CHAPTER VI
NATIONALIST ASPIRATION VIS-A-VIS LOCAL ASPIRATION: FROM CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE MOVEMENT TO QUIT INDIA MOVEMENT

The sudden withdrawal of non-cooperation movement and the imprisonment of leaders created a situation in the country in which the majority of the congressmen felt gloomy and pessimistic about the future prospect of national liberation. Moreover, the congress decision to boycott the legislature created a feeling of frustration amongst a section of Congressmen. The most prominent among them were C.R Das and Motilal Nehru who devised a plan to make the best out of the impasse by carrying the battle inside the legislatures. In spite of opposition of the conservatives popularly known as 'no-changer', the Congress endorsed the plea of the reactionary to wreck the constitution from within. The Swarajya Party was formed with Motilal Nehru and C.R Das as President and Secretary respectively. With the formation of Swarajya Party at the national level, a process of rethinking also started in Assam in favour of Council entry. Accordingly, in the election of 1923, majority of Congressman contested the election under the Swarajya Party banner and their candidatures received wholehearted support from local
Congressmen and Khilafatists. In Suram-Barak Valley, Bipin Chandra Deblaskar, Rashid Al Laskar, Harikishore Chakraborty, Ramoni Mohan Das and Khirode Chandra Deb were elected to the council as independents, later joined the Assam Swarajists. Even Basanta Kumar Das was elected on Swarajya Party Ticket when the formal branch of Swarajya Party was not established in Sylhet. The Assam Nationalist Party was formed with the support of Swarajists and independents and Brojendra Naarayan Choudhury was elected as Deputy Leader and Khirode Chandra Deb as Chief whip of the party in the legislature. They functioned with considerable effectiveness in criticising Government policies, voting out unpopular measures and carrying the resolution of public importance. In their first meeting, they urged upon the Government to revise the Government of India Act, 1919 in order to secure for India the status of a full-fledged self governing dominion. Attacking the dyarchical form of Government, Sadananda Dwara moved a resolution asking for the replacement of

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dyarchy by full provincial autonomy. All the Surma Valley Councillors lent him their full support. Between 1923-28, Swarajists though refused to accept office, they made their presence felt and their obstructionist role kept the Government under constant pressure in passing any undemocratic resolution. There was absence of politics on party lines, but the Council was crossed on communal and territorial lines. According to the Indian Statutory Commission, Hindu-Muslim antagonism raised its head during this period and it was the main influence in the election, which retarded the national consciousness on the basis of secularism. The debates often reflected an urge for satisfaction of communal and valley demands and lacked any secular approach to the problem of the vast majority of the people of the province. In Surma-Barak Valley, in the absence of organized political activity, there was the recurrence of old fueds between the two major communities of the valley. To erase out the differences and to keep the spirit of communal harmony, Surma Valley Association summoned its sixth session in August 1924 and

2. Ibid, P.106.
was presided over by Sarojini Naidu. In her presidential address, she emphasised 'Hindu-Muslim unity' and said, 'I do believe that the relation between the two communities in the Surma Valley has been so cordial that this is not to be regarded as of merely local character. It is an example to be followed by rest of India, India is composed of different creeds but is guided by the harmonious regeneration. For the present, Gandhiji is concerned with three things: (i) Khaddar (ii) Hindu-Muslim unity (iii) the removal of untouchibility. What is needed at the present movement is less haste and more speed for the sake of popularity. We should not deceive the truth from Mahatma Gandhi, but should say to him, we can go with you so far or we can not go with you at all. Moreover, to keep the spirit of national unity, the Surma Valley Political Conference for the first time expressed its willingness to work as a Congress organization and passed a resolution having full confidence in the leadership of Gadhiji and pinned its faith on Gandhiji's constructive programme and stressed the necessity of promoting hand spinning.

and hand weaving, removal of untouchibility, organizing village and village workers.

Immediately after the release of Gandhiji, a pact was signed between Gandhiji and Swarajists which provided that the work in connection with the central and state legislatures would be carried on by the Swarajya Party as an integral part of Congress organisation, while others would be devoted to constructive works. In the midst of political turmoil, the election to Third Reformed Council was held and, in Surma Barak valley, the party position was improved. Shrish Chandra Dutta was elected to the central legislature. Six out of the eight seats were captured by the non-Muslim swarajists and Arzan Ali Mazumdar defeating Rashid Ali Laskar won Cachar Mohmmedan constituency defeating Rashid Ali Laskar. But in Sylhet none of the muslim Swarajist candidates were successful. In the Third Council also they refused to accept office as it would be impossible on their part to reject Government Proposals and such a decision was a mark of protest against constitutional lacuna.

Meanwhile, Congress' decision to boycott Simon Commission

and its subsequent directives to the Swarajists to resign from the central and state legislatures seemed to stir up the fervour for a country wide national movement. All the members from Sylhet and Cachar immediately vacated their seats and prepared themselves for the next phase of freedom struggle chalked out by the I.N.C. Their vacant seats were filled up by the responsivist and title holders. Though the Surma valley Congress-Swarajists, boycotted the next election, but they sponsored two illiterate cobblers - Chiratan Muchi and Kalicharan Muchi to contest the election. They returned to the Fourth Council and sat with Raibahadurs and Khan Bahadurs. Through this election, INC no doubt, established its credentials of mass movement and was able to extend its base to every segment of the society.

In protest against the failure of the Government of India Act 1919, the INC, in Madras session, declared independence as its goal. The Government appointed a Statutory Commission headed by Jhon Simon to report on the working of the Act of 1919. But the non-inclusion of any Indian member was treated as an insult by the INC. Accordingly, the INC gave a call to boycott the Statutory Commission and this call of boycott was endorsed by all political parties irrespective of their political affiliations. The Lahore Congress
of 1929 authorised the Congress Working Committee to launch a programme of civil disobedience including non-payment of taxes. In Surma-Barak Valley, the gloomy atmosphere created after 1921, underwent a change and national politics acquired a new vigour in 1930. The Congress was an organized body in the region as the District Congress Committees and Sub-Committees were set up in many places of the valley. Naturally, the leaders and volunteers as per the directives of INC plunged into the movement. The movement was conducted under the able guidance of Kamini Kumar Chanda, Shyama Charan Dey, Satindra Mohan Deb, Gangadayal Dixit, Sabid Raja Mazumder, Khursheed Ali, Satish Chandra Deb, Shrish Chandra Dutta and many others. The whole atmosphere was surcharged with patriotic feeling that permeated the minds of both young and old. There were regular meetings, processions, bonfires of foreign clothes and picketing before the liquor shop. In Silchar, National flag fluttered in the office of Cachar Joint-stock Company, Cachar Press, Bharat Sampad and Assam Bengal Commercial Company, though there lurked the danger in such an action for incurring the

displeasure of the authorities. To keep the students away from the political movement, Cunningham, the then DPI of Assam, issued a circular popularly known as 'Cunningham Circular' by which parents and guardians were asked to give an undertaking to the effect that their sons and wards would not take part in the political meetings and demonstrations. There was a strong resentment against the Circular throughout Assam. Barak Valley was also affected by this development and many parents, as a protest withdrew their sons and wards from the Government aided school. In order to arrange education of such boys, a new school was started which today goes by the name of Cachar School. Dhirendra Kumar Gupta, Girija Mohan Dutta, Kamini Kumar Chakraborty and Golam Chhabir Khan served as honorary teachers. Similar institution was established at Karimganj at the initiative of local people.

On the eve of civil disobedience movement, there started a wave of unprecedented national awakening amongst the Indian women. With a view to channelise this new awakening among the women folk through well organised bodies, Mahila Samitis were

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8. J. B. Bhattacharjee, Cachar under British Rule in North-East India, op. cit, p. 278.
formed in Silchar and Karimganj in 1930.\(^9\) The main objective of the Samitis was to conduct all kinds of constructive programmes and to help the National Congress in all possible ways. In 1932 when the various organisations working under the banner of Congress were declared unlawful, the Mahila Samitis were not exempted and they had to bear the prosecution by the Government. Some of their members suffered long term imprisonment. The most prominent among them were Matongini Das, Snehalata Deb, Suniti Bala Das, Bilangamayee Kar, Naresh Sundari Dutta, Binodini Paul, Saudamini Paul and many others.\(^{10}\) Despite the repressive measures, the activities of the Samitis were not stopped. In 1930, three branches of the Samiti were established in and around Karimganj town namely Dasher Bazar, Lakshmi Bazar, Byani Bazar. They made vigorous Campaign and inspired the women to work shoulder to shoulder with their manfolk. In 1931, a Prohibitory Order was served by the Government under section 144 on Suniti Bala Das, Secretary Chotolekha Mahila Sangha in Karimganj. She was forbidden to give


\(^{10}\) Ibid.
speeches in any meeting or to take part in any processions. In utter defiance of the prohibitory order, she along with about two hundred women participated in the condolence meeting of the Moulana Mohammed Ali, a freedom fighter.\(^{11}\) As soon as she rose to make speeches after Suresh Chandra Deb and Swadesh Ranjan Dutta, she was arrested by the Deputy Superintendent of Police. What is evident from the above is that the movement was the most liberating experience to women who had never stepped unescorted out of their homes and could truly be said to have marked the entry of women to public space.

Meanwhile, the announcement of Gandhiji's historic march to Dandi on March 12, 1930 to break the salt law gave a new lease of life to the Civil Disobedience Movement. It was a signal for fresh movement involving mass demonstration, meetings and boycott and the whole nation aroused with new enthusiasm. The people of Surma-Barak Valley responded with full zeal. It was decided that the Civil Disobedience movement would start on April 6, all over the

\(^{11}\) N. K. Gupta, \textit{op.cit.}, p.138.
country and salt law would be violated where there was possibility to do so. Accordingly, in Karimganj, a batch of Satyagrahis under the leadership of Suresh Chandra Deb went to break the salt Law. Although, they could not produce salt by their own effort as salt was not available there, the move had shrouded in registering peoples voice against the Law and Suresh Chandra Deb was awarded with six months imprisonment.¹²

In May 1930, there was spell of hartals, passive disobedience and picketing at the government aided schools, colleges law courts and shops selling foreign clothes and excise goods. The whole valley was rocked by innumerable processions led by Congressmen of two rival Camps- the Congress League and Congress Committees. During the civil Disobedience Movement a rift developed between Sylhet DCC and BPCC over the issue of Sylhet-Cachar reunion with Bengal, the main plank of regionalism of the valley. The rift was prominent during the Presidential election of BPCC. The Sylhet DCC refused to participate in the election unless the Sylhet-Cachar reunion issue was considered at the right earnest. But

¹² Ibid, PP 111-112
the BPCC at that time was not in a mood to consider the issue. As a result, some congressmen, as a protest withdrew their association with parent body and formed 'Congress League' under the leadership of Brojendra Narayan Choudhury.\textsuperscript{13} Though the Congress organisation suffered due to this difference among its members, the tides of nation-wide movement helped it to overcome intra party squabbles and for the time being could bring the two rival factions together to work for the cause of freedom struggle from the same platform. The leaders of the valley showed their greatness when the whole valley become restive after Gandhiji's arrest on May 1930. As a mark of protest, all shops were closed spontaneously for the whole day and it was announced that 7th May would be observed as a day of hartals.\textsuperscript{14} In the meantime, people assembled at the office of the Sylhet League and from there, they started a procession with the tricolour flag in their hands. The authorities tried to disperse the unarmed processionists by force. Many were injured and sent to jail. Many prominent leaders like Shyama Charan Dey, Satindra

\textsuperscript{13} Home political File no 254 of 1930, A A. Guwahati.
\textsuperscript{14} A. C. Bhuyan and S.De (ed.), Political History of Assam, Vol II, op.cit, P. 162.
Mohan Deb, Sabid Raja Choudhury, Pritish Nag, Saday Govinda Das, Khurseed Ali, Swadesh Dutta, Nalini Kumar Bhadra, Shyama Kishore Paul, Swadesh Chandra Deb and Matsin Ali underwent imprisonment.\textsuperscript{15} To counter the government atrocities, a pamphlet called 'Matri Adesh' edited by Baikuntha Chandra Roy and published from Sadya Press, Silchar exhorted the policemen not to obey the Government orders against Satyagrahis. This pamphlet had some effect on the attitude of the local policemen. Three constables in Karimganj resigned possibly to avoid their duties against the Satyagrahis.\textsuperscript{16} The Civil Disobedience Movement had its repurcussion even amongst the people belonging to the lower strata of the society. In Karimganj, the cobblers resolved in a meeting not to drink wine and imposed social boycott on those who dishonoured their resolution. These unparalleled facts proved the extent of hegemony that the leadership exerted in the society at large.\textsuperscript{17}

On 26th January 1931, when I.N.C. celebrated the second Independence day, important national leaders including Gandhiji and Nehru were released. Immediately after their release, a

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item[15.] Ibid. P. 170
\item[16.] Ibid
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compromise offer came from the Viceroy to settle various issues, and consequently, the Gandhi-Irwin Pact was signed.\textsuperscript{18} Under the term of the Pact, all political prisoners except those convicted of violent offences were released. Satindra Mohan Dev, Matsin Ali, Dhirendra Gupta of the valley who were kept in Tezpur jail were released. They received heroic reception everywhere.\textsuperscript{19} Though the suspension of the movement offended a section of the congressmen, the situation compelled them to abide by the decision for the time being. Most of the leaders and workers devoted themselves to reorganise the Congress organisation and also engaged themselves for political education of the masses. At Karimganj, under the active guidance of Suresh Chandra Dev, political classes were held at Dasher Bazar, Badarpur, Lakshmi Bazar, and these were attended by Congress volunteers including women.\textsuperscript{20} Similarly, during this period a good number of conferences were held throughout the valley, from 22nd to 24th April 1931. Surma Valley Youth Conference was held at Silchar. In the same year, the election of BPCC was held and

\textsuperscript{18} Tarachand, \textit{History of Freedom Movement in India}, vol III, Ministry of Education, Govt. of India, New Delhi, 1983, P.149

\textsuperscript{19} N.K. Gupta, \textit{op. cit}, P, 149.

\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Ibid}
Satindra Mohan Dev and Suresh Chandra Dev were elected to the executive body from the valley.\textsuperscript{21} With this, the difference that cropped up between BPCC and Sylhet District Congress Committee in the past was resolved with the intervention of Subhash Chandra Bose.\textsuperscript{22}

Side by side, the nationalist leaders kept close eyes on the rigid implementation of the Pact. But the government repression had not ceased and armed itself secretly with new Ordinances. The Congress was left with no other alternative but to start the second phase of the civil disobedience movement. All Congress organisations were banned. To cripple the movement, a propaganda against the civil disobedience movement was started by a section of the Indians under government patronage mostly the landlords, lawyers and government servants. They formed a Peace Committee to baffle the movement and their agents organised a number of meetings in different parts of the valley condemning the movement.\textsuperscript{23} This strategy to suppress the movement had failed and there were a lot of political activities in the valley including boycott and Swadeshi. Ever since

\textsuperscript{21} A. Guha, Planter Raj to Swaraj Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826-1947, \textit{op.cit.} p. 175.
\textsuperscript{22} Sylhet DCC Dispute papers 1926-30, File no 6-77 NMML. New Delhi.
the beginning of the movement, all coercive measures were applied by the government to weaken the nerve of the nationalists. Many nationalists were arrested and brutally tortured by the jail authority who participated in the second phase of the civil disobedience movement.

The oneness of the purpose, ceaseless effort and determination "on the part of the freedom fighters to liberate the country from the shackles of the imperial rule compelled the government to change its attitude towards India. Even the public opinion in Britain had gained momentum against the coercive action of the government. The government faced strong criticism in the Parliament. The political momentum of the civil Disobedience Movement was, however, retarded with the declaration of Communal Award. The political significance of civil Disobedience movement gradually lost its prominence within the rank and file of the Congress. Instead, cause of the upliftment of the distressed classes gained priority at this point of time. Ultimately, Gandhiji recommended to the AICC for the suspension of the civil disobedience movement to the utter dismay of his followers.

 Though nothing tangible resulted from the civil disobedience
movement, the creed of national struggle for freedom got a wider publicity and found a strong base in the valley. This period under consideration contributed to the weakening of the organizational framework due to the difference between the Hindus and the Muslims. The appeals of communal leaders to stay away from the movement coupled with active government encouragement of communal dissension to counter the forces of nationalism had created bitter conflict between the Hindus and the Muslims and this adversely affected the electoral politics of the 20's. The tussle assumed such prominence that the leaders lost sight of the emergence of the most disruptive phenomena in the politics of the region. This was evident from the fact that though the struggle was not much different during Civil Disobedience movement from those in 1921-22, but the extent of mass participation specially the Muslims were nominal and they remained indifferent. This was because of the disappearance of Khilafat issue and also because of the divisive tactics adopted by the colonial administration. Moreover, differences cropping up among the old guards over the question of Council boycott causing an initial leadership vaccum in 1930. Inspite of its weaknesses, the Civil Disobedience movement paved a crucially important stage in the progress of the anti-imperialist struggle in the valley.
Growth of Labour- Peasant Movement and its interaction with Localism

The socio-economic cataclysm brought about by world war I ushered in a new era for the Indian working class, long subjected to dumb misery and oppression, to a new political consciousness. As rightly pointed out by Narendradeb, "the war and its effects had created those conditions which helped the Indian masses to make a resolute break with their inglorious past and acquire a new confidence in themselves. Their traditional passivity was now broken, their deep rooted conservatism was demolished and for the first time they began to feel their importance in India's struggle for independence." 24

Apart from the far-reaching effects of war, another important factor that awakened the peasantry was the non-cooperation movement launched by the congress under the leadership of Gandhiji. In fact, it was during non-cooperation movement that the

Indian working class was brought within the ambit of national movement and it was for this reason that the growth of the working class movement can be traced during this period. As already mentioned in chapter III, one of the reasons why working class upheavals failed to gather momentum on all-India scale was due to the fact that although Congress solicited the co-operation of the peasants in the national movement, they were unwilling to espouse their class demands. That is why the 'Chargola Exodus of 1921', in spite of the national prominence it received, could not be utilized for forging a greater permanent consolidation of the labour class, a consolidation which might have extended the support base of the national movement to a great extent.

In the decade between 1921 and 1931, the working class movement could not become a significant phenomenon in the political life of the valley. The Indian National Congress was busy with electoral politics in early twenties and subsequently it was busy with the Simon Commission and the Nehru Report. In this fluid situation, mass politics in Surma-Barak Valley suffered, for leaders kept themselves busy in electoral politics. The old feuds between Hindu and Muslim over the reunion (with Bengal) issue raised its head and retarded the pace of consolidation on national basis. Agitational politics again
came into limelight when Congress declared complete independence as its goal in 1929. The growing enthusiasm for undertaking anti-imperialist stand was visible among the leaders as well as cadres. Along with Civil Disobedience programme the congress leaders decided to uphold the cause of the working class more seriously. The golden opportunity to utilize congress as a mass platform came when the Manipuri peasants of Bhanubil of Sylhet organized themselves to resist the oppressive measures taken against the tenants by the local Jamindars. This movement marked the beginning of a new kind of peasant movement where landlordism and capitalism came under fire from the emergent left minded youth of the congress organization. The background of this movement as depicted by Guha was:

"The most politicized peasant movement, however, developed in Sylhet, particularly among the Maipuri tenants of the Bhanubil area. The Zamindari Mahal of Bhanubil in the Pithampasha Estate of Maulavi Bazaar was a cluster of nine villages, with a population of some 9000 and areable lands amounting 1,500 acres. Between 1885 and 1922, the Zamindari rent per khear(one-third acre) there had been gradually enhanced from ten annas to a repee-and a-half. Besides, an abwub and fines for failure to pay rent on the due date were also added. The
measurement of land by a shorter pole in 1923 resulted in an increased rent burden that the peasants refused to accept.

In 1927 notice was served, thereby enhancing the rent further to Rs.2-8 annas per kear. The estate managed to obtain some decrees at that rate by 1931, while executing the decrees by force, the Zamindars demolished hundred of tenant’s house, seized their cattle and destroyed their granaries in the face of a no-rent campaign. Peasants helped by a section of congressmen offered stiff resistance.²⁵

Amongst the congress leaders, Khirode Chandra Deb of Karimganj was regarded as the eye opener of the movement. He was assisted by other Congress leaders like Purnendu Kishore Sen Gupta, Saral Bala Deb and Baikuntha Sharma, a leader of the Manipuri peasant community. All were convicted to imprisonment in the Bhanubil case during the period between 1931-34.²⁶

The Bhanubil upheaval took place at a time, when fierce class struggle already gained ground in national as well as regional level. The movement had directly influenced the course of the peasant movement not only in neighbouring region of Sylhet and Cachar but also in Bengal. Guha informs us that Jnananjan Neogi came from

²⁶ Ibid, P, 183.
Bengal to inaugurate an association of Sammyobadi Samiti style which came into being in the wake of Bhanubil movement in July 1931. The Samiti in its inaugural session took some resolutions which urged upon the peasants to rise against landlordism. The association gave moral boost up to the peasant and inspired them to organize peasant movement in other places of the valley.\textsuperscript{27}

Moreover, in Surma-Barak valley, the spectrum of Congress Socialist and Communist ideologies gradually began to gain ground as both the Socialists and Communists had decided to work under Congress banner to organize the labour and peasant forces of the valley. The Bhanubil satyagraha was the turning point for these emerging political forces to consolidate themselves with a view to coming in the open. Thus, in the context of the Surma-Barak valley, the Bhanubil movement may be regarded as a demarcating line between traditional congress politics on non-class basis and emergence of a new bend of movement based on class struggle.

Biresh Misra, the then secretary of D.C.C., Sylhet rightly

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid, P. 184.
summerised the impact of Bhanubil movement in his report to A.I.C.C in 1934 wherein he said: "The rent Fight of Bhanubil and the participation of the local congress in it raised an issue in the minds of the landlords and petty land holders of the district and they were consciously or unconsciously feeling uncomfortable with the congress."^28

In Surma-Barak valley, the Communist ideas poured through same young men who were indoctrinated in calcutta. They came in contact with Phanindra Nath Dutta, who hailed from Sylhet and became a Communist in early thirties. Under his guidance, Organizing Committee of Communist Party was formed for Sylhet. Early leading members of the Communist Party of Sylhet were Lala Saradindu Dey, Chanchal Kumar Sharma, Chittaranjan Das, Dinesh Chowdhury, Digendra Nath Das Gupta and Amarendra Kumar Paul. Since Communist Party was banned at that time, the Communists decided to work within the Congress under Congress Socialist Party (CSP) banner. To organize the toiling masses, the CSP convened a conference at Sylhet and this conference gave birth to two organizations Surma Valley Labour Association and the Surma Valley

Peasants' Association. Suresh Chndra Deb, the then secretary of Congress Socialist Party of Surma valley was the chief coordinator of the two associations. Amongst the other organizers, names should be mentioned of Swarisnath Goswami, Kedarnath Bhattacharjee, Abala Kanta Gupta, Devendra Bijoy Chowdhury, Ramnath Bhattacharjee, Biresh Chandra Misra and Harendra Chandra Chowdhury, Saradindu Dey and Chittaranjan Das who were very active and vocal in the conference.\textsuperscript{29} Thus, an active link was built up between the CSP and the Communist members and both of them worked hand in hand in organising the toiling masses in their fight against 'colonial exploitation in the right earnest. Moreover, both the forces and their tactics to work within the Congress paid them good dividend. In 1940, two communist activists, Achintya Kumar Bhattacharjee and Biresh Chandra Misra became the secretaries of cachar and Sylhet DCC's respectively.\textsuperscript{30} Even the Karimganj subdivision Congress committee was under the control of the communists. Moreover, all the members of the Tarun Sanga, the


\textsuperscript{30} C. Sharma, \textit{op.cit}. P. 165.
famous outfit of terrorist of Sylhet, later joined the communists, making the Congress Organisation a heterogeneous anti-imperialist national front representing different shades of political opinion as well as divergent class interests from feudal princes to the rackrented peasants, from the new Indian Bourgeois to the exploited working class.\textsuperscript{31} This new situation encouraged the sudden spurt of trade union activities in Surma-Barak Valley. According to Mohitosh Purkayastha "there was only one trade union at Silchar till 1938. That was the Post Telegraph and Railway Mail Serviceman Association. In 1938, several trade unions sprang up one after another. These were Sylhet-Cachar Cha Mazdoor Union, Surma Valley Dock-Dhakghar Union, Cachar Press Workers' Association and Silchar Shangar Union. The registered office of the cha-Mazdoor Union was at Sylhet."\textsuperscript{32}

It may be mentioned here that even earlier CSP took initiatives to get Surma valley peasants' association and Surma Valley Labour Association affiliated to All India Trade union Congress. A Strong

\textsuperscript{31} Guha, op. cit. P. 185.
\textsuperscript{32} Dainik Jugashankha (Bengali daily), Silchar, May 1, 1980.
delegation attended the Meerut Conference of the CSP and All India Peasants' Conference in 1936. 33 However, due to some technical reasons, the affiliation was not accepted.

The Sylhet-Cachar Cha Mazdur union was formed in 1938 and was registered under the Trade Union Act on 27th April, 1939 with Arun Kumar Chanda as its president. 34 The organization made rapid progress and began to play a significant role in organizing labour on radical platform. They realized that the demand for national freedom had to be linked with workers' aspiration. In 1938 labourers of five tea gardens of cachar went on strike. 35 These were Lalacherra, Mainagarh, Allenpur, Bharakhai and Arunaband. In the wake of the strike the organization consolidated its base and came forward to support the striking labourers. Meetings and processions were held in support of their strike at silchar. This is the first occasion that the urban people of Silchar stood solidly behind the workers to express their solidarity. Arun Kumar Chanda, the president of Cachar DCC who was a liberal and was sympathetic to the cause of the

34. M. Bhattacharjee, Freedom Struggle in Barak Valley, op.cit, P.281.
35. Mahitosh Purkayastha, 'Cacharer Pratham May Divas', Dainik Jugashankha, (Bengali daily), Silchar, May 11.
oppressed humanity, activised the Congress organization to stand behind the labours' cause. Achintya Kumar Bhattacharjee, a staunch communist, was the general secretary of cachar DCC and it was quite natural that he would extend all types of support towards the worker's cause. Sanat Kumar Das, president Silchar Sub-division Congress Committee came forward to highlight the cause of the labourers. The whole hearted support of the leaders boosted up the morale of the labourers of the tea-garden. The most striking feature of the strikes in tea-gardens of Cachar was that it was able to mobilize popular support in their favour from almost every walk of life.

In the wake of labour movement in Surma-Barak valley, it was decided to observe May Day at Silchar and Udharband. At both the places, the day was observed with processions and meetings. At Silchar, meeting was presided over by Arun Kumar Chanda and was addressed by Achintya Kumar Bhattacharjee, Mohitosh Purkayastha and Ajoy Bhattacharjee. At Udharband, the meeting was presided over by Sanat Kumar Das and the speakers were

36. J. B. Bhattacharjee, Cachar under British Rule in North East India, op.cit. p. 283.
Sudhanshu Ghosh, Manindera Roy and Tarapada Bhattacharjee.\textsuperscript{38}

Besides Sylhet-Cachar Cha Shramik union, other associations formed during the period also took up independent programmes for consolidating the working class. Amongst them, the names of Dock Mazdur Union, Cachar Press Workers' Union and Dhakghar Union deserved special mention.\textsuperscript{39} The activities of these unions did not go beyond organizing meetings and processions but these programmes helped cultivating political awareness among the workers. Most of the active workers' of these organizations were communists. Their firm determination helped them to be successful in expanding their base among the masses and these mass support helped them in getting important portfolios in the congress organization itself.

Side by side of the trade union movement, the Socialists and Communists also tried to expand their support base amongst the peasants. The resistance offered by peasants of Bhanubil had already proved that the peasantry could fight their cause bravely if

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{39} C. Sharma, \textit{op. cit.}, P. 183.
objective conditions were favourable. It was the leftists within the Congress organization who took the initiative to consolidate the class awareness amongst the peasantry. We have already seen that trade union movement in the district of Cachar had its genesis in the late thirties. It was due to the fact that tea industry was the most important industrial sector of this district. Similarly, peasant movement developed first in Sylhet because zamindars under the permanent settlement were the most dominant social as well as economic force of that district and the situation that arose mostly out of the blending of political and peasant movement under the umbrella of Congress in the district of Sylhet was aptly described by the District Magistrate of Sylhet in February 23, 1934, in his despatch to the Chief Secretary. It read:

'The various Raiyats' and peasants societies, whose activities in this district gave cause to a good deal of anxiety some two years ago, at the time of the revival of the Civil Disobedience Movement, suggested that Communist agitators might be at the back of the movement. Possibly this suggestion was unjustifiable. But the connections between these societies and other similar societies in the district of Tippera which were responsible for serious disturbances was established. The activities of these peasants' and workers' societies have, of course, considerably diminished since that time and have now apparently dwindled down to the
holding of one or two conferences during the year in the various subdivisions. These bodies however offer communist agitations a convenient focus for the propagation of their principles ....

Surma Valley committee of the All India Kishan Sabha was formed in 1936. The workers initiated a vigorous campaign against the exploitative character of the permanent settlement. The first conference of Surma valley Kishan Sabha was held at Behali, a village of Sunamganj Subdivision of Sylhet. The next year the Kishan Sabha conference was held at Bihani Bazar of Karimganj subdivision. The most striking feature of these peasant conferences was that the discussions were not only confined within the problems of the peasants, but also the overall political scene of the country which was reflected in the speeches and the resolutions.

In 1938-39, the workers of the Kishan Sabha expanded their activities and in Karimganj sub-division causing rising tension between landlords and tenants. It is pertinent to note here that while the landlord-tenant conflict dominated peasant agitations in

41. C. Sharma, op. cit, p. 178.
Sylhet because Sylhet was a permanently settled district, it was the conflict between the state and peasantry as a whole that motivated the peasant masses of Cachar for Cachar was under Ryatari System. As the Congress organization of the valley was dominated by leftist socialist since late thirties, class character of the working class movement gave rise to conflict within the Congress organization itself. The communists wanted the Indian peasants to league themselves against their class enemies whether it be national or alien, the right wing leadership warned the peasant leaders against emphasising such class conflicts. They held that in India there did not in fact, exist any conflict between different national classes. In the midst of such hiatus amongst the rank and file of the Congress organization, Karimganj Sub-division Kishan Conference was held at Tegharia (near Baraigram Junction of modern Karimganj district) in May 28 and 29, 1939. Suresh Chandra Deb was the Chief organiser of the Conference and he was assisted by communist workers. Jagneswar Das, who subsequently became the most valorant leader of the peasant rose to prominence during this period.\textsuperscript{43} The Kishan

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.
movement actually helped in building bridge between the Hindus and the Muslims and in 1940 at least 21 Muslim peasants were convicted along with their Hindu brethren in connection with the agrarian troubles.\textsuperscript{44}

In the district of Cachar, the condition of the peasants was marginally different because the system of land revenue was different there than its counterpart in Sylhet. The big land-holders of Cachar, known as mirashdar had no any special legal rights over land. But through their money power and their nexus with officials, this landed class was successful in introducing some extra legal measures to exploit the peasantry.

So, it is quite natural that when in 1937 Surma Valley Krishok Sabha came into existence, its branch was established in Cachar in the name of Cachar Zilla Krishok Sabha. Between 1938-39 activities of the Kishan Sabha had made rapid progress and branches were established in Boyaljud, Ramnagar, Udharband, Chatla, Joypur, Lakhipur, Sonai and other places. Kishan Sabha of the district was

\textsuperscript{44} M. Bhattacharjce, Freedom Struggle in Barak Valley, \textit{op. cit.} P. 288.
fortunate to have the guidance and services of activists like Achintya Kumar Bhattacharjee, Mahitosh Purkayastha, Motilal Jaigirdar and Gopendra Lal Roy. They organized the kishan sabha on communist line under the congress cover. In 1938, the Kishan Sabha organised an agitation in the zamindari of the Chakraborty family of Hailakandi. It was conducted with the help of the congress and CSP demanding the resignation of Nirendra Chakraborty who was a member of the Muslim League Ministry of Saddulla. A number of processionists including Dr. Brajendra Bhattacharjee, a Congress leader, was injured when they were attacked by the paid muscleman of the Chakraborty family.

In 1938-39 the Kishan Sabha organized another movement in Zamalpur and Kamalpur area of the district. The Kishan Sabha lent immense support to the striking labour of Arunaband Tea Estate and thereby set a glaring example of working class solidarity in the valley. In 1940, Cachar Zilla Kishan Conference was held at Silchar in which Abdul Mohim, a communist and peasant leader presided.

45. Ibid, P 290.
The conference raised the genuine demands of the peasantry and also adopted a resolution condemning the imperial war.\textsuperscript{46}

With the beginning of the second world war the workers and peasant movement suffered a setback. As already mentioned, the communists within the congress organization, who were the vanguard of the movement, were arrested under the Defence of India Act for obstructing war effort and the Communist party was banned in India. However, during the year following the war, a militant peasant movement cropped up in Sylhet. The movement is generally known as Nankar Movement. Though started in Sylhet, Lauta-Bahadurpur of Karimganj sub-division was the nerve centre of Nankar movement. The communist regained their lost glory and took up the cause of the peasant into right earnest. The Kishan Sabha organised the peasant and demanded occupancy right of their land and abolition of feudal exploitation. It is pertinent to note that this system of exploitation was mostly predominant amongst the Muslim Zamindars and the Muslim tenants. This organized movement by the Kishan

\textsuperscript{46} C. Sharma, \textit{op. cit.} PP 72-76.
Sabha helped in creating a solid base for communist party in the Muslim dominant pocket of the district. Though in the peasant front, the communists were successful in establishing solid base, in the tea gardens, they had to suffer losses during the post-war period. Realising the growing influence of the communists, both the government and the Congress became apprehensive and decided to free the labour-peasant organisations from the clutches of the communist design so far as the organization of tea-garden workers was concerned. Arun Kumar Chanda, a leftist sympathizer announced in the Assam Legislative Assembly in September 1934 that 'the spectre of class war is worrying the world and I can see that this 'spectre is becoming larger and larger on the horizons of this country everyday'. So long as Chanda was in the helm of affairs, he maintained good relations with the communists and did not find it difficult to manage the organizational affairs of the party with Achintya Kumar Bhattacharjee a hard core leftist as secretary, Cachar DCC. But, Chanda died in 1946 and with his death the communists lost their only sympathiser in the Cachar congress. As a sequel to the

47. M. Bhattacharjee, Freedom Struggle in Barak Valley, op. cit, P 292.
growing influence of the communists, the APCC took measures to form their own labour cell to combat the challenge. In Surma Valley also congress decided to toe the same line. So, two unions of tea garden labourers were registered with trusted congressman as their office bearers. Surma valley Cha Sramik Congress had Jiban Santhal and Purnendu Kishore Sengupta as President and Secretary respectively. Surma Valley Cha Sramik Union was formed with Rabindranath Aditya as president and Suresh Chandra Biswas as secretary. In 1947, both the unions merged and when Indian National Trade Union Congress was formed in the same year, the Union got affiliated to this organization.

It is thus evident that the leadership at the national level were not unaware of the deplorable condition of the working class and peasants. But until 1920, none thought of politicizing their class interest to serve the causes of the national movement. In the surma valley, though objective conditions were favourable to involve the toiling masses in the national movement, the leadership did not take

50. Ibid, i.
up the task in right direction till 1930. The reasons for this cleavage between the working class and the national movement may be sought in the attitude of the leadership at the national level as well as the social background of the leaders and activists at the regional and local level. At the early phase of the national movement, advanced section of the leadership took up the cause of the toiling masses, but it was considered more as a humanitarian problem than as political and we have already mentioned their reactions in the context of the Chargola Exodus of 1921.

At the local level, the activists and leaders mainly came from three classes, landlords, lawyers and other urban middle class. The landed aristocracy was antipathical towards any type of consolidation with toiling masses lest they might affect their vested interest. The lawyers were linked with landlords and garden management for their living. The middle class also had vested interest in the land or industry which actually provided them security to involve in political activities. However, it was this last section that emerged as the initiator to steer the problems of the exploited people in the right direction.

The Bhanubil peasant movement of early thirties showed beyond doubt that the toiling masses were anxious to involve
themselves in the mainstream of national movement in the hope of improving their lot. And both the Congress Socialists and Communists took up the chance to use the movement as the starting point of their future course of action. Unfortunately, the out-break of the second world war and the subsequent difference of opinion between the Socialists and Communists acted as a deterrent towards the consolidation of this new awareness. In the year following the war, the necessity to bring the workers and peasants to the forefront was felt by the Congressmen, Congress Socialists and Communists alike. But the contest between the different political forces of the valley had nothing to do with the course of the national movement, because no programme for attaining national freedom was undertaken at the national level after the Second World War. As a result the working class and the peasantry of the valley could not play a dominant role in the national movement for no mistake of their own. It is worthwhile to note here that this exclusion of the toiling people at the national struggle for freedom created a gap between the upper and lower strata of the society that still haunts the political scenario of the valley.
Mid 30's witnessed the growth of a number of new developments in the field of practical politics. Though Indian National Congress has become the recognized political platform of all patriotic forces, the organisational framework of the Congress had been undergoing a process of transformation. The new ideas of Communism and socialism had their influence on the toiling masses of the country and a leadership emerged from amongst the middle class activists of the Congress to guide these new forces. The Congress Socialist Party was formed which stood for the organisation of the workers and peasants on class lines, and making them the motive force of the national struggle for independence. Moreover, CSP has become the platform of both the socialist and the communist within the organisational framework of the Congress. Finally, the emergence of Subhash Chandra Bose and Jawaharlal Nehru, their dynamic leadership as recognised at the national level, brought younger generation nearer to Congress organisation. These factors along with others had their impact in this valley itself. Here, there was a happy blending of youthful vigour and elderly wisdom. Hence, both the
district Congress committees of Sylhet and Cachar had Secretaries with known communist leaning without much disturbing the earlier organisational structure of the Congress. The situation continued till the election of 1937.

As per the Government of India Act 1935, the first general election was held in March 1937. The All India Congress Committee decided that the Congress should accept offices in the provinces where it commanded a majority in the legislature. It was provided that minister-ship should not be accepted unless the leader of the Congress party in the legislature was satisfied and able to state publicly that Governor would not use his special powers of interference or set aside the office of the ministers in regard to their Constitutional activities. As a result of it's massive success in the election, Congress was able to form ministry in six provinces. In Assam legislative Assembly, Congress won 33 seats and emerged as the largest single party.\textsuperscript{51} In Cachar out of 12 candidates seven came out successful. The candidates who returned from present day Barak Valley (i.e. in Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi) in the election of

\textsuperscript{51} Home Poll, File no. 18/1/37 poll, A 1
1937 were:  

**Cachar District:**

Arun Kumar Chanda. (Silchar, General)

Kalachand Roy. (Silchar, Reserved)

Parameshwar Parida. (Silchar, Labour)

Munawar Ali Borbhuyan. (Silchar, Muslim)

Hirendra Chandra Chakraborty. (Hailakandi, General)

Mazroof Ali Laskar. (Hailakandi, Muslim)

Baidyanath Mukharjee. (Barak Valley, Tea planters)

**Karimganj Subdivision:**

Kamini Kumar Sen. (Karimganj, East)

Khirode Chandra Deb. (Karimganj, West)

Balaram Sarkar. (Karimganj, Reserved)

Mamud Ali. (Karimganj, Muslim)

The successful Congress candidates returned to Assam Legislative Assembly from the valley were Arun Kumar Chanda and Khirode Chandra Deb. Arun Chanda, the son of K.K. Chanda was

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52. *ALAD*, vol 1 No 1, Assembly Library, Dishpur.
the rightful successor of his illustrious father. He was a Bar-At-Law and initially went to Singapore and joined the Bar there. However, a year later, he came back to Silchar to assist his ailing father and took up the rein of the District Congress Organisation. Before that he was the chief organiser of the celebration of Golden Jubilee of Congress at Silchar. As the president of the DCC he was aware of the organisational weakness of the Congress due to intra-party rift which was responsible to widen the gap between the urban Cachar and the rural Cachar. He, therefore, made sincere effort to spread the ideal of Congress in the remotest corner of rural Cachar. Also, he expanded the activities of the organisation in tea gardens and with the help of young leftist workers, he laid the foundation of the vigorous trade union movement in the Valley. Thus his election to the Assembly in 1937 was a right choice, though he had to face challenge from his erstwhile colleague, Jatindra Moha Deblaskar of Borkhola. Significance of this contest will be discussed later.

Khirode Deb of Karimganj was also the son of another reputed and veteran Congress leader Satish Chandra Deb who abandoned his practice as a Government pleader in 1921 in response to non cooperation call given by Gandhiji. Khirode Deb was a promising Lawyer of Sylhet bar and he earned appreciation from all his senior
colleagues as a promising and hard working political activist. In Bhanubil peasant upsurge, K.C. Deb played a very important role for which he came to be known as the 'Sardar Patel of Bhanubil'. His premature death in 1937 was a great blow to all concerned.

It was apparent from the election result that apart from this two undisputed and recognised leaders, things were not smooth sailing for the Congress in the Valley. In spite of its overwhelming victory, there was no Muslim member in the party nor did Congress have any electoral base in labour constituencies. The failure of the party in gaining absolute majority was ascribed to a variety of reasons namely, lack of organisation, intra-party rift and communal dissension generated by the Communal Award. Moreover, the increased activities of the Muslim League at the national level had its impact on the provincial levels and the latter were swayed by it. Even Arun Kumar Chanda, in spite of his reputation in public works, had to face challenge from his erstwhile political colleagues. Chanda was aware of the alienation of the rural people from the Congress and, he initiated a step to bridge up the gap. In doing so, he selected Sanat Kumar Das as his aide which offended the feeling of Jatindra Mohan Deblaskar who hailed from an old aristocratic family of rural Cachar. The election was contested by Deblaskar with a forceful
campaign for the recognition of the rightful place of the indigenous people of Cachar in legislative politics. Though Chanda won, the number of votes secured by Deblaskar showed that his slogan also had takers in rural Cachar.

In Hailakandi, Congress could not give a candidate against Hirendra Kumar Chakraborty who was an ally of Saddulla. The fact is that the powerful chakraborty family resisted all efforts of instituting an official sub-divisional level Congress Committee in Hailakandi. In 1938, the Kishan Sabha organized a procession as a mark of protest against Hirendra Chakraborty's induction in Sadulla ministry and demanded his resignation. The procession was attacked by paid muscleman of the Zamindar family and a good number of processionists including Dr. Brojendra Bhattacharjee, a Congress worker was injured. This family succeeded in developing a peculiar kind of localism encompassing the entire sub-division of Hailakandi which resisted effective entry of national politics based on nationalism in the area under their influence. It may be mentioned that a sub-divisional Congress Committee was formed in Hailakandi only in 1937 with Abdul Matlib Mazumdar as its president. 53

In the labour belt also, Congress was yet to gain enough strength to put a candidate. However, the Congress was gaining ground in the labour belt was manifested in the subsequent by-election following the untimely death of the sitting M.L.A and a planters nominee Parameshwar Parida. There was a historic fight between the planter and the Congress. The Cachar DCC and the APCC jointly supported Sanat Kumar Ahir, a unionist fighting against tremendous odds, and could get him returned defeating the planter's nominee, Sitaram Roy. It was during this election that the congress regained its lost prestige in the labour front and was successful in bringing the tea garden labour in the mainstream of national movement.  

In the year following the non-cooperation movement, Muslim attitude throughout the nation underwent radical change. In Assam, the gradual increase in their number along with their increasing political consciousness alienated the Muslims from the mainstream of India's struggle for independence. So long Abdul Matin Choudhury of Syhlet, who later became the chief spokesmen of Muslim league,

54. C. Sharma, op. cit., P. 85.
cooperated with the Congress, it was difficult for the Muslim members of both the valleys inside and outside the legislature to organise any move against the transfer of Sylhet to Bengal. Soon he changed his stance and became the ardent protector of Muslims' rights in the province as a whole. It was alleged by some contemporary political leaders as well as political analysts that a persistent feature of Assam politics since 30's had been the absence of a common secular leadership which could command the respect and allegiance of the masses irrespective of caste, community and religion.\textsuperscript{55} Rabindranath Aditya in his memoir "From the Corridor of Memory" expressed his dissatisfaction over the non-acceptance of office after 1937 and held Gopinath Bordoloi partially responsible for lack of vision. If he could have formed the coalition ministry and extended the hands of cooperation towards non-League Muslim leaders, the politics of Assam would possibly have taken quite a different turn.\textsuperscript{56} The only way which the Muslim candidates could be approached was either to set up Muslim candidates who belong to Congress organisation

\textsuperscript{55} Rabindranath Aditya, \textit{op.cit}, P.7.

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.
or to enter an understanding with the Muslim Political Party which had a programme similar to that of the Congress. In Assam, like the rest of India, the Congress wanted to rise above the narrow ambit of communalism and offered Congress tickets to the Muslim candidates. But in Assam no Muslim candidate could be persuaded to contest election in Assam. The Muslim in general supported the Assam valley Muslim Party led by Saddulla. In Surma Valley there was no unanimity among the Muslim leaders and they contested the election under the banner of Surma Valley Muslim Party. Though the Muslim League leaders - the most promising amongst them were Shaukat Ali and Nawab of Dacca - tried to persuade them by raising the slogan of Muslim brotherhood, their effort went in vain.\(^57\) It deserves to be mentioned here that against this fragmentation of the Muslims in the Valley, Congress' position remained indivisible. A good number of Muslim of the Valley sided with the Congress and the Congress had to depend on their support whenever situation so demanded. As was evident from the fact that during September 1938 to November

\(^{57}\) M. Kar, op.cit, P. 36.
1939, the Congress party got the support of four Muslim members of whom two were from Surma Valley alone. But under frenzied communal vulnerability the relation between the congress and the Muslims had became harsh. The absence of secular leadership confused the Muslim members, which prepared the ground for political animosity and mutual acrimination.

In Surma-Barak Valley, a new situation emerged after the emergence of the Congress Socialist Party and the Communist party. Apart from the ideological differences, there were many specific issues over which the leftists and the dominant Congress leadership held divergent views. And this squabbles divided the Congress into two rival groups. Later, these groups identified themselves with left and right trends. The entire period under discussion was dominated by the leftist Congressites and this domination inspired them to stake their claim to electoral politics. This infighting between the rightists and the leftists groups in the Congress made an open breach within the organisation, and this affected the course of political development.

58. Ibid.
in subsequent years. A remarkable episode of far-reaching influence was the by-election of 1937 in Borlekha constituency of Karimganj (West) which fell vacant as a result of sudden demise of Khirode Chandra Deb. The right-wing leadership proposed the name of Rabindranath Aditya to the BPCC who was a Jamindar and a lawyer. The leftists put forward the name of Biresh Chandra Mishra, a leftist. Hectic lobbying took place for obtaining official nomination by the contending parties and Mishra won the first round official nomination by obtaining approval telegraphically from Vallabhbhai Patel, Chairman of the Congress Parliamentary Board. The Assam Pradesh Congress Committee took initiative to influence the Parliamentary Board in favour of Mishra. The issue, it seems, turned to be a show of strength between APCC and BPCC as the former could not recognize wholeheartedly the inclusion of Surma Valley Congress to the BPCC. On the contrary, the right wing Congressites did not give up hope and tried to reverse the decision with the help of the conservative faction of the B.P.C.C. Sarat Bose, the lone

representative of Congress Working Committee from Eastern Zone, tried to assess the election prospect and wired Brojendranarayan Choudhury and Basanta Kumar Das for their opinion. They replied telegraphically: "Socialist candidate, Socialist workers in the field, Fund unknown, Rabindra Aditya's Chance better funds immense."

Sarat Bose placed the opinion before Patel who was allergic towards the Socialists and the earlier decision was reversed. Thus, eight days before the election, the Congress nomination was changed in favour of Aditya. The leftist appealed to Nehru who declined to interfere and advised Mishra to mere withdraw. The left forces determined in their stand and devoted their entire energy in campaigning for Mishra. Thus the contest assumed the form of inner-party fight between the two factions of Congressmen. Mishra was defeated ultimately to Aditya by a margin of 240 votes. This episode had a repercussion at the national level. Rammonohor Lohia, one of the secretaries of A.I.C.C. publicly criticised Patel for the reversal of nomination of Biresh Mishra. This infuriated Patel and he raised the matter in CWC. The

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resultant turmoil culminated in the resignation of the Socialist group in a body from the A.I.C.C.\(^6\)

After the election, many prominent Congress leaders like Suresh Chandra Deb, Abalakanta Gupta were expelled from the party for supporting Mishra. The Congress organisation of the Valley suffered a great loss as they were all first grade and dedicated Congress workers. However, when Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose came to Syhlet in 1938, expulsion was withdrawn and all of them again devoted themselves to the organisational work and sudden spurt of trade union activities was seen throughout the Valley.\(^6^2\)

At the provincial level, only identifiable sub-group of party members with variable extent of interaction was the Surma Valley group of Congressmen. After the election of 1937, the Assam group of parliamentary party representing both the Valleys met on 22nd February to select the leader of the party. The Surma Valley members had in their mind Basanta Kumar Das, the senior most member of the patry whose leadership was not acceptable to the members of

\(^{61}\) Rabindranath Aditya, op. cit, P 44.

\(^{62}\) Election Dispute in Sylhet 1937-38, F/N 6/60 (i) NMML, New Delhi
other Valley. It was alleged that Das would take exception to his undue bias towards his own Valley. The members representing the Bramhputra Valley had rallied behind Gopinath Bordoloi, who was a new face in Parliamentary politics. However, as a rapprochement, the Deputy leader had to be taken from the Surma Valley.\textsuperscript{63}

Quit India Movement-lukewarm response of the Valley: Localism prevailed

With the outbreak of the Second World War, an abrupt situation arose as a result of involving India into war without the consent of the Indian people. Initially Congress' attitude towards the government was one of the sympathy. Both Gandhiji and Nehru were in favour of supporting the British Government for it appeared to be a struggle between fascism and democracy. But the Congress adopted the policy that no cooperation was possible unless the British Government would make clear its war aims in regard to democracy and imperialism and the new order that is envisaged. Also it

demanded that India must be declared an independent nation. On the contrary, the British Government did not make any candid declaration of its policy and the future of India as demanded by the INC. Rather, Viceroy offered to setup, after the war, a representative body to device a new Constitution of India to enlarge the Viceroy Executive Council with additional Indian members. This offers was outright rejected by the Congress. As a mark of protest all the Congress ministries in the provinces resigned as per Congress directives and this resignation was treated as a first step towards the preparation for civil resistance against the British Government.⁶⁴

In Assam, the coalition ministry of Congress under Bordoloi’s leadership was functioning during that time. Responding to the call of the AICC, Bordoloi ministry placed their resignation before the CWC. Immediately after the resignation of the Congress ministries in the provinces, the AICC held it's annual session at Ramgarh to decide its strategy to meet the situation arising out of the viceroy’s declaration of war. A few days after the session, Gandhiji

announced his individual Satyagraha campaign. In order to build the base of the Satyagraha campaign, Surma-Barak valley along with the rest of India celebrated the national week from 6 to 13 April, 1940 in a befitting manner. Meetings were held even after the expiry of the national week to chalk out the next course of action. A section of the Congressmen mostly the leftist group, instead of selective satyagraha formulated by Gandhiji, preferred mass opposition to Government and court arrest on that occasion. In order to make satyagraha most struggle oriented, they launched vigorous campaign and for that purpose they arranged meetings and at times were successful to associate the common people within the ambit of satyagraha campaign. In Syhlet, Karunasindhu Roy and Sarala Bala Dev were the first to offer satyagraha. At Silchar, Arun Kumar Chanda was arrested and was convicted to one-year imprisonment with a fine of Rupees one hundred when he offered satyagraha there. These aroused so much of public indignation that the students of Silchar town resorted to strike and some of them attempted to

organise a general hartal and brought out a procession for that purpose. The Government undertook all efforts to cripple the Congress programme of individual satyagraha. Ever since the beginning of the war, the Government of Assam declared ban on holding processions, meetings or assembly without prior consent of the Government. This provoked Rabindra Nath Aditya to move an adjournment motion in the Assam Legislative Assembly in 1941 to discuss the situation that arose in the district of Cachar, Syhlet and Dibrugarh. The Government even refused to give permission to hold meetings at Syhlet to condole the death of Nobel laureate, Rabindra Nath Tagore.

Meanwhile, the Government of Assam received an order from the central Government that the Congress leaders who were in jail should be released immediately. Apparently this initiative was taken by the Government to reconcile differences with the Congress party and to explore the possibility of gaining the latter's cooperation in the war effort. Accordingly, the Government of Assam released all the satyagrahis from jail. Both Arun Kumar Chanda and Gopinath

66. Arunodoy (Bengali weekly), Silchar, April 22, 1982.
Bordoloi were released unconditionally on health ground. With that the satyagraha campaign which generated immense public enthusiasm was suspended in December 1941, and the suspension was considered justified by the Congress in the light of Japanese air raids over Assam. "The individual satyagraha of 1940-1941 was launched, as its leader repeatedly emphasized, not to cause embarrassment to any one, but as a mark of moral protest against the imperialist policy of the British Government which has dragged India into war efforts without making due to her legitimate aspiration. From this point of view it was a fairly successful national experiment, which conducted itself with discipline and dignity".

During the war, the British prime minister sent a delegation under Stafford Cripps for the resolution of the political deadlock in India. After hectic activities and prolonged discussion with Indian leaders, he announced his proposals in the form of a Draft Resolution which declared dominion status with the power to secede from the British Commonwealth. It also implicitly suggested a partition of India in the long run in case of the new constitution was found unacceptable.

68. The Assam Tribune, Gauhati, April 4, 1941.
by any province or proviences. The Cripps proposal yielded no satisfactory result as both the Congress and the Muslim league dismissed the offer as "empty of any substance of independence". The collapse of this negotiation only soured mutual trust and the chasm and the difference of opinion widened further when the British Government mischievously designed to tarnish the Congress image in the outside world by deliberately misquoting and distorting facts on the Indian situation and national leaders. Gandhiji was totally disillusioned and indignant at this sudden volte-face of the imperialist Government. In such a situation Gandhiji was searching for a remedy. The solution was finally downed upon him on a Monday of silence and in a letter he communicated to Horrace Alexander and contemplated an all out campaign to compel British withdrawl from India. Gandhiji, though sceptic about the consequences, asserted that the real safety of India and that of Britain lied in orderly and timely British withdrawl from India. Most of the Congress leaders, in spite of their initial doubt, agreed to Gandhiji's assessment of the situation and his plan of campaign.

On July 14, 1942, the CWC adopted a resolution demanding immediate end of the British rule in India. This became famous as the 'Quit India' resolution. The British Government viewed any such
idea and plan of campaign as rebellion. Churchill angrily refused to make any compromise and took a grim view of the 'Quit India' resolution. There after at Wardha, Gandhiji's resolution was finally adopted, and the AICC, after a prolonged discussion passed a resolution deciding to launch a mass struggle on non-violent lines on the widest possible scale.

The news that Congress would launch a non-violent mass movement sent a wave of excitement throughout the country. All the leftist in the Congress like Congress Socialist party, Forward Bloc, CPI welcomed the congress decision. The movement initially started with typical Gandhian method of protest like hartal, procession, the hoisting of national flag in Government buildings, etc. But as the movement progressed, the movement took the form of a violent out break revealing the militant mood of the people. In Surma-Barak valley, strikes and hartals were observed and the Congress volunteers formed a war council to launch a wide spread Satyagraha. As in the whole country, so also in Barak valley, non-payment of tax and revenue, anti-war propaganda, general defiance of law, boycott, picketing, hunger strike were cited as probable items of action. With the gradual progress of the movement, the whole valley was electrified with the spirit of defiance of the government order and the government
machineries were successfully paralysed. In sylhet, a group of women Satyagrahis under the leadership of Saralabala Deb picketed the Syhlet court and forcefully occupied the Judge's chair. When she was requested by the Superintendent of Police to leave the chair, he was manhandled by Congress volunteers. At Badurpur and Lala, congress volunteers attacked the police station. Besides, there were determined attempt at many places to disrupt road and rail communication. In Syhlet, the Surma Valley Mail was derailed. The main intention behind this derailment was not to cause any harm to the civilian population but to hamper military movement.

The student did their best and played a vigorous role in this movement. In fact, with the arrest of all the senior leaders of the valley, it was the students who hold the rein by organising strikes, hartals, picketing, and processions. In Hailakandi, Monmohan Nath Choudhury, Dipak Kumar Nath, Binoy Bhusan Choudhury, Ajit Dhar took active part in running the students' organisation. Situated in the eastern frontier, Cachar was supposed to be an immediate

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71. Congress Reaction (P), File no 7 of 18/8/42, AA. Guwahati.
casuality of Japanese attack. The fall of Rangoon in March 1942 was followed by a large scale influx of the Burmese refugees in different parts of Cachar. In Hailakandi, Saday Givinda Das Purkayastha, Sachindra Roy and many other student activists extended their helping hands to repatriate the refugees in different parts of the Barak valley. In Silchar, Matilal Jaigidar and Tarapada Bhattacharjee were asked by the Government to leave under the Defence of India Rules (DIR). In Karimganj, Rabindranath Aditya, Chunilal Dutta, Ohibhusan Das, Ranjit Roy, Ajoy Bhattacharjee, Nanigopal Swami, Sushil Kumar Aditya and many others were arrested for giving anti-war slogan.\(^{72}\)

While it is true that Muslim mass participation in the Quit India movement was not high, it would be unjust to put all the Muslims of the valley on the same footing. The local Jamiat-Ul-Ulma who had some followers in the valley offered cooperation to the Congress workers in Syhlet and Cachar. It is interesting to note here that the number of person convicted during the Quit India movement were 392 of whom 76 were Jamiat-Ul-Ulma’s volunteers.\(^{73}\) During that time Saaddulla ministry was functioning and Muslim League, a

\(^{72}\) N.K.Gupta, \textit{op.cit,} p.83.
\(^{73}\) S.Chowdhury, \textit{Barak Upatyakar Sataborsher Rajniti, Samayik Prasanga,} (a Bengali daily), Silchar, Oct. 5, 2000.
collaborator of the government already emerged as a dominant political force. Obviously, amidst all odds, these numbers bear enough testimony that all Muslims of the Valley were not kept themselves aloof from the August movement and they were not leaguers. Though the movement may not have aroused much support from the majority of Muslim masses, it did not arouse their hostility either.

In Syhlet and Cachar, all the District Congress committees were almost dominated and led by the CPI leaders and activists. The years following the 1930's, the youth folk of the Congress belonged to revolutionary terrorist groups. Most of them were the members of Tarun Shagha and later they were swayed by communal ideology. Because of their sincerity, all the key organisational offices of the Congress were held by the leftist. During 42's struggle, Biresh Misra and Achinta Bhattacharjee led the Congress committees of Syhlet and Cachar respectively. When INC first accepted the idea of struggle in 14th July 1942, a good number of communists within the Congress, vehemently opposed the Congress decision. The communists succeeded to have the plan of their rejection of the Quit India Resolution endorsed in the DCC and their proposal was sent to CWC.  

From this it could be easily gauged the extent of influence the communist exerted over the Congressss organisation during that period. Despite their differences, the powerful attraction of the Quit India Movement and its elemental quality is also demonstrated by the fact that hundreds of communist of the valley participated in the movement despite the official position taken by the Communist Party. Though they sympathised with the strong anti fascist sentiments of their leaders, yet they felt the irrestible pull of the movement, and for sometime, joined in it along with the rest of the Indian people. Thus, it could be seen that when the communist withdrew their support, the movement had no impact in the valley.

Browendra Narayan Choudhury in his book Smriti and Pratiti (Bengali) mentioned that Quit India movement failed to leave any lasting impact in the valley because of the apathetic attitude of the central leadership and there was no clear-cut directives regarding this. As a result, the leaders failed to create that favourable atmosphere in which people of different shades could be accommodated. This allegation might be partially true but there were other factors too which were responsible for the lukewarm response of the valley towards the movement.

Though the movement was carried on in the name of typical
Gandhian method of protest, many of the leaders with leftist leaning rejected non-violent creed, and masses in many places of the valley came under their influence and direction. The absence of any clear line of policy led to a period of frustration and confusion in the ensuing years alongside the political deadlock. Those who assumed the leadership in the valley were divided in their views. In the light of national situation, Myron Weiner in his book, Party Politics in India vividly explained the situation. When the Quit India movement was launched opines Weiner,

"its leadership soon fell largely into the hands of the Socialists partly because the top Congress leadership had been incarcerated by the British and partly because the Congressmen who had taken part in the Civil Disobedience Movements of the '20s and '30s were now too old for active participation in a militant movement. Furthermore, while the Congress leadership reluctantly approved of the Civil disobedience programme after the failure of negotiations with the British, the Socialists and the non-communists left enthusiastically welcomed it. They, therefore, psychologically prepared to lead the struggle and thereby attracted younger militant elements from school and colleges throughout the country .... with the disruption of the Congress organisation and arrest of the Congress leadership during the war, the Socialist dominated underground activities paralleled not only the British authority but also the Congress organisation. This meant first of all
that the younger newcomers had rejected the efficacy of Gandhism and non-violence and secondly, that the Socialists had developed confidence in their own ability to win mass support. Thus, with the close of the war, when Indian leaders of all shades returned to public life, divergent groups within the Congress found themselves at loggerheads. The issue now was the manner in which the freedom was to be carried on." 75

The surma-Barak valley followed the same line. When most of the rightists engaged themselves in electoral politics, the leftist group moved away from the August Revolution in order to veer round the international policy line. As a result of this the infrastructure of the Congress organisation in the Valleys collapsed. In Sylhet, Abalakanta Gupta and Saralabala Deb undertook all efforts to strengthen the movement, but in Cachar, Arun Kumar Chanda was arrested at the outset and the leaderless organisation of Cachar grew weak and was not in a position to mobilise the people in the right direction. Secondly, the resignation of Subhash Chandra Bose from the Congress shook the faith of his followers and as a mark of protest

they kept themselves adrift from the Congress led movement. The senior most and ablest leaders of Barak valley were Brojendra Narayan Choudhury and Basanta Kumar Das. In 1936, Choudhury was elected to the Central Legislature without contest. Bholabhai Desai was the leader of the Congress Legislative Party with whom Choudhury had differences of opinion. This difference had reached such a climax that Choudhury had to resign from the legislature and kept himself away from the subsequent programme of action chalked out by INC. In reality, he was an ardent follower of Netaji and the resignation of Bose from the party might be the real reason behind his resignation, Basanta Kumar Das was the speaker of the Assam Legislative Assembly. He was instructed by the High Command to hold the post till further order. Hence, he was not in a position to lead any movement in his valley. As a result, the August revolution in the Surma-Barak valley was devoid of the able leadership of B.N.Choudhury, Basanta Kumar Das and Arun Kumar Chanda. The masses were confused, leaders were helpless. While pursuing national politics, they sacrificed and sometimes ignored many genuine and burning issues of the region and thereby made the valley suffer in the long run. Taking the advantage of the situation, at the
operational plane there emerged the most disruptive phenomenon which neither the leader nor the people could foresee. The details of the incidents would be discussed in the next chapter.