Chapter III.

NEW AWAKENING AMONG ASSAMESE WOMEN: (1923 - 1929)

The non-cooperation movement came to be suspended in February 1922 by Gandhiji following the violent incident at Chourichaura. What Gandhi really meant by non-cooperation was complete absence of violence in thoughts, words and deeds, which he felt was not properly understood by the people. While Gandhi's will ultimately prevailed, the suspension of a countrywide popular movement was disliked by large section of the masses and a quite a few important leaders.

On 10 March 1922, Gandhi was arrested and was tried on 18 March. On the day of his trial Gandhi offered no defence. Instead of it he justified non-violent non-cooperation and his own disaffection towards the Government. He was sentenced to 6 years imprisonment. However, before his jail term was completed Gandhi was released unconditionally on grounds of health on 5 February 1924.1

Meanwhile the Civil Disobedience Enquiry Committee appointed by the AICC recommended unanimously that "the country is not prepared at present to embark upon general mass Civil Disobedience". However, on the issue of
'Council boycott' which was also an item of the non-cooperation movement; the opinions were divided. Ajmal Khan, Matilal Nehru and V.J. Patel argued for Council entry while Ansari, Rajagopalachari and K.R. Iyengar held the view that "there should be no change of the Congress programme in respect of the boycott of Councils".2

In the Gaya session of the Congress held in December 1922, the whole issue of non-cooperation was reviewed. The proposal for Council-entry as proposed by Motilal Nehru in the session was defeated. C.R. Das, the President of the session, who was also a strong supporter of the Council-entry proposal, resigned from Presidentship of the Congress at the defeat of the resolution. The break-away group formed the 'Swarajist' party within the Congress with Matilal Nehru and others on 1 January 1923. T.R. Phukan also joined C.R. Das and Motilal Nehru. Delegates from Assam supported Nehru's proposal and most of the Congressmen were in favour of Council-entry. Accordingly the Swarajist group of Assam functioned as a separate group and sent an 8-member team including T.R. Phukan to the first Reform Council in November 1923.3

Nabin Chandra Bordoloi remained with the 'No-changer' group led by C. Rajagopalachari. The No-changers were directed by the Central Committee to work more vigorously for the success of the Constructive programmes.4 In Assam
the non-cooperators under the leadership of Habib Chandra Bordoloi stood firm in their commitment to the implementation of the constructive programmes.5

The split in the Congress into the Swarajist and the Ne-changers did not last for long. Most of the Congress members started to accept the Swarajist's arguments that only constructive programmes could bring Swaraj to the country, and that it was essential to enter the legislature, the most powerful instrument of propaganda, to obstruct the Government in the implementation of its policies detrimental to the interest of the nation. At its special session held at Delhi in September 1923, the Congress permitted the Swarajists to enter the Councils. It urged the people to carry out the constructive programmes and prepare for the adoption of Civil Disobedience.6

By November 1924 the differences between the two groups totally disappeared and Gandhiji, who formerly did not agree with the Swarajists' view, recommended that the Swaraj party should carry on its work in connection with the Central and Provincial legislatures on behalf of and as an integral part of the Congress.7

In Assam, the Swarajist Party was formed on 25 July 1923 and it succeeded in mobilizing a large number of Congress workers into its fold. The number of 'Ne-changers' in Assam was very small. Habib Chandra Bordoloi,
a no-changer, found it difficult to carry on the constructive programme without the help of the Swarajists, while T.R. Phukan, a Swarajist, also felt the impracticability of forming a separate party with serious limitations.

In the period between 1923 to 1929 the programme of the movement had two aspects. One was to non-cooperate from within the legislature by the members of the Councils and the other was to prepare the people for a Civil Disobedience through the implementation of constructive programmes throughout the country.

On the basis of the Montague-Chelmsford recommendations of 1919, Legislative Councils were constituted in all the province in 1923 through elections and nomination of members. Assam had also its Council in 1923. However, the question of women's election to the Councils did not arise at that time because they had not attained the status of a voter till then, except in the province of Madras.

The issue of women suffrage was debated upon at all India level in the 1920s. The Franchise Committee of 1918-19 headed by Southborough discussed this issue in its report. A large number of representations were submitted by women from different parts of India urging female suffrage. Although the Committee did not recommend any special arrangement for enfranchising women, it advised removal of sex disqualification. However, in case of Assam, the
Committee recommended "No person will be qualified to vote at any election if such person is a female".11

The Franchise Committee observed that enfranchisement of women in India was an unrealistic proposition until the custom of seclusion of women prevalent in the society was removed. It also noted that no provincial government advised to the Committee for the extension of franchise to women. Thus lack of initiative on the part of the provincial governments and the conservatism of the society stood in the way of getting the right to vote by the women of India.12

The British Government "did not admit, on principle, all inequalities based on birth, sex distinction, caste, or community". But struggles had to be organized anyway for realization of equality in respect of enfranchisement. A.R. Desai observes - "The hesitation of the British Government as well as the reactionary resistance of the orthodox sections of society, had to be combated before legislation was enacted such as would increasingly make woman man's equal in matters of civic rights".13

In 1923, a proposal was initiated in the Assam Legislative Council (ALC) to introduce legislation to enfranchise women. Munwar Ali, an ALC member moved a resolution proposing that sex qualification with regard to voting for election of ALC members be removed. But this resolution could not be carried through due to opposition by a large
number of members. The women of Assam, in general, resented this decision of the Council. An anonymous women writer wrote - "Man always denies our competence. If a woman can make a midwife, why not a doctor. She cannot take part in politics, but it is she who trains up the future politicians". But such individual efforts were not enough, in the absence of any organized action, to assert the demand of the women for enfranchisement.

The Alexander Muddiman Committee, appointed by the Government to enquire into the working of the 1919 Reform Act, submitted its report in March 1925. In the course of its enquiry the Committee also received various representations for enfranchisement of women from a number of women organizations. The committee in its Report recommended that provincial legislatures might be instructed to remove the sex disqualifications in the matter of elections. Accordingly, this measure was introduced without much difficulty in many of the provincial legislatures and the Indian Legislative Assembly. In Assam, the right to vote was granted to women in 1924. In the Assam Legislative Council session of 1924, Sadananda Dowerah, a member, moved a resolution saying - "that women be allowed (1) to vote in and (2) stand as candidate for election for Legislative Council in Assam". This resolution was adopted by a 26 to 8 majority votes. Thus a new chapter was opened for a more active and realistic role to be played
by the women of Assam in the political life of the province as well as that of the nation.

On the acquisition of this important political right by the women of Assam, Catherine Rompus, the Secretary of the central body of the International Women Suffrage Alliance congratulated the women of Assam for their being enfranchised. In a letter to Mrs. M.E. Cousins, she wrote on 29 November 1924, that the President of the IWSA, Corbet Asbee and the British Overseas Committee were very anxious to congratulate the women of Assam for acquiring the right to vote. The IWSA Secretary also regretted their ignorance as to whether congratulatory messages should be sent to the Women's Indian Association or to a particular personality. However, the Alliance congratulated and conveyed their good wishes to the women of Assam for their achievement. Margaret Cousins sent this letter to Anindita Devi of Goalpara to get it published in one of the widely circulated newspapers in Assam. 18

Asjam Mahila Samiti.

It was noted earlier that the women of Assam began to organize themselves from the year 1915, and that the Dibrugarh Mahila Samiti was the first women's organization. From then onwards many Mahila Samitis were formed in different places of Assam at the initiative of the local women in different areas. These organizations were however, primarily concerned with socio-cultural matters for the
upliftment of women. The Mahila Samitis formed in such a manner had no formal connection with each other nor they were affiliated to any central women's organization.

The need for a provincial women's organization in Assam was pointed out possibly for the first time, by Anindita Devi, a social worker of Gouripur of Goalpara district, in June 1923. She expressed her concern for the absence of an all-Assam women organization and appealed to the women of Assam, through a letter in the newspaper to give serious thought about the formation of a well-organized all-Assam Women's Association. She also said that such an association would be of great importance in the event of women being enfranchised. Anindita Devi also laid great importance in establishing a link between the Indian Women Association, formed in 1917, and the women associations of Assam because she believed that without being attached to a greater body, the women organizations of Assam in their existing condition were hardly capable of achieving anything significant.

Till 1925 there was no provincial women's organization in Assam. In the absence of this, the women of Assam, had to use the platforms of either the Asom Chatra Sammilan or the Asom Sahitya Sabha for the purpose of ventilating their own views on different matters.

In 1925, the annual session of the Asom Sahitya Sabha was held at Nowgong. In those days special sitting arrangements were made to accommodate women audience in the public
gatherings. In this meeting at Nowgong also the side of the pandal that was meant for the women to sit in was covered from all the four sides with curtains made of very thin and light bamboo sticks, so that the male participants could not see them. The women audience had to listen to the lectures of the meeting or enjoy the cultural functions only through the bamboo curtains or chicks.20

Chandraprova Saikiani was a women representative at this meeting and she was seated in the dais along with the male members. She was hurt to see the peculiar arrangement made for the women audience in the meeting. In her speech she condemned the whole arrangement. Expressing resentment and anger she said "Why in our society the women are confined in a cage like this? It is a matter of great shame for the whole nation. A women has to hide her face before the men - there is nothing more shameful than this custom of ours". She also asked the women present in the meeting -"Sisters! Why should you sit in that cage-like structure? Who dares to prevent you from sitting outside it?"

These words of Saikiani had an electrifying effect on the women audience of the meeting. Within a few moments they tore open the bamboo chicks into pieces and came out of it. There was a murmur amongst a section of the male audience but the remaining part of the meeting passed off smoothly with the women sitting openly.
This incident at the Sahitya Sabha session at Nagaon made Chandraprova realize more seriously the need for an All Assam women's organization so that women could be organized to assert their rights effectively and to fight against the injustice done to them by the society. The women, in general, also realized that absence of an organization like this was the main cause of their inability to participate in the activities of the society.

With the object of initiating the process of formation of a Provincial Women Organization in Assam, Chandraprova Saikiani called upon the women of Nowgong and also the delegates from different place of Assam who came there to attend the Sahitya Sabha, to assemble on the following day in the Sahitya Sabha pandal for a discussion on this issue. More than one thousand women collected in the said place. But due to strong protest by a section important male residents of Nowgong, the proposed meeting could not be held there. This had doubled the enthusiasm of the women leaders and the women's meeting was held on the same day in an open field near the pandal under the leadership of Chandraprova Saikiani. The meeting resolved to form the Asom Mahila Samiti (Assam Women's Association) and entrusted Chandraprova with the task of making arrangements for that purpose. In fact, the humiliation faced at Nowgong made the women to fight for their cause in a more determined manner.
The 1926 session of the Asom Sahitya Sabha was held at Dhubri in Goalpara district and was attended by many women representatives including Chandraprova Saikiani, Ratna Bezbarua and Snehalata Bhattacharyya. Chandraprova and other women delegates, however unlike their Nowgong experience, found the male members co-operative and sympathetic to their cause. Particularly the President of the session, Benudhar Rajkhowa gave inspiration to Chandraprova and others and took initiative to hold a women's meeting at the Bijni Hall for the purpose of forming the Asom Mahila Samiti. The meeting, held with Rajkhowa on the chair, formally declared the formation of the Asom Mahila Samiti in 1926. Chandraprova became the first Secretary of the Samiti.

The responsibility of organizing the Mahila Samitis fell upon Chandraprova. She appealed to the women to form Mahila Samitis throughout the province. During the whole year of 1927 Chandraprova visited most of the towns and important villages for this purpose. In the course of their organizational propaganda Chandraprova and her co-workers had to face all kinds of criticism from general people and were subjected to queries. The local women helping them had also to face the same situation. However, women of the urban areas mostly ignored such criticism and came forward to form Mahila Samitis in their respective localities.
Swarnalata Saikia (Gauhati), Durgaprova Bora (Gauhati), Snehalata Bhattacharyya (Gauhati), Prafullabala Choudhurani (Goalpara), Ratna Bezbarua (Dibrugarh), Annada Das (Gauhati), Bharatpriya (Gauhati) Padmawati Das (Goalpara), Ratnakumari Rajkhowa (Jorhat), Padmawati Phukanani (Gauhati), Padmawati Devi (Dibrugarh), Devi Prova Bhuyan (Dibrugarh), Anindita Devi (Goalpara), Labanyaprova Talukdar (Gauhati), Bhubaneswari Debi (Gauhati), Kamala Devi (Gauhati), Gangeswari Devi (Jorhat), Chaandraprova Barua (Gauhati), Subhadra Singha (Gauhati), Dharmeswari Devi (Mornoi), Kanaklata Chaliha (Sibsagar), Kamalalaya Kakati (Sibsagar), Ghunucha Patgiri (Mornoi), Sashiprova Hazarika (Gauhati), Maheswari Devi (Texpur), Hemaprova Das (Gauhati), Girija Sundari Devi (Gauhati), Lajjawati Devi (Dibrugarh), Lakhmiprova Bora (Dibrugarh), Sukhalata Duara (Dibrugarh), Kanakeswari Hazarika (Sibsagar), Hemalata Baruah (Sibsagar), Suprova Chaliha (Sibsagar), Gayatri Baruah (Sibsagar), Rajabala Das (Gauhati), Smti P.B. Goldsmith (Jorhat), Annada Devi Barkotoki (Jorhat), Swarnalata Devi (Gauhati), Sundari Barkakati (Charing), Jugaleswari Barua (North Lakhimpur), Lilawati Bordoloi (North Lakhimpur), Priyalata Kakati (Dibrugarh), Punyaprova Das (Dibrugarh), Debiprova Bhuyan (Dibrugarh), Girija Barua (Dibrugarh), Jogoda Devi (Dibrugarh), Swarnalata Dutta (Dibrugarh), Monorama Dutta (Dibrugarh), Kunti Phukan (Dibrugarh), Bimala Devi (Dibrugarh), Janaki Devi (Mongoldoi), Snehalata Medhi (Mongoldoi), Swarnalata Barua (Golaghat),
Mrinalini Devi (Golaghat), Narayani Handique (Jorhat), Hemalata Talukdar (Barpeta), Gayatribala Das (Barpeta), Bharati Devi (Barpeta) and Ramanti Devi (Barpeta) were the women who participated in the organizational work of the *Asom Mahila Samiti* at the initial state. By 1929, almost every town of Assam had *Mahila Samitis* with a number of *sub-Mahila Samitis* under each of them. Women workers travelled from village to village and aroused the consciousness among the rural women in favour of their cause.

The aims and objectives of the *Asom Mahila Samiti* were:

1. All-round development of health and education of Assamese women;
2. For that purpose:
   a. to establish *Mahila Samitis* for the purpose of helping the mothers to work collectively for all-round child care;
   b. to establish girls' schools and to carry out propaganda work about women's education among the general public and to persuade the parents to send their daughters to schools;
   c. to establish at least one destitute home (*Anath Ashram*) and Model School (*Adarsha Vidyalay*) in Assam;
   d. to give shelter to the destitute women and to educate them;
(e) to rear up orphans;
(f) to give financial help to poor, ambitious and studious girls;
(g) to establish training centres of weaving and spinning for the promotion of cottage industries.
(h) to publish suitable monthly journals for women;
(i) to arrange publication of books of poor women writers; and
(j) to take measures to remedy the difficulties and grievances of women in general.  

It may be noted that the aims and objectives of the Asom Mahila Samiti were socio-cultural in nature and no overt political aim was spelt out.

The all-India women's organizations like the Women's Indian Association (WIA) and the All India Women's Conference (AIWC) did not appear to have had any knowledge about the existence of such well organized women's association in Assam like the Asom Mahila Samiti with its branches in towns and villages. This fact is evident from a resolution adopted by the All Indian Women's Conference in 1927 regarding selection of representatives from among the women of Assam, which read as follows:-

"This being a backward province most of its first representatives would be Bengali or of the domiciled community. Conditions about residence in the unit for being elected as delegate may have to be relaxed in such case".
Such a comment by the AIWC was obviously born of ignorance. The leaders of the Asom Mahila Samiti (AMS) reacted sharply to the above resolution. All the executive members of the AMS including the Secretary went to the Calcutta session of the AIWC in 1928 postponing its own Second Annual Conference scheduled to be held at Gauhati during the Christmas days. It was apparently an attempt to demonstrate the organizational strength of the AMS in the All-India women's organization and remove the misconception about Assamese women.25

From 1926 onwards, the AMS held its annual sessions regularly for a few years and discussed issues of importance. In her Presidential address to the 2nd session held at Jorhat in 1928, Prafullabala Choudhurani pleaded for widow remarriage. She said that the society had no right to force a widow to lead an ascetic life. She argued that the widow should be allowed to determine her own way of life without any injustice to her by others. This session also adopted a resolution in support of prohibition of child marriage. The proposal was opposed by some members but was passed.26 The session also extended its support to the Sarda Bill which had fixed the marriageable age for girls.27

The Samiti also used to invite important provincial leaders to their sessions. Important leaders like
T.R. Phukan, Faiznur Ali attended the third annual conference of the AMS held at Golaghat in 1929. The Golaghat by session was largely attended by women from the neighbouring areas. A paper on prohibition was presented by Maya Das, an invitee, and the session had a detailed discussion on this issue.

Although the Asom Mahila Samiti was primarily a socio-cultural organization, it paid serious attention to the promotion of spinning and weaving which was in conformity with the Constructive Programme of the Congress. Many spinning and weaving centres were opened by the Samitis in different places. In order to facilitate the sale of the products of women weavers, 'Sipini Bhorals' or weavers' stores were opened in different places at the initiative of the Mahila Samitis. One such store was opened at Gauhati at the initiative of the Kamrup Mahila Samiti in 1928. Chandra Kumar Agarwala had donated a sum of Rs. 200 and Smti Subhadra Singha donated her building for opening this emporium. Some of the Mahila samitis also organized spinning and weaving competitions among girls to encourage them in this skill. Exhibitions were also organized where women even above the age of 90 participated to demonstrate their skill in spinning and weaving.
Reformatory and Welfare works. The AMS and its branches in towns and villages undertook many reformatory and welfare works relating to women. They opposed child marriage and polygamy and patronized child widow remarriage. In 1924, the Sibsagar Mahila Samiti adopted a resolution not only to support child widow remarriage but also resolved to take steps to popularize it. Even in rural areas such progressive issues were discussed in the Mahila Samitis. In a meeting held at Gandhia village in Kamrup district in 1928, a resolution was passed to bring into being the system of widow remarriage in Assam.

The welfare works of the Mahila Samitis included (1) expansion of women education, opening of girls' schools and providing scholarships to meritorious girls, provision for free compulsory primary education for girls and (2) opening of maternity and child welfare centres to improve the health and hygiene of women and children. In some places, for carrying out these works the Mahila Samitis constituted Women Welfare Associations (Mahila Kalyan Samitis) to help the village women. These Samitis organized talks by eminent social workers and reformers for educating the women. Articles written by the members on women education, social reforms, rights and responsibilities of women and on other related matters were read and discussed at these meetings.
The AMS touched upon all aspects that concerned women. It took up the question of even obtaining special seating arrangements for women travelling in railway coaches. The Goalpara session of the Samiti passed a resolution requesting the Railway Advisory Committee to direct the Eastern Bengal Railways for making separate seating arrangements for women travellers and better waiting-room facilities, etc. Most of the demands were conceded by the Railways.

The Golaghat Mahila Samiti in its regular session held in 1929 appreciated the Government's decision to make primary education compulsory for all but it urged the government, at the same time, to make women education free up to primary level and to grant special scholarships to meritorious girls studying at different levels. The Golaghat session discussed in detail the level of illiteracy prevailing among women at that time. It was revealed that the percentage of literacy among women was only 1%.

In fulfilment of its objective, the AMS established girls' schools in some rural areas. The first ever school opened by the AMS was at Tihu in Kamrup District on 6 July 1928. While opening the School at Tihu the AMS also requested the Barpeta Local Board to adopt necessary measures for opening girls' schools in 25 other areas of the district. Some branches of the AMS also raised funds for
giving financial assistance to poor girls for pursuing their studies.\(^{37}\)

One of the important women educationists, Rajabala Das, observed that expansion of women education was a precondition for national development. She prepared an outline of a tentative curriculum for women education in Assam as early as 1928. She observed that early marriage was one of the major causes responsible for poor literacy level of women of that time.\(^{38}\)

In the first annual conference of the AMS held at Goalpara in October 1927, Durgaprova Bora, the President of the session, reminded the women about their past glory and achievements in politics, warfare and in socio-religious activities. Dwelling upon the need for education she said that the education of the women received from their mothers and grandmothers in the traditional pattern was not sufficient for them to march forward equally with the women of other parts of India.\(^{39}\)

The need for expansion of women's education was urgently realized by the AMS. In the second annual session at Jorhat, Prafullabala Choudhurani appealed to every educated girl of Assam to undertake voluntarily the responsibility of imparting education at least to ten women of her neighbourhood. She observed that without promotion of education the development of women in general would not be possible.\(^{40}\)
National movement and the AMS. Durgaprova Bora, President of the first session of the AMS, called upon the women of Assam to respond to the call of the nation as effectively as possible. This was a very important decision of the AMS in that it became formally involved in the national movement. Emphasizing the urgency of boycotting foreign goods, she appealed to the women of all ages to spin and weave for themselves and for others. She also explained how foreign goods had been damaging the Indian economy.41

For the purpose of removing caste, communal and religious differences the AMS opened its membership to all. It and its branches passed resolutions to fight against untouchability. The Samiti realized that caste, religious or communal differences and differential treatment to various communities stood as an obstacle to unity, and that no national problem could be solved nor any national aim achieved unless these castes and communities were united and integrated.42

In addition to organizational involvement of the AMS and its branches in the implementation of the Constructive Programmes in the Brahmaputra valley, many women contributed individually to these programmes by becoming members of the Assam Provincial Khadi Board. In those days the members were required to send regularly
their self-spun Khaddar to the Board, and the response from the women members in this regard was very encouraging. For the promotion of Khaddar, the hand-spun yarns were also collected by the Khadi Board, and such yarns were sent to the all-India Khadi Board. In the months of November and December 1925, large quantities of hand-spun Khadi yarns were sent to the All India Khadi Board. The major portion of these Khadi yarns were spun by the women spinners of Assam and the quality of yarns was also certified by the All India Khadi Board as of very high standard. Mahatma Gandhi, Rajendraprasad, Harjiban Bhai of Bombay, Sankarlal Banker and many others certified the Assam Khadi as of the best quality in the country. Once the Secretary of Uttar Pradesh Khadi Board was reported to have said that he could not believe that human hands could produce such a fine Khadi yarn.

In 1928, a Congress Khadi exhibition was held at Calcutta. Two young girls aged 8/9 years, from Assam, participated in the exhibition. They demonstrated the whole process of Endi and Muga spinning. Their performance became a centre of attraction for the visitors. The skill and expertise of the Assamese women in spinning and weaving were appreciated by all. In 1924, there were 421, 367 handlooms in Assam and all were operated by women. Either as a part of the Constructive programme or as a
part of usual domestic activity, the Assamese women showed great devotion to the work spinning and weaving.

Commenting on weaving by the women of Assam, Rev. C.F. Andrews wrote in the Young India in 1925 - "Nowhere else in the whole of India, I believe, can such industry be found in weaving home-made cloth as in Assam; for the custom among women is almost universal. Though spinning has partly died out (nevertheless it is being quickly revived), weaving has held its proper place, and it has preserved the true Hindu ideal of the home-life here in Hindu India; ....... She weaves the cloth for the family and teaches the little children round her who are just like her own children, to spin and weave. She hold her true place of dignity, because she is an active bread-winner and bread-earner with an independent occupation".

Gauhati Congress session.

The 41st session of the National Congress was held at Gauhati in 1926. In the Kanpur session of the Congress held in 1925, the A.P.C.C. was represented by Rohini Kanta Hati Baruah and Krisnanath Sarma. Sarma and Hati Baruah, on behalf of the A.P.C.C., extended the invitation to the Congress to hold its 41st session at Gauhati. The A.P. C.C. proposal to hold the 1926 Congress session at Gauhati was unanimously agreed upon. Even the Punjab and Ajmer P.C.C.'s withdrew their invitation to the Congress for that
Some of the leaders in the Kanpur Congress including Motilal Nehru, however, expressed their doubts regarding the practicability of holding the session in Assam. Mahatma Gandhi did not object to the proposal but he had also doubts in this regard which he expressed later after the Gauhati session was over. He wrote - "When in Cawnpore, the Assam delegates gave the invitation to hold the Congress of 1926 at Gauhati and the Congress accepted the invitation, I was filled with misgivings. I felt that Assam was too far away, too unorganized and too poor to shoulder the heavy burden of holding a Congress session. Gauhati has a population of only 16000. No place with such a small population has before Gauhati had the temerity to invite the Congress. Gauhati however beat all previous records, and in an incredibly short space of time erected, in the midst of surroundings of great natural beauty on the banks of the Great Brahmaputra, a city under Khadi Canvas. The huge Congress pavilion itself was made of pure Assam Khadi".

Gandhiji's doubts, of course, did not go without any meaning. Gauhati in 1926 was nothing more than an urbanized advanced village in comparison to other towns of India, and the population of Assam was only about 40 lakhs. Some leaders of Assam, like T.R. Phukan and G.N. Bordoloi had also doubts, at the first instance, about the responsibility involved in such a huge task with limited resources. But, by undertaking great strain and
pooling all possible resources, Phukan, Bordoloi, Krishna-nath Sarma and others made the Gauhati session a success.  

The area selected for the session was about 300 acres of land near Pandu given by the Kamakhya temple. But the whole area was a jungle full of thick bamboo bushes and other thorny plants infested by tigers and other wild animals. An amount of ten thousand rupees had to be spent in clearing the area out of the poor fund that the Committee had at that time. About seven hundred and fifty local volunteers (including girls) worked day and night to make the site ready for the session.

The Gauhati (Pandu) Congress session was held from 26 to 28 December 1926. S. Srinivas Iyenger was the President of the session. Important leaders like Motilal Nehru, Vallabhbhai Patel, Rajendra Prasad, M.M. Malaviya, Mahmad Ali, Shaukat Ali, Sarojini Naidu, S. Satyamurthi, T. Prakasan, Sambhamurthi, Rangaswami Iyenger, Abul Kalam Azad, J.M. Sengupta, B.N. Sasmal, Jamunalal Bajaj, Dr. Munje, Dr. Satyapal, Rajagopalacharya, Maulana Azad Sovani, and others came to attend the session. Other important personalities to attend the session were Kasturba Gandhi, Miraben and Padmaja Naidu. Mr. and Mrs. Pathic Lawrence came from London as observers.

The Reception Committee of the Gauhati Congress made arrangements for a colourful procession of elephants.
to "give a remarkable and unprecedented ovation to the President of the Congress". But that programme was abandoned when the news of the assassination of Swami Shraddhananda reached there. A simple and formal guard of honour was given to the President of the session.

The newly built township for holding the Congress session was named as 'the Pandav Nagar'. The main entrance was named as the 'Swaraj Duar' and the two other gates were named after Gandhi and Ansari. One gate was meant for the ladies only. The delegates camp was named as the 'Chittaranjanpur'. A huge pandal made of Assam Khadi was erected with accommodation for about 25,000 people. Besides making living arrangements for 3000 people, 20 cottages were constructed for the leaders. The construction of the cottages was incredibly simple - Assam bamboo, Assam mud, Assam straw, Assam Khadi and Assam labour were responsible for the very simple but artistic huts, erected on the Brahmaputra bank" - Gandhi wrote. One such cottage was meant for the President and another for Gandhiji. Expressing his happiness with the arrangements Gandhi wrote to the Ashram sisters at Sabarmati -

"The scene around here is very beautiful. Our hut is built right on the bank of Brahmaputra. Kaka Saheb would love to live in the cottage here if only he were to see it. The roof is thatched by straw. The walls were made of slats of bamboo which grow everywhere. The bamboo
is plastered with clay. The inside of the walls are covered with blue Khadi. There is no cot inside. But there is an improvised platform of a raised wooden plank with bamboo legs. Over it is spread straw, then a carpet on the carpet, a Khadi sheet. On this I sit, eat and sleep. It is big enough to accommodate four more, but no one else sleeps on it. The floor of the hut, too, is covered with straw, on which is spread a carpet, which again is covered with Khadi. Who would not like to live in a hut like this?"  

In the main pandal also Assam Khadi was used for making sitting arrangements on the ground for six to seven thousand people. Over ten thousand people attended the Congress session of Gauhati and the arrangements were quite sufficient. The total amount of money spent on the Gauhati Congress session was more than one hundred thirty thousand rupees. But the whole amount could not be collected by the organizers mainly because many delegates had left the session before its commencement due to the sudden death of Swami Shraddhananda, heavy rains and fall in temperature, etc. Phukan and Bordoloi managed to meet the expenditure by taking loans. The AICC later granted an amount of ten thousand rupees only and the rest of the loans were repaid by T.R. Phukan and N.C. Bordoloi by selling out their private properties. 

The resolutions of the Gauhati Congress were of the usual type. It resolved to direct the Congressmen in the legislatures to refuse to accept the ministership
or other offices, to resist all attempts to form ministry with any other party and to oppose every proposal of legislative enactment introduced in the interest of the British. At the same time, Congress members were advised to move resolutions and support bills which were for the healthy growth of the national life.73

The Gauhati Congress also resolved to make wearing of Khadi compulsory for a Congressman to enable him "to vote at the election of representatives or delegates or any Committee or Sub-Committee of any Congress organization whatsoever, or to be elected as such, or to take part in any meeting thereof".74 Inspite of strong opposition by a section of the delegates, the resolution was passed by an overwhelming majority.75

The Gauhati session was held in a situation with the co-operator and non-cooperator participants still retaining their earlier differences.76 But happily during the session a sense of compromise and good feeling prevailed among them. Tarun Ram Phukan in his welcome address appealed to all to give up their differences in the interest of the nation and to stand united under the national tricolour. He said - "Honest differences of opinion are undoubtedly inevitable in politics, but should we not close up our ranks, specially when the deceptive manoeuvre of the enemies is threatening a complete rout".
He further said - "In such a critical state of the country I may be pardoned if I take the liberty of striking a personal appeal to Mahatma Gandhi once again to give us the lead.....". Gandhiji, who declared his withdrawal from active politics in the Kanpur session of the Congress of 1925, was found in the Gauhati session not as a passive spectator but as active as he used to be in taking part in the deliberations so much so that two of the resolutions passed by the Subject Committee had to be altered the following day.

Assam Khadi and Gauhati session. One of the most remarkable aspects of the Gauhati Congress session was the outstanding display of Assam Khadi. As mentioned earlier, the whole pandal with a capacity for about 25 thousand people was covered by Assam Khadi. The delegates camp was decorated with Assam Khadi. Hundreds of meters of Khadi were used as carpet to cover the ground for 6 to 7 thousand people to sit on. About 10000 meters of Khadi woven by the Assam weavers from local hand spun yarns was supplied to the Pandu Congress by the Assam Spinners Association. A Khadi exhibition was also held where Khadi cloth was the main item of attraction, and Assam Khadi was appreciated by one and all. Sitaramayya writes that Khadi was so liberally used in the Gauhati Congress that the new township was named as the 'city
In 1925 when the decision to hold the Congress session at Gauhati was taken, the Khadi work in Assam was in an unorganized state. In the beginning of the year 1926, suggestions came from the other provinces that a Khaddar Tomb should be raised as a symbol of Constructive programmes at the Gauhati session. Since Assam did not have sufficient quantity of Khaddar at that time, it was assumed that the required quantity of it would be obtained from other provinces. But with the untiring efforts of Krishnanath Sarma, Pandit Kanak Chandra Sarma and other Khadi workers it became possible for the APCC to collect more than the required quantity of Khadi on time and make the session a success. The Khadi workers in Assam had been put to work very hard in collecting such a huge quantity of Khadi cloth. In any case, the whole credit for making available the required quantity of cloth went to the spinners and weavers living in the interior villages of Assam. Those spinners and weavers were none but the village women and girls. They took only six months to make the entire Khadi ready for use by working day and night.

In order to make an assessment of the progress of Khadi work in Assam for the session, the All India Weavers Association deputed Rajendra Prasad to Gauhati in January
1926. Rajendra Prasad discussed the matter with the local leaders and appointed Krishna Nath Sarma as the Secretary and Accountant of the Assam Weavers Association and entrusted him with the responsibility for collecting all the Khadi for the session. Krishnanath Sarma was helped, among many others, by Pandit Kanak Chandra Sarma and Bidyadhar Barua of Nowgong. The major part of the Khadi spinning and weaving was done in Nowgong district. Morigaon, Barpujia, Jagiroad, Phulaguri and Dharamtul were the main centres of Khadi production for this purpose. The women and girls of these areas with their devotion and hard work completed the targeted production of Khadi by November 1926.

The weavers were supplied with raw cotton procured from elsewhere by the Khadi organizers. The former had to get the cotton ginned and spun for themselves. In Morigaon area of Nowgong district every elderly woman took about 20 Kg. cotton, on an average, for spinning and weaving Khadi. They used to spin the cotton collectively by a system locally known as 'Haderi'. It was purely a female arrangement evolved for group spinning. According to this system when a village women had sufficient quantity of cotton for ginning and spinning she used to invite a group of village girls to gin and make sliber of the cotton. The girls used to work continuously day and night for the women and complete the work
within a limited time. For the purpose of making Khadi for the Gauhati session the Morigaon girls and women worked under the 'Haderi' system.

The spinning of the cotton yarns for the session was completed by March 1926. Wherever cotton was distributed for making of Khadi for the Congress session the women took the work with seriousness, and no one had to remind them or inspect their work. By the end of November all the Khadi necessary for the Congress was ready.84

In appreciation of Khadi work in Assam, Rajendra Prasad wrote to Krishnanath Sarma saying that the kind of spinning and weaving as prevalent in Assam was found in no other province of India and that Gandhiji's scheme "to each house a spinning wheel" was already in existence in Assam. He further wrote that with the existing kind of Khadi work, Assam promised to occupy a very high position in the field of Khadi in the Country.85

Nabin Chandra Bordoloi, in his report as the General Secretary of the Reception Committee of the Gauhati session, greatly praised the sense of duty and patriotism of the women of Assam. He also said that it could become possible to cover the whole pandal with home made Assam Khadi only due to the patriotic feeling of the village women of Assam.86
In the Gauhati Congress 750 volunteers worked day and night of whom 25 were women. The uniform prescribed for the women volunteers was the traditional Assamese dress made of Muga or Assam silk. Chandraprova Saikiani was also a volunteer and she was in charge of the main gate to the Working Committee pandal. A large number of other women also attended the Congress session either as participants in the Khadi exhibition or as part of the audience. Mr. and Mrs. Harliman two other distinguished visitors from outside India after attending the Gauhati session wrote to Md. Tayyabulla appreciating the beauty and simplicity and the skill in weaving of the women of Assam.

In November 1927, the Government of India appointed the Simon Commission, a commission exclusively composed of British members, to enquire into India's fitness for responsible government. The Indian leaders felt insulted at this and decided to boycott the Commission. As a counter measure to this action of the Government, the Congress directed its Working Committee to draft a Constitution of Independent India.

Accordingly, the Congress Working Committee in its sitting at Bombay on May 19, 1928, appointed a committee with Motilal Nehru as Chairman to draft the proposed constitution for India. The Committee submitted its report to the All Parties Conference held at Lucknow in August 1928.
The Committee recommended dominion status for India, granting of fundamental rights, joint electorate for central and provincial legislatures, universal adult franchise above the age of 21 years, reorganization of provinces on linguistic basis, etc.\textsuperscript{90}

In Assam an All Parties convention was held at Gauhati in the Curzon Hall on 29 October 1928 to discuss the recommendations of the Nehru Committee. The convention was presided over by Kuladhar Chaliha. It passed a resolution in appreciation of the work of the Nehru Committee and requested all present in the convention to give adequate publicity of the report amongst the general public. It was also decided to form a Standing Committee for this purpose. The convention was attended by representatives from 23 different groups and organizations. The Asom Mahila Samiti was also invited and Chandraprova Saikiani represented the AMS. It was for the first time that a representative from the Asom Mahila Samiti was formally invited to attend a provincial level political conference. Saikiani took part in the deliberations and decisions of the convention very effectively.\textsuperscript{91}

\textbf{AMS vis-a-vis Status of women.} The formation of the Asom Mahila Samiti provided an important forum for the women of Assam to make improvement, in their status
through organizational efforts. In all the sessions of the AMS, the status and position of women used to be important issues for discussion.

Prafullabala Choudhurani in her Presidential speech in the Jorhat session, referring to the status and position of Assamese women, said 'we want only man's sympathy and co-operation. What we really need is equality and freedom in serving the society and the country as well'. She not only demanded women's right to be elected, but also urged for reservation of seats for women in the Council and in municipal bodies.\textsuperscript{92}

In the same session, Ratnakumari Rajkhowa, the President of the Reception Committee in her speech also emphasised the need for expansion of women's education with a view to bringing about improvement in her status. She said "a woman in our society is known as 'somebody's wife' or 'mother', as if she has no identity of her own". She strongly condemned the social arrangements that made the whole women community dependant on the other sex. She said further that most of the women suffered from ill health, physical as well as mental, due to early marriage and motherhood and also due to the social restrictions imposed upon her.

Ratnakumari strongly pleaded for equality of man and woman in all aspects of life. While advising the
women to stand against male chauvinism, she assured men that "increase in our strength does not lessen yours, rather that will be an addition to your own strength".* She reminded men and women alike that women's education was the only way to strengthen the foundation of a society.93

In 1929, the Government of India passed the Age of Consent Bill, known as the Sarda Bill after the name of Rai Hari Bilas Sarda. Thus, under the Sarda Act, the Minimum age of marriage for a girl was raised to 14 and that of a boy to 18 years.94

In Assam, the women themselves took the initiative in bringing about reforms with regard to marriageable age. The Asom Mahila Samiti took effective steps to see to it that the Sarda Act was implemented fully in Assam. Mostly it was the local Mahila Samiti that kept vigilance on the implementation of the Act. Examples of intervention where necessary were numerous. When information was received about marriage of minor girls, the Mahila Samiti workers used to go to the parties and prevented the solemnisation of such marriages.95 They also protested against giving of tender-aged girls in marriage with elderly grooms. In such cases, when the Mahila Samiti received information it used to issue notices to the concerned families to stop. In the event of ignoring such notices of the Samiti by the families, the Samiti workers used to go personally and prevent such marriages. For such activities, some
people ironically named the Mahila Samitis as 'Marriage breaking Samitis'.

Narayani Handique, in her Presidential address at the Golaghat session of the AMS appealed to the women of Assam to throw away the 'Purdah' in whatever form it might be existing. She reminded them that the seclusion of women was never a tradition in Assam, and that the 'purdah' system was new to the Assamese society. She said it came to Assam with the migration of outsiders during the British rule.

While giving representation before the Harton Committee, in 1928 Suniti Bala Gupta, a School Inspectress of Assam said that the conditions for expansion of women's education in Assam were suitable. Except in the Brahman community the Purdah in no form prevailed in Assam. Girls belonging to the non- Brahmin community could move about freely.

Kamala Kanta Bhattacharyya, a renowned poet of Assam and a freedom fighter, presiding over the Joymati Utsab (a celebration in memory of Joymati) at Gauhati in 1928, said in his address that the renaissance of the women of Assam in the contemporary period would surely bring prosperity to the nation. He observed that the women of Assam were gradually marching ahead and identifying themselves with the nation and appealed to them to work in a more organized and effective way.
It is clear that in the period between 1923 and 1929 there was a kind of renaissance among the women of Assam. The formation of the AMS, the acquisition of women franchise, participation in the holding of the 1926 All India Congress session at Gauhati and undertaking of numerous reform works were some of the important achievements of the women of Assam during this period. In spite of such developments in the organizational activities, the AMS could not come to desired prominence at the All-India level. The reasons for this were mainly the lack of publicity and proper means of communication and poor knowledge about Assam and her society in the rest of India.
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