Chapter V.

STATE OF THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT DURING 1935-1939

The Working Committee of the Congress recommended in its Patna sitting held on 18, 19 and 20 May 1934 the suspension of the Civil Disobedience programme and adoption of Council entry programme as accepted by the AICC. Thus after the Patna decision "the Civil Disobedience movement was switched off and the Council entry programme was switched on". On 19 May Gandhi sponsored the resolution to appoint a Congress Parliamentary Board to run the election. The Working Committee also reiterated the Congress policy on the proposals outlined in the Government's White Paper and declared that formulation of a Constitution by a Constituent Assembly consisting of Indian members elected on the basis of adult suffrage could be the only acceptable alternative to the White Paper.

Almost immediately after the Bombay session of the Congress (26-28 October 1934) was over, the campaign for election started in accordance with the decision of the Congress Working Committee.
In the meantime Gandhi saw a "growing and vital difference of outlook" between many Congressmen and himself and decided to retire from active politics. He announced his decision on 17 September 1934 and severed his official connection with the Congress on 28 October 1934, the last day of the Bombay session and also withdrew his primary membership from the Congress.4

The Joint Select Committee appointed by the Government on 27 March 1933 to consider the Government's scheme of constitutional reforms for India as formulated in the White Paper, submitted its report in November 1934. In spite of general disapproval of the recommendations by the people throughout India, a bill, drafted on the basis of the Joint Select Committee Report, was passed on 24 July 1935 and received the Royal assent. This brought into force the Government of India Act, 1935.

Under the Act of 1935 Assam was provided with a bicameral legislature. But this arrangement was not welcomed by the people in general. It was evident from the Act that, the intention behind such a voluntary offer was to satisfy the European and British commercial interests in Assam.5 The Act came into force on 1 April 1937. But the federal scheme under the Act had to remain in abeyance due to non-fulfilment of the primary condition "that a sufficient number of Indian states would accede
to the federation". As such only the constitutional provisions dealing with the provincial government came into operation.⁶

In spite of dissatisfaction over the Act, all the political parties of India decided to participate in the election to the provincial legislatures. The Congress party adopted its party manifesto for the election on 23 August 1936.⁷ The manifesto declared the rejection of the undesirable Constitution of 1935 and demanded its replacement by a constitution framed by a popularly elected Constituent Assembly.⁸ For the purpose of conducting the election, in Assam also the Assam Provincial Congress Parliamentary Board was constituted.⁹

The General Election was held in February 1937. In the provinces of Bihar, Bengal, U.P., C.P., Crissa, Maharasthra, Gujrat, Karnataka and Assam, the Congress won the majority seats.¹⁰ Capturing 33 out 108 seats, the Congress emerged as the biggest single party in the Assam legislature with Gopinath Bordoloi as its leader.¹¹ In the Brahmaputra valley 29 Congress candidates contested and 26 were elected.¹²

On the eve of the 1937 General Election, the people of Assam again availed themselves of the opportunity of displaying their political consciousness and
loyalty to the Congress. Election meetings were attended by thousands of people. The Congressmen of the province appealed to the general public to vote in favour of the Congress. Such appeals, signed by men and women, were published in the 'Asomiya', a weekly newspaper in Assamese. One such appeal from Golaghat was signed by 105 men and 7 women leaders. The women signatories were Nagabala Borbora, Kamaleswari Barua, Mohini Rajkumari, Brateswari Rajkumari, Swarnalata Barua, Lakhimipriya Dutta and Kamaleswari Duaranî.\textsuperscript{13}

The Golaghat Branch of the \textit{Asam Mahila Samiti} extended its full support to the candidature of Chandraprova Saikiani, the only women candidate to contest the election to the Assembly from the Brahmaputra valley. The Committee also requested the Assam Provincial Congress Parliamentary Board to consider her case.\textsuperscript{14} Chandraprova filed her nomination for contesting the election from Patacharkuchi constituency. But the APCC did not nominate her on the ground that she might not be able to win the seat. Many opined that it was an underestimation of Chandraprova Saikiani's popularity.\textsuperscript{15} It was also a manifestation of male chauvinism, as a woman would like to say.
On 6 December 1936 the 4th Assam Provincial Political Conference was held at Becheria near Tezpur to mark the beginning of the election campaign in Assam. Bhulabhai Desai, an important non-Government member in the Central Assembly who presided over the meeting urged upon the people to elect Congress candidates to the Assam Assembly so that they could contribute to the dismantling of the 1935 Constitution from within.16

From the very first day of the election campaign the women of the valley took active interest in it. Chandraprova Saikiani and Guneswari Devi were also supporters of resolution that was proposed by Gopinath Bordoloi in the 4th APCC which urged upon the people and more particularly the voters to extend their full cooperation to Congress 'to immobilize the present administration in Assam'.17

Bhulabhai Desai who attended many meetings in different places of Assam, in addition to the Tezpur conference, was very much impressed with the patriotism and political consciousness of the people of Assam. On his way back from Assam, he told the representatives of the United Press at Calcutta. "People of Assam are very much conscious politically and are ever prepared to work for freedom at the cost of anything".18
Thirtyfive million men and women throughout India were enfranchised for this election. Although women's right to vote was granted about a decade back they found no occasion to exercise it. The somewhat liberal enfranchisement of women gave an impetus to the awakening of women. They came in thousands to register their names as voters. During this election, women's political consciousness and their loyalty to Congress became evident. About five million women enthusiastically participated in electioneering and casting votes for Congress.

The Act of 1935 gave the women of India an opportunity to be elected to the provincial legislatures. In the 1937 election, more than 55 women were elected from the general and reserved constituencies. Vijaylaxmi Pandit became the Minister of Local self Government and Public Health in U.P.

In Assam, Miss Down (Independent) was elected to the Legislative Assembly while Zubida Ataur Rahman (nominated) became the Deputy President of the newly constituted Assam Legislative Council.

No woman was elected to the Assembly from the Brahmaputra valley. Congress did not give them the chance to be represented directly by a woman representative. But their enthusiasm for popular movement never
abated. And Congress did encourage women's active association in municipal administration. The annual conference of the Dibrugarh Mahila Samiti held on 20 November 1937 resolved to urge upon the Assam Legislative Assembly to implement the bill, passed by the Legislative Assembly that granted women the right to be elected as municipal commissioners. Padmakumari Gohain took the initiative in this regard. 23

The eleventh session of the Assam Mahila Samiti held at Gauhati on 29 December 1937, was presided over by Amrit Kaur. The session demanded equal political right of women with men and also an increase in the number of seats for women in the Legislative Assembly. A large number of women attended the Conference. Amrit Kaur in her presidential speech praised the women of Assam for the enthusiasm and valour they showed in the previous years of India's battle for freedom. She observed that although Assam was situated in the farthest corner of the country, her women had the potentialities to rise to the occasion. Amrit Kaur praised the Assamese women for their sacrifice and spirit of nationalism which she considered as something unique. She reminded the women of Assam of their onerous responsibilities of remaining vigilant to protect the north-eastern boundary of the country. The women were asked to devote their activities for fighting
the battle against opium and illiteracy also. She said that spinning and weaving were the most favourite programmes of Gandhiji and that the women of Assam had every reason to be proud of their being expert in this skill in comparison to the women of other parts of India.

This conference also demanded the release of Rani Gaidalu of Naga Hills (then within Assam) who was sentenced to transportation for life in 1933.

The people of Assam seldom got the opportunity to have the national leaders in their midst. Occasional visits by these leaders served as a great source of inspiration to men and women. But, Assam rather felt neglected by the national leaders save Gandhiji. Gandhiji, too, could not pay attention to Assam till 1921. But after Gandhi visited Assam more than once, the road was cleared for greater contact between Assam and the rest of India.

The feeling of being neglected by national leaders was expressed more than once by the Assam leaders. Two letters written by the leaders of Assam and a note from Nehru in reply to the former would reveal that this feeling was not without reasons. The following was a letter written by Liladhar Bora, Asst. Secretary, APCC and four others of the APCC to Jawaharlal Nehru on 19 July 1937:
Dear Comrade,

We had on several occasions expected your visit; but unfortunately for us your time was wholly occupied by other provinces. It is a matter of great regret that the Congress President has not yet toured in Assam. Just on the eve of the last election although you said that you would come, still you could not on account of your pressure of work. After the election you travelled in Burma and visited Chitagong, but you left out Assam from your tour programme.

Now that you are free, we extend you our heartiest welcome and hope that you will visit in autumn.

We hope you will not neglect this poor province this time.

Nehru replied to this letter on 31 July 1937 with a note, saying: "I am sorry, I cannot visit Assam yet although I should like to go".

In another letter of November 1937, Siddhinath Sarma, the General Secretary of the APCC wrote:—

Panditji,

The news of postponement of your tour in Assam has been received with great disappointment by the people of this province. According to the programme fixed previously, you were to have reached Gauhati this evening, and this morning a large number of people from Garo hills and outlying parts of Kamrup district have come to see you. They live in places where it is difficult to send the news. .........
Assam has been neglected in the past. During the two years you have been in office you have found time to tour in other parts of India, but Assam has to pay the penalty for her geography."26

The Assam leaders sent several letters to invite Panditji to the province inspite of his repeated refusal. In his letter to Nehru, written on 29 July 1937, Bishnuram Medhi, the APCC President wrote -

"Your visit to Assam is long overdue. The Congress workers as well as the peasants of this province are eagerly waiting for your visit with a view to get your inspiration and personal guidance in solution of many peculiar problems with which they are confronted".27

Towards the end of 1937, however, Jawaharlal Nehru included Assam in his tour programme. On 27 November he arrived at Dhubri and included in his 8-day tour programme many important places of rural and urban areas of Assam.28 The visit of Nehru was a big event for the province.29 People in thousands came to attend the meetings addressed by Nehru. In most of the places separate women's meetings were held to receive the national leader. The women of Golaghat, Gauhati, Jorhat, Nowgong, Barpeta, Sibsagar, Dibrugarh welcomed Nehru with "Abhinandan Patras"* and donated money for the Congress fund. One such Patra*, signed by Nirmala Devi,
Bukujur Barooah, Charuprova Bharali, Chikanlata Barooah, Aimoni Bordoloi and Reboti Bordoloi was presented at Charigaon near Jorhat.  

Jawaharlal Nehru addressed a large number of meetings in different places of the Brahmaputra valley. In most of the meetings he expressed his happiness about the role the women of Assam played in the freedom struggle. He said, in a meeting held at Digboi, that the women of Assam were no less active in the movement than the women of other provinces.

Since his tour was of short duration, meetings were held even on the roadsides. In all these meetings and in those formally organized, the attendance of women was remarkably large. Nehru, in his speech to the Jorhat meeting held on 3 December 1937, appealed to the people of Assam to give up the feeling of being neglected. While confessing that the central leader's visits to Assam were noticeably rare he held that it so happened due to the distance between Assam and the centre of political activities.

On 29 November Nehru addressed a meeting at Rampur in Kamrup district. He was moved by the enthusiasm of the people of the village and what impressed him most was the pandal that was decorated with Endi cloths spun and woven
by the local women. During his visit he took interest in spinning and weaving activities in Assam. He visited the Raha Spinners Association centre, Nowgong district and was delighted to see the expertise and efficiency of Assamese women in this craft.  

**Saadullah Ministry.** The result of the general election held in February 1937, brought into focus the popularity of the Congress among the people of India. The Congress won absolute majority in the Legislative assemblies of five provinces, viz., Madras, U.P., Central Province, Bihar and Orissa, while in Assam, Bombay, Bengal and N.W. F.P. it came out as the largest single party. Thus the popularity of the Congress was affirmed in all of the provinces save Sindh and the Punjab.  

After a prolonged debate held at Delhi on 17 and 18 March 1937, the AICC permitted the "acceptance of office in provinces where the Congress commanded a majority in the legislature, provided that the "ministership shall not be accepted unless the leader of the Congress party in the legislature is satisfied and is able to state publicly that the Governor will not use his special power of interference and set aside the office of ministers in regard to their constitutional activities".
By the end of July 1937, Congress ministries were formed in seven of the eleven provinces. In Bengal and Assam, the Congress did not enter the Government as it could not constitute the majority in the legislatures.  

Non-acceptance of ministry by the Congress in Assam led to the formation of Muslim League coalition ministry under the leadership of Syed Md. Saadullah with the support of the European group and other tribal members of the Assembly. Saadullah took charge of office on 1st April 1937. This date coincided with the day of implementation of the Government of India Act 1935 and the day on which the Congress observed countrywide hartal as a mark of protest against the introduction of the Act.

The people, particularly of the Brahmaputra valley, could not accept the appointment of Saadullah ministry happily. The Governor did not even consult the Congress group, the largest single party in the assembly, while appointing the ministry. Later, it became apparent from its programmes and policies that the Saadullah ministry was brought into power for the purpose of strengthening the hands of the bureaucracy only. The policies pursued by the ministry caused great displeasure among the people and protests were raised throughout the province.
Due to unpopularity in and outside the Assembly the Saadullah ministry had to resign on 13 September 1938. The announcement of Saadullah's resignation was greeted with cheers from the opposition and hailed by the people of Assam. Then came the turn of the Congress to form the Government. Subhas Chandra Bose in his capacity as Congress President, suggested the formation of Congress ministry in Assam under Bordoloi's leadership. For this purpose Subhas Ch. Bose came to Assam. He had a meeting with leaders on 20 September 1938 and at his initiative a ministry with Bordoloi as the leader was formed. Gopinath Bordoloi formed the coalition ministry with the full concurrence of the Congress high-command. People, in general, throughout the Brahmaputra valley rejoiced at the formation of the Congress ministry and the fall of the Saadullah ministry. Bishnuram Medhi and Siddhinath Sarma, the President and the General Secretary of the APCC appealed to the people of Assam to hold meetings on 27 September throughout the province to express their support to and solidarity with the Congress coalition ministry. People were so happy at the formation of the ministry that they had started holding such meetings from 21 September itself. Women of the valley were not less jubilant than the menfolk over this political change. Besides attending general public meetings they held separate women's meetings in many places to rejoice
at the formation of the nationalist Bordoloi ministry.

On 25 September 1938 the women of Charing in a meeting held under the presidency of Sundaribala Kakati, extended their support to the newly formed Congress ministry and prayed for its long tenure. In a separate resolution they congratulated the new cabinet members.

Gauhati Mahila Samiti is its meeting held on 26 September asked the people of Assam to extend their whole hearted support to the ministry. In another resolution, the Samiti requested Miss Down, an Independent women member in the Assembly, to cooperate with the Congress coalition ministry and to influence the Government to meet the due demands of the women of Assam.42

In the period between 1935 and 1939, the Council entry programme gained more importance than the constructive programme, and naturally, therefore, less political work was evident during the 1930-34 period of Civil Disobedience. However it did not mean inactivity. Now greater attention was paid to organizational work. Thus, meetings were continued to be held, constructive programme was popularized and spinning and weaving formed an important part of constructive work. Other programmes like mobilization of public opinion against untouchability and opium eating continued, besides enrolling members
to the Congress organisation. 199 women enrolled themselves as Congress members under the Jorhat District Congress Committee alone in the year 1938. The Charing Mahila Samiti, in its 8th Annual Conference held on 4 June 1938 passed a resolution requesting all adult women to enroll themselves as Congress members. The meeting also discussed the promotion of women's education in Assam.

The Kaibartta community of Assam was predominantly a fishing community. Both men and women belonging to that community used to catch and sell fish. The women of this community, in general were not very much interested in spinning and weaving since fishing took most of their time. Meetings were held in different Kaibartta-dominated areas to popularise spinning and weaving. The 8th Annual Kaibartta Sanmilan was held at Golaghat on 18 and 19 April 1938, under the presidency of Nilamoni Phukan of Jorhat and it was attended by a number of important Congress leaders. Padmawati Hazarika, a Kaibartta women leader, appealed to the women of her community to take up spinning and weaving for their upliftment and also as a part of the freedom movement.

Many Assamese girls and married women went to Wardha to take course in Hindi. Dharmeswari Das got a Scholarship from the Assam Rashtrabhasha Prachar Samity to
prosecute her studies in Hindi. She left on 23.5.39 for Wardha with Kaka Saheb Kalekar who visited Assam in connection with propagation of Hindi. 46

A movement against illiteracy was formally inaugurated at Jorhat on 1 September 1939 by Kuladhar Chaliha. For the purpose of working effectively to fight against illiteracy six committees were formed. One such committee was also formed for the advancement of women's education. 47

During this period, few women from Assam participated in certain all-India conferences. Swarnalata Barua of Golaghat was one of the delegates of the Assam team in the 51st Congress session held at Haripur in 1938. 48 Hemaprova Das, along with her two daughters Amalprova and Tilottoma and other delegates from Assam went to Gujrat in February 1938, to join the Congress session held at Vithalnagar. Hemaprova Das, besides attending the meeting also participated in the village industries exhibition held in the session. She received great appreciation from the delegates for her performance in operating the oil 'Ghani' or crusher. Nirmalprova Chaliha, Amiya Duara and Durgawati Saikia of Sibsagar went to Calcutta in March 1938 to meet the then Congress president Subhas Chandra Bose. They assured the Congress president about the solidarity
of the women of Assam with the Congress and handed over
to him some money for the Congress fund.49

In this period, the women continued with the
celebration of the anniversaries of Sati Joymoti,
holding of spinning and weaving exhibition, Gandhi
week and Independence Day on 26 January.
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17. Asomiva, 12 December 1936.
18. Ibid. 19 December, 1936 (translation ours)
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26. AICC papers File No. P/1937 (NWL)
27. AICC paper File No. 4/1937 (NWL)

30. APCC File No. P4(i)/1937 (NMML); See Appendix

31. Asomiya, 4 December, 1937.


33. Tendulkar, Mahatam Vol.IV p. 143.

34. Ibid. p. 152.

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36. Ibid.

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43. Report of the Assistant General Secretary, Jorhat DCC; see Asomiya, Vol. 9, issue III.

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46. Ibid. 2 June, 1939.

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