CHAPTER IV
INTERACTION WITH NATIONALISM : FROM BANGA-BHANGA TO NON CO-OPERATION MOVEMENT

The birth of Indian National Congress was an unprecedented event in the political history of India. Since its inception, political consciousness began to gain a concrete ground in the country. The ideal of Congress produced different reactions in different parts of the country. Surma - Barak Valley also did not remain aloof from the mainstream of this new awakening. Some distinguished personalities of the Surma Barak Valley maintained close contact with the leaders of Indian national Congress since its very inception. The Valley was fortunate to have leaders like Bipin Chandra Pal and Kamini Kumar Chanda who were counted as front-ranking personalities of the Congress and they along with others participated in the annual sessions of the Congress regularly. The leaders of the valley discovered in Indian national Congress a meeting point between regional demand vis a vis national issues. However, inspite of this participation, the formal branch of the Congress was established in Surma-Barak Valley in a later date only. The ground for the birth of Congress as a full fledged organisation was prepared by the four political conferences held between 1906-1920 under the banner of Surma Valley Political Conference.
The political activities in the real sense, in Surma-Barak Valley had begun during the Swadeshi Movement and the apostles of this new dawn were Bipin Chandra Pal and Kamini Kumar Chandra. Their close association with national leaders and their participation in the annual sessions of the Congress held in different places of the country created a national outlook amongst them and through them the name of Congress and the creed of nationalism had reached to every heart and home of the valley. These two leaders along with others were the real spirit for the germination of national outlook in the Surma-Barak Valley.

With the beginning of 20th century, political consciousness in the country specially in Bengal had reached a stage which could no longer be tolerated by an imperialist like Curzon. So, he planned to play his trump card to break the nationalist solidarity in Bengal. Curzon, thus, proceeded to give effect to his plan partition which not only weakened the influence of Bengal on the national movement but also helped in exploiting the separatist feelings of the Muslims. In October, 1905 the province of Assam was reconstituted as the province of Eastern Bengal and Assam. Dacca, Chittagong, Rajshahi divisions were incorporated in it. The Eastern Bengal and Assam was a political creation that was deliberately designed to create
a Muslim majority area. In creating this Muslim majority area Curzon, according to Tripati, "was more actuated by devious political motives than by mere administrative expediency".¹

The partition of Bengal unleashed a popular movement unprecedented in spontaneity and far reaching in consequence. The partition came as a rude shock and eye opener to patriotic Bengalese or indeed Indians. It exposed the limitations of the policy of prayer and petition on which Bipin Chandra Pal wrote, "if anything could prove the utter futility of our so-called method of constitutional political agitation, the history of the agitation against the proposal of partition Bengal has done it".²

The declaration of 'Curzon plan' immediately created a stir in Surma-Barak Valley. The people of Cachar and Karimganj, because of their distinct socio-cultural and political oneness, never felt the existence of separate political identity. Thus, it was quite natural that when the Swadeshi and boycott movement started in Bengal in

protest against the partition of Bengal, the leaders of Surma-Barak Valley found in it a meeting point to crystallize their long cherished regional aspiration as well as the national cause. Both Cachar and Karimganj were the joint partners to the political programme chalked out during the anti-Partition agitation under the leadership of Kamini Kumar Chandra, Bipin Chandra Pal, Sarada Charan Shyam, Romoni Mohan Das, Satish Chandra Dutta, Shrish Chandra Dutta and many others. In 1906, when the whole country was convulged by anti-partition feeling, 'Shrihatta Swadeshi Sebak Samiti' under the presidentship of Kamini Kumar Chandra were formed to mobilise people towards anti-partition agitation and inculcate amongst them the spirit of Swadeshi and Swaraj. Abantinath Dutta, Mohendra Chandra Dutta, Ramtak Chakraborty, Radharaman Dutta, Kalimohan Deb, Nur Mohammad Laskar, Khusiram Namasudra were the executive members of the 'Cachar Swadeshi Sabha' which shouldered the responsibility of spearheading the movement in Cacher. Responding to the call of Swadeshi and Boycott, protest meetings were held at Silchar, Karimganj and Badarpur and the date of partition was observed along with Bengal as the 'Rakhi Bandhan Day'.

observance signified the indissoluble brotherhood between East Bengal and West Bengal, between the rich and the poor, between Mohammedans and Hindus.

From the very beginning the leaders of the anti-partition movement were anxious to secure the co-operation of all classes of people and evidently the anti-partition agitation turned into a popular movement based on Swadeshi and Boycott. One noticeable feature of the Boycott Movement in Barak Vally was the spontaneous response of the Muslim community. A considerable section of the Muslim community led by Noor Mohammed Laskar pledged their support to the Swadeshi ideas. At Badarpur, people belonging to both Hindu and Muslim community jointly observed Rakhi Bandhan and fasted for the whole day. Bipin Chandra Pal’s fierce speeches during his tour in the valley also inspired the people of both the communities to come under one umbrella. In his autobiography, "Memoirs of My Life and Times", B.C. Pal wrote that, under the Hindu and the Mohammedan rulers of India there was no exploitation. Whatever was spent by them remained in the country. Under the rule of the Feringhis (foreign ruler) every year twenty five crores of rupees had been taken away across the seas resulting in famine, scarcity and appalling poverty of the masses in India. It was impossible to check this exploitation, until and unless swaraj was established. He did
not advocate a war with the Feringhis, but they must be driven to a
corner and compelled to give the Indians what they wanted and this
could only be effected by a boycott not alone of foreign cloth but of
everything foreign. In response to the clarion call of Bipin Chandra
Pal, the Muslim community along with their Hindu brethren plunged
spontaneously at the boycott movement. What was most significant
was that several Hindu and Muslim zamindars through their agents
called upon their tenants to give up the sale and purchase of foreign
goods. As a result the demand for local goods was on the increase.
The new spirit engendered in the young mind a sense of hatred
towards British. It was the students community whose tender mind
was flared up by national spirit and they formed the bulk of the
audience at the anti-patition meeting and paraded the streets of
moffosil towns of the valley shouting Bande Mataram. At Sylhet, the
nerve centre of Boycott Movement, student came out from their
government aided educational institutions and pledged their support
in favour of Boycott Movement in utter defiance of the government
directives. To cater the need of such students, the national school
was established at Sylhet. Shrish Chandra Dutta of Karimganj and

Bhuban Mohan Vidhyaratna of Silchar served the school as teachers.\(^5\)

The society of Surma-Barak valley was conservative so far the participation of woman in socio-political activities was concerned. But their supportive role behind the curtain helped the agitators in many ways. During Bipin Pal’s visit at Silchar, a section of woman expressed their desire to attend the meeting. Accordingly, an arrangement was made at the house of Mahesh Chandra Dutta where the women from behind the curtain listened to his address. This was perhaps the first meeting attended by women in Cachar and this undoubtedly opened a new chapter in the history of women’s participation in national struggle for freedom in India.\(^6\)

When the anti-partition agitation had reached its climax in the Surma-Barak Valley, some front ranking leaders of the valley took the initiative in the formation of regional organisation like Surma Valley Association for socio-economic and political development of the region along side their commitment to the national struggle for freedom. In fact, this regional organisation prepared the ground for national consciousness and political regeneration and carried the programme of Swadeshi and boycott in an organised way to the

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6. J.B.Bhattacharjee, Cachar Under British Rule in North-East India, op.cit., p 257
grassroots in Surma-Barak Valley. The initiative for the formation of the Surma Valley Association was taken by Srihatta Swadeshi Sebak Samiti for promoting Swadeshi and Swaraj. It was an organisation comprising the men from diverse fields and it heralded an era of reawakening. Accordingly, the first Surma Valley political conference was organised in Telihawr on 11-12 August, 1906. Kamini Kumar Chanda presided over the conference, while Bipin Chandra Pal among others addressed the conference. The conference resolved to form the Surma Valley Association as a common forum to promote Swadeshi and to press for the withdrawal of the partition of Bengal. It extended wholehearted support to the Swadeshi Movement and gave prime emphasis in organising national life of the valley. To facilitate the formation of this broad-based organisation, the Srihatta Swadeshi Sebak Samiti and the Cachar Swadeshi Sobha merged themselves with the conference. Besides the leaders of Surma Barak Valley, many leaders from Calcutta attended the session. The tremendous success of the conference provided the nationalist leaders of the Barak Valley with a political forum in the early decades of the present century and it facilitated the entry of the people of the

valley in an organised way into the field of national work. The activities emphasised by the conference was the appointment of preachers for the spread of Swadeshi throughout the valley, establishment of co-operative stores for the sale of indigenous goods and the establishment of national school. For these purposes a number of committees were constituted.

Immediately after the conference, Bipin Chandra Pal addressed public meetings at Karimganj, Silchar, Badarpur and many other places and the impact was spontaneous. The people boycotted foreign goods and resorted to indigenous goods. The bonfires of British goods were organised in many places. Bipin Chandra Pal's activities posed a serious threat to the British Raj and he was sentenced to six months imprisonment in October, 1970. His absence created a serious political crisis and slackened the activities of the association and almost all local sub-committees were lacking their enthusiasm to hold the second conference. However, on March 9, 1908, Pal was released from jail and immediately he urged upon the people of the Surma-Barak Valley to organise the conference. He argued 'as the political atmosphere of the valley was surcharged with the spirit of

9. J.B.Bhattacharjee, Cachar Under British Rule in North-East India, op.cit, 257
nationalism, there would be no doubt of the utility of the Conference'.

One of the saddest episode of that period was the split in the nationalist ranks at the Surat session of 1907 due to the ideological differences between two groups - moderates and extremists. There was an unprecedented excitement and the proceedings of the session were marked by riotous disturbance. The cleavage between the elements of moderation and the forces of extremism were evident.

The leaders of the Surma-Barak Valley were generally aligned to the radical section of the nationalists because of their active association with Bipin Pal, the harbinger of radical nationalism. But Kamini Kumar Chanda maintained cordial relation with both radicals and moderates and at times succeeded in bringing the two most important groups of Indian politics of that period together.

The second Surma Valley political Conference held at Karimganj on 18-20 April, 1908 outlined the objectives of the Surma Valley Association and its role in the national movement in more definite terms. In his presidential address, Radhabinode Das deplored the Congress split and called upon the Association to create a team of dedicated workers who would move about the villages to preach the gospel of Swaraj, Swadeshi and boycott for the political emancipation

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12. J.B.Bhattacharjee, Cachar Under British Rule in North-East India, op.cit., p 260
of India. The conference declared that the attainment of Swaraj was the political goal of the Surma Valley Association. Averting to Hindu-Muslims problems, he exposed "the despicable dodge resorted to by the Government to alienate the sympathy of the Mohammedan from the Swadeshi Movement by gilded baits of state patronage, but added that truth would ultimately triumph and our Mohammedan brethren would soon shake off this hypnotic spell see through will-of-whisp policy of the government". The third conference was held at Jalsuka (Habiganj) where the spirit of the second conference was echoed but one difference to be noted was that the Association became the stronghold of the radicals as was evident from the fact that Aurobinda Ghosh, a staunch revolutionary, graced the occasion as the chief guest. But at no stage the Association deviated from its main theme-the attainment of Swaraj. It is to be noted in this connection that though the policy and programme of the Association contained the elements of extremism, it did not contribute to terrorism.

The Swadeshi and boycott movement had now become a redoubtable force and extended its influence all over the country. In the midst of mounting government repression and terror, it continued

13. Archana Chakroborty, Surma Valley Political Conferences, _op. cit_ P.151
14. _Ibid._ P, 152
unabated. The people inspired by the nationalist feeling braved arrest and assaults, lathi-charges and flogging. A virtual reign of terror prevailed all over Bengal. Many Nationalist leaders were tried and imprisoned under the regulation III of 1818. Indiscriminate and merciless police attack on the agitators profoundly shocked the people and it precipitated the explosion of revolutionary tendencies all over India, particularly in Bengal. This different political trend operating in Bengal had been able to find followers in Sylhet and Cachar. Jugantar and Anushilan Samiti had attracted many young men from Cachar and Sylhet. The prominent revolutionaries of the valley like Shrish Chandra Dutta, Basanta Das Purkayastha, Debendranath Choudhury, Jnaedra Chandra Dhar, Romoni Mohan Roy, Upendra Roy, Monoranjan Sinha, Mohini Brahma had formed 'Surid Samiti' Upendra Dhar, Tarakishore Bardhan, Kaliraman Bhattacharjee ran the 'Tarun Sangha'. The most important institution that grew in the valley was the 'Arunachal Ashram' near Silchar which was suspected by the Government as being linked with the Jugantar group of Bengal. Dayananda, the founder of the Ashram, was suspected by the Government as being a revolutionary and a preacher of Swadeshi

in guise of a sanyasi His Ashram was raided by the police. He challenged the district authority for official interference in matters of religion. Dayananda was convicted and his disciple Mohendranath De was fatally injured in an encounter and he died. This brutal incident created a great excitement throughout the valley as well as in Bengal. 'The Sylhet Chronicle' and 'Ananda Bazaar patrika' wrote a series of articles protesting against the police atrocities that resulted the death of Mohendranath De. Through Dayananda and his associates were not involved in any direct political activities, their action remained to be an inspiration for subsequent nationalist activities of the valley.

The political movement in the valley suffered a set back after 1910 due to the estrangement of the two major communities of the valley The Hindus and the Muslims. At the initial stage of the agitation, the Muslims, like their counterparts in different parts of India, made common cause with their Hindu brethren and joined the movement. Though the Swadeshi movement succeeded in drawing a large number of Muslims within its fold, yet the Muslim masses in general remained unresponsive or indifferent to the main currents of Indian Nationalism. The degree of spontaneity which the leaders of the

boycott movement hitherto received from the Mohammedans gradually started waning mainly because of the apprehensions that the Indian Nationalism had a distinct Hindu element. The observance of Hindu religious rites by the anti-partition leaders further estranged the Mohammedans from such an agitation. The apathy towards the agitation and subsequent withdrawal from the movement was further fanned by the British Government's policy of communal vulnerability. Curzon was candid enough, albeit confidentially, admitted that one of the driving motives of his plan was to cause division among the people and gain support and loyalty of the Muslims.\textsuperscript{19} Initially, the separation of Sylhet from the mother province (Bengal) generated discontentment amongst a section of the Muslim leaders. The prominent Muslim leaders of the Surma-Barak Valley, through their incessant request, pressurised the leaders of the Eastern Bengal Mohammedan Association to support their cause. The Surma Valley Muslims were aware of their majority status in Bengal and they felt that they would be unjustly placed in a disadvantageous position if they were forced to continue under the Assam administration where unlike Bengal, they would always be in a numerical minority. In a

public Meeting held under the presidency of Abdul Mazid, the president of Anjuman-E-Islamia at Sylhet on 15th April 1912 an immediate transfer of Sylhet to Bengal was demanded.20

This attitude underwent a radical change. The prospect of Muslims outnumbering Bengali Hindus in the new province had great political appeal to the Muslims. A large section of the Muslims landlords and the middle class were allured by the political and economic benefits in Eastern Bengal and Assam. Being swallowed by this promises, the provincial Mohammedan Association of East Bengal and Assam organised a pro-partition meeting at Dacca and surprisingly, Anjuman-E-Islamia of Silchar which initially fought for reunion with Bengal suddenly changed its position and sent delegates to attend the meeting and declared along with their parent body to remain with Assam.21 Even the Mahishya Community of the Surma-Barak Valley, like the Muslims, expressed support and deep loyalty to the government and their leaders openly pronounced their intense hatred against seditious movements, and it was claimed that they were always on the side of law, order, progress and humanity. The

20. M.Kar, op.cit, p.113.
demand for reunion with Bengal received a set back when on January, 1912, one Kalikamal Pandit Kabyabinode sent a telegram to the Chief Commissioner from Badarpur informing him that Sylhet People's desire for re-union with Bengal was engineered by persons guided by whims and sentimentalism and that many signatures in the memorials were given reluctantly. Similarly, another petition protesting against the demand for the transfer of Sylhet to Bengal signed by fifty four persons was submitted to the Commissioner, Surma Valley and Hill Division, Silchar. A meeting of Surma Valley branch of Indian Tea Association held on January 22, 1912 also opposed the move and claimed that the severance of Sylhet and Cachar from Assam would be disastrous of the highest degree to both the districts. In the midst of all this claims and counter claims of the inhabitants of Surma Barak Valley, partition was annulled and Assam including Sylhet and Cachar was reverted to its old status Chief Commissioners province in April, 1912. The valley once again convulsed by an unparallel agitation for the re-union. On the other hand, this restoration of the separate status was a welcome relief to the people of Brahmaputra Valley. The local press welcomed this new

arrangement with jubilation. In Surma Valley particularly the people of Sylhet had considered that a deep injury and a deep wound had been inflicted on the Bengalee speaking population by tagging them to Assam having no affinity whatsoever - geographical, ethnological and linguistic. Thus, in 1912, when the whole of Bengal rejoiced in being united into a homogenous governorship, the surma-Barak Valley, lone Bengali speaking areas, mourned over their separation from Bengal and protested against being thrown to the reconstituted Chief Commissionership of Assam with which they had failed to develop any commonality of interest during the past thirty years union.

The new political arrangement had thrown Surma-Barak Valley in disadvantageous position. Surma Valley represented advanced portion of the population with better representation in the field of commerce and profession. The valley also represented the major chunk of the Bengali linguistic and cultural elements of the British evolved political society in Assam. The inclusion of Surma-Barak Valley in Assam, inevitably brought into prominence the politics of valley rivalry based on language and developmental issues. The rivalry between the two valleys became so acute that it transcended communal and caste politics and the line of division in Assam politics.

23. Reports on Correspondence Resolutions regarding the Sylhet People's desire to remain in Assam File no. 22, 1946-47, NMML, New Delhi, Political Diary, H. P. A., File no. 297, AA, Guwahati
turned primarily not between Hindu and Mohammedans but between the inhabitants of both the valleys to build up necessary infrastructural facilities for the development of the respective valley's society and to cultivate and protect their particular valley interest. This difference of attitude actually obstructed and hampered the formulation of a general policy for development of the province as a whole.

The period that followed the annulment once again witnessed the re-emergence of Sylhet-Bengal Reunion Movement, the main plank of regionalism in the valley. In 1917, Sylhet peoples Association submitted a memorandum to the viceroy. It received further boost up with the formation of Sylhet-Bengal Reunion League in 1920. The League was formed at the initiative of Girish Chandra Nag. Promod Chandra Dutta, Brojendra Narayan Chowdhury, Sukhomoy Chowdhury, Satish Dutta, Abdul Mazid and many others. The League held a Conference under the presidentship of Jaynarayan Shome and highlighted the demand for re-union. Under the pressure of this organised move, the chief Commissioner of Assam with the approval of viceroy, assured the members of the League that there

would not be any change in the existing land system and the districts would be under the jurisdiction of Bengal High Court and Calcutta University. The activities of the League, however, receded to the background due to the progress of non-cooperation and Khilafat Movement and the League ultimately became a defunct body.

From the discussion made above, it appears that the impact of anti-partition movement in Surma-Barak Valley evoked mixed responses. The region had always been under the influence of Bengal throughout the colonial period. So, it was quite natural that the different political trends operating in Bengal had always been able to find followers in the valley. There was sufficient evidence of the wholehearted response of the valley in the wake of Curzon’s historic announcement of the partition of Bengal in 1905 and bogey of protests were heard from different corners of the Valley. The people took it as a challenge to their spirit of nationalism and a strong protest flared up which assumed national character. The urban and semi-urban class came under the direct influence of nationalism. Also, active politics in true sense of the term had its initial positive beginning in the wake of anti-partition Movement. In the rural areas as well, the incipient Hindu middle class fell under the influence of this new kind of nationalism. It was for the first time that the region showed a new kind of awareness to a problem that was not directly linked up with their social and economic aspiration at the local level. So, R. C.
Muzumder observes "it was the Swadeshi Movement which brought nationalism from the realm of theory and sentiments into the field of practical politics which leavened the life of India as a whole." So, the response to the movement may be regarded as a first step towards the synthesis of local level politics with national issue. At the same time we should not ignore the fact that dissident voices were there that manifested a cleavage in the social set-up. Finally, in a colonial polity, Hindus and Muslims emerged as unit of mobilisation. The linguistic patriotism of the two communities was reflected in their agitation for the re-union. But colonial manipulation and the tempting prospects of politico-economic advantage in the new province decimated the linguistic patriotism. Under these circumstance communal interests rose above the linguist affinities. Sumit Sarkar has attributed this failure to the socio-economic "structural limitations" of the movement and its inherited "cultural tradition".

The year 1919 was an eventful year in the political history of India. The Rowlatt Act, the Jallianwala Bagh massacre and Martial law in Punjab had belied all the generous wartime promises of the British. The Indian Muslims were incessed when they discovered that their loyalty had been purchased during the war by assurances of generous treatment to Turkey. After the war, the British Government had no intention of fulfilling the promise. Gandhiji, the then emerging political leader of India had all along been sympathetic to the Khilafat issue and suggested the Khilafat leaders that they adopt a programme of non-cooperation. In a convention held in 1920, at Allahabad the Khilafat Committee unanimously accepted the suggestion of non-cooperation and asked Gandhiji to lead the movement. In a special session held at Calcutta in September 1920, the Indian National Congress endorsed the famous resolution of non-cooperation recommending the renunciation of Government titles, boycotting of legislatures, law court and Government educational institutions.\textsuperscript{28}

\textsuperscript{28} R.C.Mazumdar, \textit{op.cit.} P 977
The co-operation and Khilafat Movement evoked a hearty response throughout the country and there was an unprecedented fraternisation between the Hindus and the Muslims. In Barak valley, movement was acclaimed with high enthusiasm. Inspired by Gandhiji's Satyagraha Campaign and to tag the valley once again with the mainstream of Indian Politics, the 'Surma Valley Association' summoned its fourth Session in July 1920 with Bipin Chandra Pal in the chair. Dr. Sundari Mohan Das, Moulana Saukat Ali, Haradayal Nag and Shrish Chandra Dutta took part in the deliberations. Their speeches on Satyagraha and Khilafat evoked a hearty response throughout the valley.29

Within two months, the Association called on its next session under the presidency of Abdul Karim, the retired School Inspector of Bengal. The conference declared that non-violent non-cooperation was the only constitutional means left to the Congress to work for the attainment of Swaraj. The conference also passed a resolution which directed against the British planters and merchants. As a first step towards complete non-violent non-operation with British planters

and merchants, the conference urged upon the people of the valley to adopt the following programme:\(^{30}\)

(i) Refusal to serve under the British planters and merchants,

(ii) Gradual withdrawal of those who are already in such services,

(iii) Non-acceptance of briefs by lawyers from aforesaid non-official Europeans,

(iv) Refusal on part of the people of this valley to grant or renew leases of land to them,

(v) Immediate withdrawal from any kind of association with them and abstention from all gatherings in which they are invited.

To organise and educate Indian labouring classes, the conference decided to start trade unions. It also demanded the immediate repeal of all legislation dealing with labour which initiated against the elementary freedom of man in regard to the disposal of his labour.

The conference, therefore, adopted the programme of non-cooperation recommending renunciation of Government titles, boycott of court by lawyers and litigants, establishment of private arbitration courts for settlement of private disputes, withdrawal of children from Government educational institutions, and organised boycott of the

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sale of all foreign goods, an active promotion of hand-spun and other swadeshi goods and boycott of the forthcoming elections to the reformed Councils and people were asked to maintain Hindu-Muslim unity.

It is interesting to note from this particular instance that the Surma Valley Political Conference seemed to have drawn up a programme of non-cooperation not only against the Government institutions but also against the non-Governmental establishment that existed throughout the valley.

The non-cooperation and Khilafat resolution adopted in the conference as per the directions of the Indian National Congress had its immediate impact in the valley. Both Hindu and Muslim leaders worked hand in hand to tighten the bond of unity for the cause of the nation. In Surma Valley, the movement was acclaimed with enthusiasm. It was perhaps the first political movement where the masses rose above their class, caste and community interests and assembled in common platform to declare before the world the principle of unity in political action. The entire country resounded to the cry of 'Hindu Muslim Ki Jai'. Though the Khilafat was a religious issue, it represented the national, anti-imperialist consciousness of the Muslim masses and of the middle class. To popularise the Khilafat movement, Maulana Abdul Mushabir, Maulana Abdul Haque,
Maulana Safiqul Haque and Maulana Abdul Rashid of Sylhet undertook extensive tour in Cachar and formed 'Cachar Khilafat Committee' with Maulana Pir Mohammed Ali of Madhurbond and a permanent office was established at Silchar. Maulana Pir Mohammed Yakub, Rashid Ali Laskar, Matashin Ali, Umar Ali, Ibrahim Ali Laskar, Maulana Taikur Ali Barlaskar, Umed Ali, Ibrahim Ali, Uchman Ali were among the prominent Khilafat leaders in Cachar. The movement was memorable for the unique Hindu-Muslim fraternity throughout the valley. Mahim Chandra Biswas, Dr. Nagendra Nath Dutta, Satindra Mohan Deb of Cachar and Satish Chandra Deb, Khirode Chandra Deb, Abdul Hamid, Md. Yusuf, Abdul Matin Choudhury, Sibendra Chandra Biswas, and Sashi Bhusan Nag of Karimganj were amongst many others who were at the vanguard of the movement and suffered all the vengeance of the British Government. Many members of the Silchar and Karimganj Bar left their legal practice and others renuciated their Government titles. Kamini Kumar Chanda refused to accept the title conferred by the Government.  

To make the movement successful, Bipin Chandra Pal, the president of Fourth 'Surma Valley Political Conference' held in Karimganj in 1920, delivered a fiery speech and gave the signal for a

stronger movement and called upon the people for their active cooperation. Many leaders devoted their whole time for the organisation of the movement. The students from various educational institutions in the valley snapped their academic career by boycotting Government aided institutions. The students branded their respective educational institutions as "Golam Khana" and boycotted the school. To cater the needs of these students, a national school was established at Silchar and Arun Kumar Chanda served it as a teacher. Similar institution was established in Karimganj and Shyama Charan Deb was its head master. Many Muslim students also left the government aided school and joined Madrasa. During non-cooperation movement Dinanth-Nabokishore Balika Bidyalaya, better known as the Swadeshi High School for girls was started to impart education among girls. The students in response to the call given by All India Student Conference held in Nagpur in December 1920 launched a vigorous campaign. Not only did they boycott their educational institutions but also picketed before the opium and liquor shops and foreign goods shops and carried on propaganda in favour of

32. Ibid
Swadeshi and boycott. There were open bonfire of clothes. Khaddar made its first appearance during non-cooperation movement. Satindra Mohan deb along with Lakshmi Bakshi and Haran Bagchi used to sell Khaddar from door to door.\(^{34}\)

Thus, the propagation of Khadi Cult became the most popular item of constructive programme for Congress volunteers of the valley. The youth in the valley were more attracted by Gandhiji's constructive programme, which they found quite meaningful and full of purpose. They seemed to believe that the country's deliverance actually lay with the success of this programme.

One of the greatest achievements of non-cooperation was that for the first time women came out of their zenana and participated spontaneously along with their man folk. The name of Shivsundari Devi and Saudamini Devi deserved special mention. They carried the banner of women awakening in the region. They shouldered the responsibility of collecting funds for the successful running of the movement along with their man folk.\(^{35}\) Hand spinning and boycott of foreign goods inspired the women to come out and join the movement.

The participation of women in the massive popular struggles from

\(^{34}\) Mohitosh Purkayastha, Tejoshbi Joronayak : Satindra Mohan Deb Arunoday (a Bengali daily), Silchar, 1982.

the twenties onwards opened up new vistas of possibilities that a sanctuary of social reform could not. The image of the women changed from a recipient of justice in the nineteenth century, to an ardent supporter of nationalist men in the early twenties, to a comrade by the thirties and forties. The women of the valley had participated in all phases of action and movements from Gandhian to socialist, from communist to revolutionary terrorists.

Meanwhile the Surma Valley Association was virtually loosing its identity as the whole organisation was captured by young Congress leader. Congress ideas seemed to be taking its deep roots in the Barak Valley. This became evident from the fact that in the fifth Surma Valley Political Conference, 'Surma Valley Association' for the first time expressed its willingness to work as a Congress organisation and passed a resolution having full confidence in Gandhiji's campaign of non-violent non-cooperation. So, on the basis of Nagpur Congress resolution of the linguistic reorganisation of the Congress, formal branch of Sylhet and Cachar District Congress Committees were formed. Kamini Kumar Chanda and Shyama Charan Deb became the President and Secretary of Cachar District Congress Committee respectively.\textsuperscript{36} Karimganj Sub-Divisional Congress

\textsuperscript{36} 'Congress O Cachar', published by \textbf{Silchar DCC} on the eve of centenary year of INC, Silchar, 1989.
Committee was formed in 1921 with Satish Chandra Deb, Hazi Matasin Ali Chowdhury and Romoni Mohan Roy as the President, Vice-President and the Secretary respectively. Separate Assam Provincial Congress Committee which hitherto was a part of Bengal Pradesh Congress Committee was formed with Six Brahmaputra Valley Districts under its jurisdiction leaving Sylhet and Cachar with Bengal Pradesh Congress Committee. Thus, though the Barak Valley remained with Assam administratively, Congress itself seemed to have created a congenial atmosphere and wiped out the pangs and sorrows inflicted upon it by making it a part of Assam since 1874.  

There might have been good reasons for tagging the valley with Bengal Pradesh Congress Committee in view of the linguistic and cultural affinity of the people of the Surma-Barak Valley with Bengal. The District Congress Committees soon emerged as an important political force and it was the constructive programmes which drew the full time attention and devotion of all the young Congress Volunteers of the whole valley.

To popularise the movement, the Congress volunteers

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organised meetings and demonstrations frequently. Panchayat, Kishan and Ryot Shabhas were organised under the banner of Congress and all these organisations witnessed typical protest and manifested their non-cooperation with the government. The crowded public meetings were addressed by the leaders almost everyday and attended by the people of both the major communities of the valley. Until 1921, Government put no restriction on peaceful activities of the Congress and Khilafat volunteers except that they were followed by police everywhere they went. Of course, the Government tried to counter Congress efforts by organising anti-cooperation league and counter propaganda.38

In Surma-Barak Valley, one of the main planks of the non-cooperation movement was the boycott of market places located in European tea estates and establishment of rival bazar and hats. Although there was nothing unlawful in this activity, Government issued prohibitory order in most cases. In 1921, there was a short-lived movement in Cachar to enlist tea garden labourer as Congress Volunteers.39 Their frequent contact with Khilafat-Congress Volunteers

39. Ibid, P.129.
at hats and bazaar encouraged them to come out in action in their own way against common enemy. It is to be noted here that the political situation of the country underwent a major change after the Great war in 1914. Emergence of Gandhiji as a guiding spirit of the Indian National Congress opened up a new chapter in the struggle for national emancipation. The launching of the non-cooperation movement along with Khilafat movement overnight brought the agitational politics at the thresholds of commoner's household. Naturally, these new development had its impact felt in tea-gardens as well. Also, the tea garden labourer as a class for a long time were the worst victim of racial discrimination and downright economic exploitation perpetrated by European planters. The accumulated grievances of the labourer had been crying for redress for a long time. But the mainstream national movement, in fact, was as yet, by and large, indifferent to the question of labour. One of the major reasons for the relatively lukewarm attitude of the early nationalists towards the question of labour was that at this time, when the anti-imperialist movement was in its very infancy, the nationalists did not wish to, in any way, weaken the common struggle against British rule by creating any division within the ranks of the Indian people. Later, with the national movement gaining its strength, efforts were made to organise labourer and secure for its better bargaining position
vis-a-vis the more powerful classes in the common anti-imperialist front.  

This urge to bring the down-trodden people in the mainstream of the national movement was manifested in September, 1920, when the Surma Valley Political Conference adopted a resolution urging upon the people to non-cooperate with European planters and merchants. The resolution depicted the political mood of the people. Moreover, there was sporadic effort in the tea-garden belt of Sylhet and Cachar to revolt and this finally culminated in the Chorgola Exodus, rightfully regarded as major event in the history of labour movement of the country.

In spite of the endeavour made by the European planters, the tea garden labourer could not be kept detached from the non-cooperation movement. Radha Krishna Pandey, a Congress volunteer from Silchar propagated amongst the labourer not only the cause of Swaraj but also organised them to protest against the low wages paid by the European planters. Gangadhyayal Dixit, a trade union leader along with two other colleagues, Deosharan Tripathi and

Ramprasad Chowdhury, undertook the task of organising the labourer and persuaded them to refuse to work in the gardens. Their preaching inspired them to demand for better wages. At this stage the Congress seemed to have adopted a strategy of mobilising the garden labourer on trade union line and also to enlist their support for the cause of national independence. It was the preaching of the Congress that inspired them to demand higher wages.

On May 1921, the demand for an enhanced daily wage was raised in a meeting held at Adampur in Dholai. Similar meeting was held at Ratabari in Chargola Valley and these meetings were attended by thousands of labourers. In Cachar, strike broke out and ultimately persisted through the whole year. The accumulated grievances of the labour led to a volatile situation when the labour of thirteen tea gardens belonging to Longai and Chargola Valley of Karimganj subdivision went on strike for the rejection of their demand of the daily wage of eight annas, six annas and four annas for man, women and child labour respectively. In Chargola Valley the strike soon took the form of a labour exodus. On May 3, men, women and children from

41. P. Sen Mazumder, Barak Upatyakar Sramik Andoloner Kromobikash, 'Weekly Barak' (special issue), 1394 B.S. P 49,
Anipur Tea Estate left the garden and later were joined by labour from other gardens of the vicinity. The Congress and Khilafat workers under the leadership of Shrish Chandra Dutta and Romoni Mohan Roy came forward to assist the labourer in their struggle. They also arranged to send regular despatch to Calcutta and publication of these reports in Calcutta papers gave the exodus the colour of a national exodus. Deshopriyo Jyotindra Mohan Sengupta from Chittagong and Akhil Dutta of Comilla, made a hurried trip to Karimganj to assess the situation. These leaders soon arranged for free passage of these labourers from Karimganj to Chandpur by train.42

The labourers who had managed to reach Chandpur were about four thousands. At Chandpur station they were refused accommodation by the railway authorities. The reason was perhaps, the nexus amongst the European authorities to protect the interest of the owners of tea industry. The comment of 'Modern Review' is most revealing in this regard, "when the interest of the foreign exploiters of India are affected and when in all probability they are

42. N.Gupta Chowdhury, Srihatta Pratibha, (Bengali) Chabuk Printing and Publishing House, Dhaka, 1368 (B).
themselves to blame, the views of the foreign bureaucracy generally coincide with those of exploiters." 43 The renowned periodical of the time was inspired to make this remark when Gurkha soldiers launched an unprovoked attack on the stranded labours at Chandpur causing grievous injuries to a number of children and women. This brutal atrocities created a tense situation in and around Chandpur. A public call for hartal was given and normal life was completely paralysed. The workers of Assam Bengal Railways and Steamer Company joined the protest movement and resorted to indefinite strike and entire area from Bengal to Assam seemed to be ablazed with outraged feeling. 44 A large number of Congress and Khilafat volunteers and activists arranged hortal, collected funds by singing song describing the deplorable condition of the labourer. Shrish Chandra Dutta, Satish Chandra Deb and Khirode Chandra Deb of Karimganj immediately reached the spot and arranged relief for destitute. Jyotindra Mohan Sengupta, C.R.Das and Saukat Ali and Mohammed Ali visited Chandpur and condemned this inhuman atrocities. 45 C.R.Das contributed lakhs of rupees from Congress

43. Ramananda Chatterjee(ed.), Modern Review, Calcutta 1921, P 816
45. P.C.Bamford, Histories of Khilafat and non-cooperation Movements, Govt. of India Press, New Delhi, 1985, pp 60-62.
provincial fund and Sengupta had to bear major expenses incurred in connection with the railways strikes. He borrowed a large amount to finance this strike. Later Hazi Saheb, a patriotic personality of Chittagong, voluntarily got squared the Sengupta's debt. This was an unique example of Hindu-Muslim unity, throughout the Surma-Barak Valley during non-cooperation movement.46

However, the official held divergent views regarding the labour unrest in Longai and Chorgola valley. P.C. Bemford, Deputy Director, Intelligence Bureau, Government of India, narrated the entire episode as propaganda employed in agitating the masses.47 Even the Bengal Government took a peculiar stand. It declared that it could not interfere in a dispute between capital and labour. At last, S.R. Das, a member of viceroy's council and Krishna Kumar Mitra, a moderate who was famous for his lifelong service to tea-garden labourers pressured the Government to arrange repatriation of these helpless deserters to their ancestral villages.48 Guha informs us that the rehabilitation of the returned labourers "was no problem since the wage rates found there were attractive than in Chorgola valley."49

46. B.N. Chowdhury op.cit., P 159
47. P.C. Balmford. op.cit., P 68. (Appendix vide )
49. A. Guha, Planter Raj to Swaraj Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826-1947, op.cit. PP 132-133
Chorgola exodus has been termed by Guha as "an economic struggle" which culminated into a mass political action in the form of collective escape. He observed that it was the product of the interaction between the Gandhian impact on primitive minds and the incipient class militancy". This political aspect of the exodus deserves further investigation. We know that the escaped labourers were inspired by Gandhian preaching. There is no doubt that prevailing political atmosphere, generated by non-cooperation movement, played a vital role in inspiring the labourers to launch a struggle of such magnitude. Coming from the lowest strata of the society and having no idea of the subtle political issue involved in non-cooperation movement, these toiling masses had shown an unexpected boldness of character and an unprecedented ability of organisation to wage sustained struggle against the foreign exploiters.

But inspite of all efforts, this famous exodus failed to leave any lasting impact in the context of labour movement in the country. Though the main cause was economic hardship, they had shown enough efficacy to rise up to occasion when situation demanded.

50. Ibid.
Even few local Congress activists like Shrish Chanda Dutta, Kshirode Chandra Deb and Romoni Mohan Roy with many others came forward to render all kinds of support to the stranded labourers.⁵¹ Amongst them Shrish Chandra Dutta and Romoni Mohan Roy were planters themselves. But their enthusiasm did not last long as they could not get any moral support from the front line leaders of the Indian National Congress who themselves were divided in their opinions as to the stance to be taken by Congress towards the problem of working class. The most important stand was taken by Gandhiji himself when he issued a strong warning in Young India against the use of labour strike as political weapons, because they were almost certain to cause violence and disturb the true cause of non-cooperation.⁵²

It is most surprising that All India Trade Union Congress which started functioning in 1920, did not show any interest in the Chorgola exodus. So, a heroic struggle, initiated and sustained by labourer themselves and sponsored by the nationalist at the local and regional level, failed to produce any permanent political impact in the history of labour movement in India. Thus, even after sixty

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⁵¹ J.B. Bhattacharjee, Cachar Under British Rule in North-East India, op.cit, P.270.
⁵² M. Bhattacharjee, Freedom Struggle in Barak Valley, op.cit, P 270.
years, a modern historian of labour movement cited Chandpur incident as an example to show how the cause of labourers were frustrated by too much politicisation.\textsuperscript{53}

When non-cooperation and Khilafat movement had reached its climax in Surma-Barak Valley, Gandhiji along with Ali brothers and Jamunalal Bajaj visited Silchar. Both Congress and Khilafat workers organised a colourful procession with Gandhiji and Mohammed Ali which touched all the major roads of the town.\textsuperscript{54} Gandhiji attended a meeting at Fatak Bazar where he emphasised the need for swaraj and swadeshi and the need for Hindu-Muslim unity in their journey towards attainment of Swaraj. The physical presence of Gandhiji changed the whole political atmosphere of the valley. At Badarpur, about two thousand people took the pledge before Gandhiji that they would not use foreign goods. In Karimganj Muslim tailors decided that they would no longer sew the foreign clothes.\textsuperscript{55} The spirit of defiance was spreading like wild fire amongst each and every segments of the valley's society. The Government in reply resorted to various means of suppression, prohibition, punishment

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{53} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{54} J.B.Bhattacharjee. Cachar Under British Rule in North-East India. \textit{op.cit.}, p 271.
\item \textsuperscript{55} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
and jail. In Surma-Barak Valley, the leaders who were sentenced to imprisonment during non-cooperation and Khilafat movement were Gangadayl Dixit, Shyama Charan Deb, Radhakrishna Pandey, Jyotindra Mohan Deblaskar, Imran Miya Borbhuyan, Munsi Abbas Ali, Mastaf Ali Laskar, Hazi Matsim Ali, Suresh Chandra Deb, Shyama Krishore Paul and many others. In September 1921, the Government ordered Matsim Ali and nine others Khilafat leaders in Karimganj to serve as special constables but they defied Government order and awarded with one and half year imprisonment. The Government prohibited all meetings and demonstrations within ten miles of Karimganj town. In utter disregard of the Government order, a meeting was organised in Karimganj under the leadership of Romoni Mohan Roy in which near about three thousand Congress and Khilafat supporters were present. For violating the Government order Romoni Mohan Roy, Suresh Chandra Deb and Mujammal Ali were arrested and imprisoned. Such a unique mass awakening paralysed the Government machinery in many quarters of the valley.

In Surma-Barak valley, the nationalist views were carried

56. "Congress O Cachar", op.cit, P 6
by papers viz, 'Janasakti' and 'Surma' published from Sylhet and Silchar respectively. The government put restrictions on those two papers. In June 1921, the printer and publisher of 'Surma', Durga Mohan Chakraborty was sentenced a fine of Rs.25/- under section 153(A). Even the villagers could not escape from the repression. The government met the expenses of punitive police by imposing collective fines in many villages like Kalain, Borkhola, Buribail, Udharbond, Karimganj Bazar and Patherkandi. The property of those who were unable to pay the fines were confiscated. Even in jail, Congress volunteers were ill-treated by the jail authority. Deocharan Tripathy, a Congress worker from Karimganj sub-division undertook a fast in Jorhat jail and ultimately died. A Jallianwalabagh type incident occurred at Kanairghat at Karimganj sub-division on 15th February, 1922. On that day, a big crowd assembled there to celebrate the anniversary of the local Madrasa. Suddenly armed police personnel appeared in the scene and resorted to unprovoked firing, as directed by the local British officials, killing six persons on the spot and injuring thirty six.

In Ahmedabad session in 1921, the nationalist leaders

58. A.C.Bhuyan, Political History of Assam, Vol II P 66. ALCP VOL I 1921, P 428
60. N.K. Gupta. op.cit. PP 85-86.
expressed their ardent desire to continue the movement with greater vigour and undertook the programme of civil disobedience under the leadership of Gandhiji. But after the Chauri-Chaura incident, Gandhiji gave up the idea of launching civil disobedience movement. The decision of suspension of the movement created a feeling of frustration amongst the leaders and workers of the valley. Many prominent leaders leaned towards revolutionary terrorism which acquired roots in the Indian soil and contributed to the radicalisation of the national movement. 'Jugantar' and 'Anushilan Smiti' attracted many revolutionaries from Cachar and Sylhet.\(^1\) This parallel trend in the post non-cooperation period witnessed a new development of increasingly greater significance which culminated in the growth of socialist and communist groups and rise of independent economic and political class organisations of the working class in the country. In Surma - Barak valley, as soon as the non-cooperation and Khilafat movement died down, there was the recurrence of old feuds between the Hindus and Muslims on reunion issue and dominated the entire political scenario of the valley till the beginning of civil disobedience

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The non-cooperation movement was nevertheless able to create a revolution in expectation by turning the Congress into a mass political platform and by building it up into an organisation in which people in general reposed their confidence. Throughout the non-cooperation movement, the people belonging to both the communities extended their support for the success of the movement and it was the leaders as well as the cadres who took the lead to rise up to every occasion relating to non-cooperation and Khilafat movement. There is hardly any doubt that it was the Muslim participation that gave the movement its truly mass character. There is an opinion that Surma valley, being a Muslim majority area took the lead in organising the people centering Khilafat issue and overtook the Brahmaputra valley, in the dissemination of political awareness and the spread of nationalist ideas. On the contrary, Ghandhi’s Swaraj Mantra and the principle of non-cooperation caused a great stir among the people of Brahmaputra valley and their participation in the political firmament, had nothing to do with religion and the political campaign they pursued was totally devoid of religious overtones. It is no doubt that the Khilafat issue brought the Muslims of India within the orbit of national struggle and the inclusion of the Khilafat in the programme of non-cooperation movement ensured their participation.
in a large scale in anti-imperialist struggle. In spite of their spontaneous participation, the nationalist leaders both Hindu and Muslim failed to some extent, in raising the secular political consciousness of Muslims to a higher plane of religious political consciousness. Of course, we should not lose sight of the fact that the participation of Muslims was ensured not by their commitment to nationalism, but because of their allegiance to pan-Islamism. Yet, the role of the khilafat in expanding the frontier of anti-colonial struggle can not be denied.

Moreover, Gandhiji's decision of sudden withdrawal of the movement created a storm of indignation throughout the nation. The leaders of Surma-Barak valley like their national counterparts recorded their utter bewilderment on hearing this news. Of course, whether or not, the withdrawal of the movement was made at a correct time may be debated but, perhaps, Gandhiji had enough reasons to believe that the moment he chosen was right one, Any mass movement have an inherent tendency to ebb after reaching a certain height and a time comes when breathing space is required to consolidate, recuperate and gather strength for the next round of struggle and, therefore, withdrawal or a shift of strategy of political action. Here, Gandhiji followed Gramschian strategy of 'War of position' for change in the structure of society and state.
In spite of all the weaknesses, the Non-cooperation movement ushered a new era of socio-political development of the Surma-Barak valley. Hitherto, political activities organised through the Surma valley political conferences centered basically around a regional demand, i.e., merger of Sylhet-Cachar with Bengal. Though national questions were discussed and national perspective were honoured, the thrust of the Conferences had always been the regional question. In the wake of the non-cooperation movement, the Surma Valley Political Conference preferred to wind up its existence as separate organisation and opted for becoming a component of the Indian National Congress. Congress, in turn, allowed two district Congress Committees of Sylhet and Cachar to be affiliated with Bengal Provincial Congress Committee, thereby recognising the linguistic and cultural distinctiveness of the Surma valley vis-a-vis rest of Assam. Since then two district Congress Committees had always been sincere in its effort to promote national interest and participate wholeheartedly in national level movements. In this way, issues related to mainstream nationalism always got an upperhand and regional issues were fought only within the confines of the legislatures.

Urban middle class orientation of the political movement of the valley also underwent a transition. Emerging middle class of rural Cachar came forward to participate in the non-cooperation
movement. Jatindra Mohan Deblaskar and Sanat Kumar Das were two vanguards in this respect. Their participation facilitated the entry of Congress ideas in the remote rural areas. As a result, localism was subordinated to national aspiration.

The 'Chorgola Exodus' was also very significant happening of this period. But its categorisation offers difficulties. It was a localised uprising originated from the conditions prevailing in the tea-garden of the region. But the heroic action of the garden labourers drew its inspiration from the national movement. The regional leaders of the valley rendered all possible help to the agitator. Thus, the struggle of the labourers led all the ingredients to establish an effective linkage between local aspirators, regional politics and national-level action programme.

When the non-cooperation failed to deliver goods, the law of elasticity came into action and contradictions between localism, regionalism and nationalism again surfaced which became visible in the legislative Assembly debate of the twenties.