplishments is a survey of indigenous landless Assamese people. The survey was conducted in all the six districts of Assam. It was a family wise survey and the result of the survey was published in a leaflet where 572255 families were counted as landless. The leaflet highlighted the Contrasting situation of Assam having more than 5 lakhs of landless family and large scale settlement of immigrants in Assam. Without question the Jatiya Mahā Sabhā was carrying a vigorous movement for establishing Assamese interest in every field be it language, land preponderance of Assamese in politics always working hard to cultivate a sense of identity among the Assam people. The methods Sabhā used to advance its cause were various, petition telegrams, representation and public meetings. *

In a situation of turmoil and change, when various factors were at work towards the greatest political transformation of India Asom Jātiya Mahā Sabhā aspired for a new political experience i.e. to contest Assembly election in 1946. An appeal towards this effect was published in Dekā Asom.91 Roy Chowdhury felt the need in view of the compulsions of APCC as part of the I.N.C. sometimes might not be able to focus on the more urgent issues concerning Assam. Roy Chowdhury made a formal request to APCC seeking co-operation in this regard and highlights the active political role Sabhā had played in the past especially on issues like land settlement, food crisis, immigration etc.92 Seeking co-operation from Congress in the election is not unnatural after playing an intensely engaged public role for 10 years.

Roy Chowdhury specially asked for at least on uncontested candidate for Jatiya Mahā Sabhā. Eventually APCC rejected his appeal on the ground that there was no such provision in Congress Constitution. Accepting the rejection gracefully Roy Chowdhury went on to support Congress in the coming election in the greater interest

91. Dekā Asom, 7th Year 38th Issue, 1945 24th September.
92. Ibid, 7th Year 41st Issue, 1945 16th October.
of India and Assam. Perhaps he realized that contesting election would not be a viable option in view of an all encompassing presence of Congress and the complexity of the situation created by League politics. APCC’s declaration on organizing Assam on the basis of Assamese Language and culture is a matter of survival for Assamese nationality is a reflection of Roy Chowdhury’s political ideology. One APCC election manifesto said, “the inclusion of the Bengali speaking Sylhet district and the settlement of hundreds and thousands of Bengali threatens to destroy the distinctiveness of Assam.”

It clearly indicates the relevance of Asom Jātiya Mahā Sabha and easily can be inferred that Congress election manifesto is more or less a replica of the political objectives of Asom Jātiya Mahā Sabha perhaps it is the explanation of Congress rejecting Roy Chowdhury’s proposal. Nevertheless Asom Jātiya Mahā Sabha continued to be engaged in the political and social sphere of Assam pushing its nationalist agenda even after independence.

*Asom Jātiya Mahā Sabha* enjoyed significant public support as is evident from the above discussion to state that “*Asom Jātiya Mahā Sabha* flourished as a pressure group within the Congress” would be limiting the role of the Sabha. On all the major politico economic issues specific to Assam, *Jatiya Mahā Sabha* played a major role in mobilizing public opinion. An increasingly conscious public opinion with regard to immigration, University Line System, anti Grouping, land settlement is no less the result of persisting effort of *Asom Jātiya Mahā Sabha*. In a complex political setup of colonial Assam coupled with a community based representation in political institutions *Asom Jātiya Mahā Sabha* represented a truly Assamese view.

*Asom Jātiya Mahā Sabha* conducted the most aggressive anti Grouping propaganda and it will be dealt with Asom Atmo Rakshi Bāhini.

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93. Ibid, 7th Year 42nd Issue, 1945 22nd October.
Asom Ātma Rakshi Bāhini:

The concept of Asom Ātma Rakshi Bāhini is closely related with the anti Grouping movement. One of the most articulate spokesmen of the anti Grouping movement, Roy Chowdhury’s desperate effort for a vigorous anti grouping movement is largely forgotten now. The inflammatory rhetoric associated with the movement, the momentum he achieved to counter the threat of a possible Muslims League invasion can easily be identified with the political dynamism of that period.

Congress started anti grouping protest only in December 1946 after Viceroy’s Wavell’s announcement that inclusion in group will be compulsory for every province. Congress published a press release in ‘Dainik Asomiya’ (18-11-46) on this crucial political issue. But ever since the announcement of grouping [June 1946] Roy Chowdhury launched a vigorous anti grouping protest. Initially a publicity drive was followed by action.

Reference has already been made to Roy Chowdhury’s apprehension about an influential Muslim League politics and its related activities. Pro League Sadullah ministry’s pernicious land settlement policy and its possible implication had already agitated Roy Chowdhury. In his appeal to the leaders of Assam proper, he cited the public utterances by Sir Saadullah at Calcutta and at Gauhati in the Assam provincial Muslim League council meeting by Maulavi Manowar Ali, the revenue minister to settle within 2-3 years all available land. It reveals a long term political scheme of Muslim League to include Assam in the proposed Muslim home land of Pakistan. In that period of crisis marked by dramatic denouement Roy Chowdhury projected the League plan as a question of life and death of the Assamese people. His insistence for a pro Assamese ministry is indicative of an imminent crisis.

His apprehension was quite right. Here an inflammatory appeal made by some Sayyad Assadullah Siraji, President city Muslim League Sirajganj and member

97. Leaflet 18th February 1945.
98. Ibid.
Bengal Muslim League is worth mentioning. This appeal dated 29-3-47 calls for a Mujahed invasion of Assam, entitled ‘Assam Dākîtese’. (Assam is calling). It says “Mothers bless your child, sisters prepare your brothers, spread the message of this liberation Jehad. There is no times to waste come forward for Azadi” it reveals an all out plan of invasion of Assam.

Thousands of East Bengal Muslims are being egged on to invade Assam by the Muslim League. The plan so far revealed indicates the thought which Muslim league has given to it. 50,000 Muslim are to enter and spread over Assam along both banks of the Bramhaputra from Rangpur. The appeal by Asadullah Siraji cited above vindicates Roy Chowdhury’s apprehension. A map indicating the detail plan of invasion prepared Muslim league was also attached with Roy Chowdhury appeal. Interestingly Roy Chowdhury collected it from a boy working in a shipping company at Karimganj. He appealed to the government to make immediate active measure and himself put forward the plan of a militia called Asom Atma Rakshi BAswini to face the imminent danger. “Seeing the inclusion of Barpeta, Ambikagiri Roy Chowdhury hurriedly organized a meeting in the courtyard of Barpeta Kirtan Ghar and along with Mathura Hitoishi and Braja Sarma formed Asom Atma Rakshi BAswini”. He envisaged Atma Rakshi Baswini (Self Defense Force) as a militia of about 2 lakh volunteers. Organized by Asom Jātiya Mahā Sabha, Atma Rakshi BAswini was completely free from communal interest. It was an attempt to maintain peace and harmony in Assam. Roy Chowdhury personally pleaded with Saadullah to save Assam from the imminent threat posed by Muslim League.

Quite apprehensive of the impending danger an agitated and tense Roy Chowdhury made a hearty appeal to save Assam. The decision of the Bengal Muslim League Joint Committee of action to send large batchers of Muslims National Guard to Assam to defy the eviction order of Bordoloi Ministry was only a corollary to the bigger plan of invading Assam which the Muslim League has been contemplating.

99. True copy (Appeal)
103. Ibid
since the prospect of transferring power to Indian hands became a major issue in Indian politics. Roy Chowdhury’s effort did have some impact on Saadullah as he opposed eventually Maulana Asad Vasani’s Jehad or direct action.\textsuperscript{104} Let us consider the reach of \textit{Asom Atma Rakshi Bahini} and people’s response to it. Roy Chowdhury planned for a dedicated well disciplined and well organized force ready to face any eventuality. Here some letters can be cited and it is indeed necessary for an overall assessment of \textit{Asom Jatoya Mahā Sabhā}. A letter from Goalpara states an enthusiastic beginning of Atma Rakshi Bahini of Lakhi Ganj Bajar.\textsuperscript{105} It is also stated that a group of young boys had come forward to join \textit{Atma Rakshi Bahini}. The letter ended with a request to Roy Chowdhury to train some of their members in Guwahati.

Another letter from Nazira states that already a self defense force had been formed and it was being imparted training of drill and other physical exercise. The writer expressed his desire to work under Jatiya Mahā Sabhā. It was a serious venture at Nazira as it becomes apparent in the letter.\textsuperscript{106} It also stated about proper uniform for the members of the force. Receipt books for contribution were distributed among workers of the Bāhini and a dedicated group started working for the Bahini at places like Kaniha, Baihata, Amolapatty, Bargaon (Rangia), Jogighopa, Dhopatari (Barpeta) and of course Guwahati.\textsuperscript{107} Prasannalal Chowdhury reminiscences about the response Roy Chowdhury received for his proposed Atma Rakshi Bahini at a meeting held at Barpeta Kirtan Ghar (Community Prayer Hall).\textsuperscript{108} Contrary to the accepted view that Roy Chowdhury call for a volunteer corps did not materialize, the concept of Atma Rakshi Bahini did have some following and in fact a beginning was made in that direction as is evident from the sources cited above. Roy Chowdhury through he was unable to achieve his objective of forming a corps of one lakh volunteer, it can be explained in terms of the removal of the cause (Grouping). His sincerity and commitment is indeed unquestionable and it is the reason of his ability to organize people on any issue affecting Assam. He had a tremendous ability to organize

\textsuperscript{104} A prominent Muslim League leader who vigorously campaigned for inclusion of Assam in Eastern Pakistan and propagated for and invasion of Assam.
\textsuperscript{105} Letter from Ratneswar Sharma to Roy Chowdhury dtd-19-8-47.
\textsuperscript{106} Letter from Gopal Ch. Sandikoi Baruah to Roy Chowdhury dtd- 5-10-47.
\textsuperscript{107} Distribution of receipt books.
\textsuperscript{108} Prasanna Lal Chowdhury, “Ambikagirik Moi Jenekoi Jāno”, in Jogesh Das and others (ed.), Ambikagiri Roy Chowdhury, p.36.
volunteers for any of his social and political plan. In terms of this statement the initial response to Ātma Rakshi Bāhini can be explained.

The Asom Jātiya Mahā Sabhā emerged at a critical phase of the History of Assam and its functioning reveals interesting and conflicting happenings in Assam’s political sphere. There is no denying the fact that the Sabhā continued to represent an assertive Assamese voice even after independence although sometimes failing to achieve the desired results since some of these had utopian element. Jatiya Mahā Sabhā continued to play its defined role even after independence and it will be dealt with in the subsequent chapter.