CHAPTER II
EMERGENCE OF THE CONGRESS PARTY IN ASSAM

2.1 Introduction

This chapter deals with emergence of the Congress party in Assam. However, a brief history of the Indian National Congress (INC) will be helpful for understanding the growth and development of the Congress party in Assam.

The history of the Congress party is the history of India’s struggle for freedom (Sitaramayya, 1969). The Congress was a movement built up to establish the idea of resistance against colonial rule and create feelings of national consciousness and awakening among the masses. The birth and evolution of the Congress party was not developed in a day. It was a gradual formation covering activities in various stages in modern India which aimed at mobilising forces on the issues of national importance.

2.2 Background of the Indian National Congress

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the need for an organised national movement was strongly felt by the Indians which led to the growth of national consciousness and an intelligentsia which established political associations to work for political goals in the country. The first political association established in India was the Landholders' Society at Calcutta in 1838 which aimed to protect the class interests of the zamindars of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. In 1851, the Bengal British Indian Society was formed, again in Calcutta. Its main objectives were to create awareness about the state of governance and about the rights of the people by peaceful and lawful means. The Bengal British India Society also sent petitions urging upon government for increasing employment of Indians in public offices and for introducing judicial reforms. However due to lack of popular support these two organisations soon ceased to exist. In October 1851 the British Indian Association was formed with the objectives of separating the legislature from the executive, abolition of the salt duty, excise duty and stamp duty and reduction in salaries of the higher officials. It also demanded that grants in education sector should be increased and that the Civil Service Examination be held simultaneously in India as well. The British Indian Association thus had a broader outlook than its predecessors. Associations of similar nature were established in Bombay, Pune, Madras and Avadh. As the Indian attitude to the British Raj was
gradually changing from co-operation to that of resentment, the politically conscious Indians realised that in the changed conditions, the issues which agitated them had to be highlighted as well. In 1865 an organisation called the London Indian Society was formed in England by Pherozeshah Mehta, Badruddin Tyabji, W.C. Bannerjee and Manmohan Ghose under the tutelage of Dadabhai Naoroji to address political grievances. This was followed by the establishment of the East India Association in October, 1866 by Dadabhai Naoroji. It comprised of Indians and sympathetic Britishers who protested against the Vernacular Press Act, cotton duties and expenses in the Afghan War. In 1869, it opened its branches in Bombay, Madras and Calcutta. However due to increasing areas of tension between the Indians and the Britishers, this organisation became defunct in the 1880’s. The Poona Sarvajanik Sabha was formed in 1867 by Justice Mahadev Govind Ranade, Ganesh Vasudev Joshi and S.H. Chiplunkar. The Sabha raised its voice against the Vernacular Press Act and the Ilbert Bill and demanded reform of Legislative Councils and recruitment of Indians to civil service. The Indian Association (1876) founded by Surendranath Bannerjee and Anand Mohan Bose tried to promote by every legitimate means the political, intellectual and material advancement of the people. Protesting against the Vernacular Press Act, the Arms Act of 1878 and the Ilbert Bill were some of its other areas of concern. The establishment of these institutions laid down the background for the formation of an organization which could formulate a common programme of activity for developing the national consciousness and awakening of the Indians. The next significant formation was that of the Theosophical Society in New York which came to India and provided the final boost for organizing the first session of the INC in 1885.

The Theosophical Society was formed by Madame Helene Petrovna Blavatsky along with Henry Olcott and William Quan Judge in 1875 in New York. Olcott and Blavatsky came to Bombay in 1879 after interacting with the members of the British Theosophical Society in London. Meanwhile Allan Octavian Hume, a Radical Social reformer and a member of the Indian Civil Service came to meet them in Allahabad. Hume had joined the Society as its President in 1880. The Theosophical Society was able to embrace a wider network of people ranging from Parsees, Christians, Sikhs, Hindus as well as some Muslims. Whereas organisations like the Brahma Samaj (1828) and Arya Samaj (1875) had catered to the needs of the Bengali Hindus and Punjabi
Hindus only (Bevir, 2003). From 1881, the Theosophical Society started holding annual conventions and provided a platform for the gathering of people to discuss the past, present and future of India. Inspired by the growing popularity of the Society in India, S.Ramaswami Mudaliar and P. Anandacharlu established the Madras Mahajan Sabha in 1884. Whereas in 1885 B.M. Malabari, Kashinath Telang, Pherozeshah Mehta and Dadabhai Naoroji organized the Bombay Presidency Association. As Mark Bevir (2003) writes, “Throughout India, therefore, theosophists were joining with other young nationalists to advance a more radical agenda, at the very heart of which lay the idea of an all – India organisation.”

This growing discontentment of the Indians against the colonial rulers caught Hume’s attention. To prevent this dissatisfaction from making progress, Hume promoted the idea of an all – India organization so as to give voice to the concerns and aspirations of the Indians. In this context, he acquired the assistance of the Poona Sarvajanik Sabha and the Bombay Presidency Association to organize an all – India political conference in Poona in 1885. Hume had to hastily shift the venue of the conference scheduled in 1885 in Poona to Bombay because of an outbreak of cholera in Poona. Finally, the Indian National Union assembled at the Gokuldas Tejpal Sanskrit College in Bombay in 1885 and renamed the association as the Indian National Congress. The objectives of the Congress were laid down by Womesh Chandra Bannerjee who was elected the first President of the INC. These objectives were:

1. Promotion of personal intimacy and friendship amongst workers to advance the country’s cause.

2. Eradication of all distinctions like race, creed or provincial prejudices amongst the people of the country and along with it the development and consolidation of feelings of national unity.

3. Discussion on important and burning social questions of the time among educated classes in India.

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4. The determination of the lines upon and methods by which it was felt desirable for native politicians to work for public interests (Sitaramayya, 1935).

As it can be seen, in the initial years the goals of the Congress were limited. It stood for the establishment of a responsible form of democratic government. Its formation started with the faith on the Britishers that they would yield to their demands of a representative government. When these hopes were shattered, the organisation which was formed with limited objectives took the lead in mobilising Indian people from all strata of society to lead a powerful campaign against the colonial rule. It was Mahatma Gandhi who spearheaded this movement for national emancipation and helped to attain freedom for the country on the 15th of August, 1947.

2.3 The Assam Pradesh Congress Committee (APCC): It’s Background

In Assam, the INC did not take a definite shape and character in 1885 itself. The state was represented in the Congress through the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee. However the nationalist consciousness and awakening among the people of this state gave birth to the need for a common forum for the meeting of minds. In tune with the nationalist tendency of establishing associations to create a broad – based ground for formulating grievances of people, the politically conscious people of Assam also got together to establish associations of similar nature. The first of such associations established was the Jorhat Sarvajanik Sabha established in 1875 by Jagannath Barooah\(^\text{11}\). Its objective was to act as a mediating body between the government and the people and to secure democratic rights for them. As the influence of the Sabha extended all over the province, the necessity of forming such an association was felt in Dibrugarh as well. The Upper Assam Association formed by Ganga Govinda Phukan\(^\text{12}\) in 1880 helped to realise this aspiration. The Association was composed of the ryots of Upper Assam to address their grievances and protest against imposition of

\(^\text{11}\) Jagannath Barooah (1851 – 1907) was the first graduate of Upper Assam in 1872 from Presidency College, Calcutta. He was the owner of several tea estates of Assam. He was the vice – President and later President of the Jorhat Sarvajanik Sabha.

\(^\text{12}\) Ganga Govinda Phukan (1841 – 1926) was educated in Sibasagar Govt. School and later in Calcutta. He had started several tea gardens in Assam. He was associated with the Asamiya Sahitya Sabha in Calcutta in 1872 and was the director of the Amola Tea Company. He was also the first chairman of the Sibasagar Municipality.
taxes. Radhanath Changkakoti\textsuperscript{13} was the Secretary of this Association from 1887 – 1893. The Assam Association with broader objectives was established in 1905 emulating the model of the Indian Association. Manik Chandra Barua\textsuperscript{14} was the pioneer founder of this association along with Prasanna Chandra Ghosh, Mathuramohan Barua\textsuperscript{15} and Radhanath Changkakoti. It initially believed in constitutional form of movement to address their grievances. It raised its voice against the partition of Bengal, grazing tax and the revenue collection from the illegal trade of opium. The association had its headquarters at Gauripur and Guwahati with its branches scattered all over Assam. Gradually the members of the Association came under the influence of extremist politics to get their demands fulfilled. It objected against the British opinion that Indians were incapable of administering their own country and demanded self – government for India. Voices of protest were also raised against the Rowlatt Act and the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in 1919. Tarun Ram Phookun\textsuperscript{16} who by this time was highly motivated by his counterparts like Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Lala Lajpat Rai and Bipin Chandra Pal was made the General Secretary of the Association in 1918. Dutt (1998) states that Tarunram Phookun, Nabin Chandra Bordoloi, Chandranath Sarma, Gopinath Bordoloi, Rohini Kumar Choudhury, Bishnuram Medhi, Kuladhar Chaliha, Padmadhar Chaliha,  

\textsuperscript{13} Radhanath Changkakoti (1853 – 1926) an eminent litterateur was the person behind the establishment of the first press in Upper Assam on 9 May, 1881 named the Radhanath Press. The Times of Assam was published from this press. Changkakoti had selflessly dedicated a part of his income to establish his printing press and publish newspapers.  

\textsuperscript{14} Manik Chandra Baruah (1851 – 1915) was the General Secretary of the Assam Association established in 1903. He was also one of the pioneers of forwarding the cause of education in Assam. His contribution towards establishment of the Cotton College and Assam’s first law college, the Earl Law College is invaluable. He was also the first member of the Legislative Council to be selected from the Brahmaputra Valley.  

\textsuperscript{15} Mathuramohan Baruah was a prominent journalist of Assam who published a newspaper titled ‘Advocate of Assam’ from Dibrugarh. It took up the cause of the ryots and the repressive land laws in Assam. He also published the ‘Assam Chronicle’ and was one of the founder members of Dibrugarh Journalist Club which published a monthly magazine titled ‘Alochani’ in 1909.  

\textsuperscript{16} Tarun Ram Phookun (1877 – 1939) was the grandson of Jagnoram Phookun, the earliest product of English education in Assam. He was educated at the Presidency College, Calcutta. A lawyer by profession, he worked in the Earl Law College. His attitude towards the British was initially moderate which changed in due course of time because of the repressive taxation measures and preferential treatment to the European planters. He therefore resigned from the membership of the Legislative Council. Later he took active part in the national freedom struggle.
Bidyadhar Sarma, Jogendranath Barua and Faiznur Ali were some of the distinguished leaders of the Assam Association who received their first training in political leadership under the banner of Assam Association and later emerged as leaders of the freedom struggle under the Congress. These leaders were part of the Assamese intelligentsia, most of whom were Calcutta educated and lawyers by profession. They were also highly influenced by western ideas and therefore advocated equal rights and end towards all sorts of discrimination against Indians.

The members of the Assam Association wanted a broad – based platform which would help to concretise the demands of the masses into strategies aimed at achieving freedom from foreign rule. Hence it began to work in collaboration with the INC participating in the programmes initiated by the INC. It was only in the Nagpur session of the AICC held in 1920 which was presided over by C. Vijayaraghavachariar that the principle of linguistic organisation of the Congress was decided upon and a new Congress Constitution was laid down, which provided for the formation of the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee (APCC) with its jurisdiction over the Brahmaputra Valley. In this session N.C. Bardaloi¹⁷ was elected as the first Assamese member of the AICC representing however the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee (BPCC). To give effect to this new provision, the AICC allocated five seats to the APCC. Meanwhile the Assam Association had its last meeting chaired by Chhabilal Upadhyay¹⁸ in Jorhat in April 1921 where discussions on the Non Co – operation programme, organisational matters of the recently formed APCC and the issue of eviction of Nepali graziers from the Kaziranga Forest Reserve¹⁹ were held.

¹⁷ Nabin Chandra Bardaloi (1875 – 1936) was a lawyer by profession. He was the son of the high – ranking government servant, Rai Bahadur Madhav Chandra Bardoloi. He was chosen by the Assam Association to promote its mission in England. Bardoloi presided over the annual conference of the Assam Association held at Dibrugarh in 1915.

¹⁸ Born in Darrang district, Chabilal Upadhyay played an important role in the education of the Gorkha community of Assam to which he belonged. He established many schools and libraries to raise his cause.

¹⁹ In the colonial period the British planters who wanted a strong labour force to work in tea plantations facilitated Nepali migration to Sikkim. The recruitment of Gurkha soldiers to the British Indian army also encouraged migrants to enter India. Soon they began penetrating into Bihar, Sikkim and Assam as well. Initially their entrance into the society did not cause any panic among the indigenous people. This was because the Nepalis could assimilate very
In a resolution adopted in the meeting of the Assam Association in 18 April, 1921, the Assam Provincial Congress Committee (APCC) was formed. Thus with the dysfunction of the Assam Association, the APCC was formed. Kuladhar Chaliha became the first President of the APCC with Badrinarayan Agarwala, Nabin Chandra Bordoloi, Kaliprasad Baruah, Muhubuddin Ahmed, Jogendranath Baruah, and Durganath Baruah as the office-bearers.

2.4 Non Co – operation Movement and APCC

It was during the war years that Indian nationalism developed and gathered momentum. The contribution made by India to the war efforts of the British ushered in a sense of expectancy in the Indians. The latter were looking forward to major reforms that would help them to achieve self – government. Taking careful notice of the Indian political scenario, Montagu, the Secretary of State for India and Chelmsford, India’s Viceroy decided to bring about some reforms to soothe the growing momentum of the Indian movement. Accordingly they submitted a joint report in 1918 known as the Montford Report suggesting constitutional changes for India. This report became the basis of the Government of India Act of 1919 which was passed on 23 December, 1919. However, the reforms had a number of loopholes within it. Under the provisions, the legislature had no control over the Governor – General and his Executive Council. The central government had complete control over the provinces. This came as a high disappointment for the Congress party as it had been hoping for, at least, provincial autonomy. The events that followed after this were accompanied by greater levels of

well with the native people. However, as their presence started to threaten the socio – cultural identity of the Asomiyas in their homeland, they soon became victims of expulsion and ethnic violence in the post – colonial period, more specifically during the Assam Movement of 1979 – 1985. In the colonial period, there had been a few instances of displacement from the Char (riverine tract areas) and the Chapari (grazing areas) and from the Kaziranga Forest Reserve. Nepali graziers from the Kaziranga reserve were forcefully evicted (Nath, 2005).

20 Born in 1886, Kuladhar Chaliha was the son of Phanidhar Chaliha, co – operator and member of the Assam Legislative Council from 1915 – 19. Kuladhar Chaliha received his education from Cotton College, Guwahati and later from the Presidency College, Calcutta. He was the Secretary of the Jorhat Sarvajanik Sabha. He led the Non Co – operation Movement and suspended his law practice for ten years. He joined the Assam Civil Service as an extra assistant commissioner in 1913, but resigned later to oppose the policies of the British government.
frustration for the Indians. The Rowlatt Act passed in London on March 10, 1919 empowered the government to imprison any person, suspected of terrorism, for up to two years without a trial, and gave the imperial authorities power to deal with all revolutionary activities. It also provided for stricter control of the press, arrests without warrant and indefinite detention without trial. It was Mahatma Gandhi who came forward to raise his voice and lead the people in a movement aimed to oppose these repressive laws. Gandhiji had arrived in India in 1915 and after observing the socio-political scenario in India, he was of the opinion that the country was in need of novel ways to fight colonial oppression. He began his Satyagraha experiments (which he was successfully able to complete in South Africa) in Champaran in Bihar and in Ahmedabad and Kaira in Gujarat. These experiments brought him into close contact with the masses, especially the workers and peasants of these rural areas who had been victims of oppressive land revenue policies.

The Jallianwala Bagh tragedy and the Khilafat agitation brought Gandhiji into the limelight of India’s freedom struggle. People had assembled in the Jallianwala Bagh on 13 April, 1919 to protest against the issue of war loans. General Dyer’s orders to shoot the unarmed crowd resulted in the massacre of thousands of innocent people. Gandhiji expressed great shock and resentment on this violent incident. Regarding Khilafat issue, Gandhiji felt that the demand of protecting the Ottoman Empire and the Caliph’s position was just. He therefore did not want that the Ali brothers should be arrested. At this crucial hour, Gandhiji decided to stand for the cause of the Muslims which would also help to establish harmony between Hindus and Muslims. Gandhiji’s dynamic and realistic approach to political situations had started to appeal both the Moderates and the Extremists, for he had decided to combine the tactics of Swaraj with the novel idea of non-cooperation. He could also enlist the support of the Congress, the principal political organ of that time. Very soon, the Congress candidates withdrew from the elections to be held under the Morley – Minto Reforms and undertook constructive tasks like promotion of national education, languages and Khadi, removal of untouchability and prohibition of liquor. Thus the stage was prepared for a fight against the unjust imperial rule under Gandhiji’s leadership using a unique method, namely Non Co-operation.
Before the formation of APCC, the activities of the freedom movement were carried out by the Assam Association. For example, the Non Co-ordination issue was discussed and debated thoroughly in a meeting of Assam Association held in Gauhati and Jorhat on 11th October, 1920. The main objectives highlighted in the programme were organised boycott of excisable goods, active promotion of hand-spun and other swadeshi goods and boycott of the forthcoming elections to the Councils. Moderates like Ghanashyam Barua, Chandradhar Barua and Taraprasad Chaliha, opposed the programme while majority of the members supported the motion that the programme should be adopted. The seventeenth annual conference of the Assam Association held in Tezpur in December 1920 chaired by Prasanna Kumar Barua echoed the Gauhati decision on Non Co-ordination. This Tezpur session of the Assam Association was very eventful in the sense that it was here that the Association was converted into a full Congress podium where national issues of the time, specifically the Non Co-ordination were discussed. In other words, the nationalisation of the Assam Association had begun by 1920.

The Congress workers of Assam responded to the national call for non-co-ordination with full vigour. Meetings were held at Gauhati, Tezpur, Nowgong, Jorhat, Dibrugarh, Silchar and Sylhet where bonfires of heaps of foreign cloth were burnt before onlookers. Peaceful picketing of opium and liquor shops was also carried out. In the places in and around Jorhat, Congress Committees were set up. Foreign clothes were burned in several places and natives began to sell locally produced goods to spread the word about importance of swadeshi. In Amguri located in Sibsagar district, Gandhians like Dimbeswar Sarma Rajguru were involved in activities like seizure of opium, raising voice against payment of revenue, spreading the importance of Khadi and to determine the number of people working for the Britishers vis-à-vis the number of people supporting the Congress. For this purpose a number of volunteers were engaged by him. In places like Bamunor Pukhuri, Seleng, Jaji, Teok, Bahona, Kenduguri etc. of Jorhat, Rameshwar Bhattacharyya, Chandrakanta Barua, Gunanath Barthakur and Debeswar Sarmah took the lead to promote the ideals of non-co-ordination movement like
prohibition of opium, boycott of foreign goods and encouraging people to take up spinning and weaving Indian clothes.\textsuperscript{21}

One of the forms of non-co-operation movement was the boycott of schools, colleges and law courts. Chandranath Sharma, Ambikagiri Raichaudhuri and Trigunacharan Barua supported this form. However Nabin Chandra Bardaloi and Tarun Ram Phookun did not agree on this. Later they conceded to this tactic provided strikes were not organised in schools and colleges. Meanwhile leaders like Chandranath Sharma and Lakshmidhar Sharma motivated the youths and students to come out of their institutions and join the non-co-operation movement. Students of the Cotton College boycotted their classes and carried out an indefinite strike. Student volunteers from Kamrup, Darrang, Golaghat and Nowgong districts gathered together to spread Gandhiji’s message of swaraj and non-co-operation.

The first programme that the APCC formally took up after its formation in 1921 was spreading the message about non-co-operation movement in Assam. The APCC invited Mahatma Gandhi to Jorhat, Assam in 1921. Gandhiji’s visit helped to circulate the message of non-violence and \textit{Satyagraha} among the people and the Congress workers began to work with a new zeal inspired by his philosophy. This historical visit of Gandhi to the town of Jorhat no doubt strengthened the resolve of the people to work together against foreign domination. In this connection, the contribution of Tarun Ram Phookun was immense. Benudhar Sarma (1959) pointed out that without Phookun, the idea of non-cooperation would not have touched the hearts of the people of Assam. Tarun Ram Phookun helped to pass on the message of Gandhiji and Maulana Mohammad by translating Hindi and Urdu in fluent Assamese thus helping in mass awakening of the realisation that there was an immense reservoir of strength which lay dormant but that if awakened, had the power to overthrow the mighty Raj. Gandhiji also addressed meetings at Gauhati, Tezpur, Nowgong, Jorhat, Dibrugarh, Silchar and Sylhet where huge bonfires were raised to burn foreign cloth. He praised the practice of spinning and weaving among Assamese women and urged the people to inculcate the spirit of Swadeshi in their daily lives.

One of the programmes for action included in this movement was resignation from all government bodies and boycott of British courts. Prominent Congressmen of the time like Rohini Kumar Choudhury and Nabin Chandra Bordoloi resigned from the Legislative Council whereas Tarun Ram Phookun abdicated his position in the Imperial Legislative Council. Others like Bishnuram Medhi, Krishnanath Sarma and Jagannath Barua suspended their law practice. There were several hartals, picketing and boycott of foreign goods organised by the Congress workers in many areas of Jorhat, Sibasagar, Nowgong and Gauhati. As a counter measure the colonial government launched several steps to curb the rising activities aimed to oppose the government. For example, employment of additional forces, lathi – charging and beating of crowds assembled in meetings, imposition of punitive taxes, prohibition of making derogatory speeches against the government (taking note of the power of Tarun Ram Phookun’s speeches, the government banned him from addressing any public meeting) and seizing all kinds of literature that attracted the government’s suspicion (for instance the weekly newspaper of the time ‘Assam Bilashini’ was not only banned but its editor Krishnakanta Bhattacharyya was deprived of his due pension by the government). Around 4000 people were jailed and among them were leaders like Tarun Ram Phookun, Nabin Chandra Bordoloi, Rohini Kumar Choudhury, Gauri Kanta Talukdar, Hariprasad Brahmachari, Deben Uzir, Dhaniram Talukdar and Md. Tayebulla.

Governmental repression was carried out throughout the province. Associations like the Congress Volunteer Corps, Khilafat Volunteer Corps, Santi Senas and Sevak Sampradays were declared unlawful associations. To prevent people from gathering in mass meetings the Governor General – in – Council enforced the Prevention of Seditious Meetings Act 1911\(^2\) in the districts of Lakhimpur, Sibasagar, Darrang, Kamrup and Goalpara. It also imposed the Criminal Law Amendment Act, the Press Act and the Police Act to quell the activities of the people. Orders prohibiting picketing and holding of processions were passed in all the towns. The authorities rummaged

\(^2\) The Prevention of Seditious Meetings Act, 1911 was a replacement of the previous legislation, Prevention of Seditious Meetings Act, 1907. According to the former, meetings which were likely to affect law and order and disturb public peace were to be prohibited. A ban on delivery of speeches in public places which threatened law, peace or order was also disallowed. Persons found to be violating the rules of the Act were to be imprisoned for six months or fined or both.
through the offices of the Congress where records were seized and offices were sealed, residences of the Congress leaders and district Congress offices were ransacked. All the District Congress Committee (DCC) offices were destroyed and swaraj camps were demolished. The records of the APCC and the Gauhati DCC were confiscated. Arrests were carried out in places where volunteers came out defying orders on prohibition of picketing and processions. The jails soon became overcrowded. According to an official report for the year 1921 – 22, 270 persons were detained for political offences and 160 were tried under Act XIV of 1908. According to Congressman Omeo Kumar Das, 1600 Congress workers were detained. These Congress volunteers were ill – treated by the jail authorities. Deocharan Tripathy, a Congress worker from Cachar undertook a fast – unto – death in the Jorhat jail objecting to the ill treatment meted out to Congress workers. This resulted in his death because the authorities did not heed to his demands. In this connection, the Governor of Assam, Sir John Henry Kerr, supporting the repressive activities of his government commented: “Non Co – operation is a kind of malaria. One can be easily cured of it, if a dose of quinine is administered.” This speaks sufficiently about the kind of oppression carried out by the British authorities against the non co – operators.

Yet the people of Assam were not frightened and their patriotic zeal could not be shaken by the brute strength of British power. The representatives of the APCC in the Ahmedabad Congress (27 – 28 December 1921) reported the police cruelties committed on the people to the Congress high command. To make an enquiry, Gandhiji sent Pandit Madan Mohan Malviya and Dr. Rajendra Prasad to Assam to submit a first – hand report on the assessment of the repressive activities of the government. The two leaders visited Gauhati, Tezpur, Kamrup, Jorhat, Sibasagar, Dibrugarh, Palasbari, Chayyyaon, Nowgong and Boko. From the interviews conducted with the participators of the


24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid, p. 78.
movement, the two leaders got a clear picture of the reign of terror unleashed in Assam. They were shocked by the ‘insensible’ acts of the government like ransacking of Congress offices and residences of Congressmen, snatching away of Gandhi caps and ill – treatment meted out on many prisoners. They were impressed by the spirit of sacrifice of the people. Dutt (1998) notes down that the waves of non co – operation movement in Assam gave the state a definite place of distinction in the national freedom struggle.

2.5 The Pandu Session of the INC

The next important landmark in the evolution of the Congress party of Assam was the first ever session of the INC held at Pandu, Gauhati. Under the presidentship of Srinivas Iyenagar, the 41st session of the AICC was hosted at Pandu successfully by the APCC in 1926. It wanted the government to establish a full responsible government in India and to summon a Round Table Conference in which representatives from the country would also participate. Congress members decided to reject ministerships and oppose formation of ministries. A number of other resolutions like working for ameliorating the condition of the peasants and to forward all steps which led to non-cooperation with government laws and policies were also taken. This Gauhati session turned out to be, as Mahatma Gandhi said of ‘unexpected importance’. The APCC again came to national limelight when Tarun Ram Phookun became the first leader from Assam to have been elected to the Congress Working Committee for 1926 – 1927. Needless to say the APCC started to gain national importance.

2.6 The Simon Commission and Assam

The Government of India Act, 1919 had introduced the system of diarchy to govern the provinces of India. This Act had a provision that a Commission would be appointed after 10 years to investigate the progress of governance scheme and suggest new steps to reform. In March 1927, the British government announced its decision to appoint the Statutory Commission.

In November of the same year, the personnel of the Commission and its terms of reference were announced. The Commission was chaired by Sir John Simon and it comprised entirely of European members. Immediately after this announcement, a
nationwide stir resulting from the non-inclusion of any Indians in the Commission was witnessed. Everywhere the Commission was greeted with black flags, banners and posters that carried out the message ‘Simon, Go Back’. The main recommendations as laid down by the Simon Commission were as follows:

1. A federal Constitution would be formed.
2. Discretionary powers were to be vested with the Governor to safeguard internal security and administrative powers to protect different communities.
3. The number of members of provincial legislative council were to be increased.
4. The Governor General was to have complete power to appoint the members of the Cabinet.
5. The Government of India would have complete control over the High Court.

At the annual session of the Congress held at Madras in December 1927, a resolution was passed which advocated the boycott of the Simon Commission ‘at every stage and in every form’. The party saw the implementation of the recommendations as a way to delay the process of transfer of power from the British to the people. It was sought to create an impression of self rule wherein Indians themselves were denied the right to decide for power-sharing.

In Assam also the APCC boycotted the Commission. Apart from the Jorhat District Congress Committee, the Assam Chatra Sanmilan also demonstrated their firm protest against the recommendations of the Commission. In its session at Tezpur on 17 and 18 October 1928, Tarun Ram Phookun highlighted the injustice meted out to the Indians by the Commission and the deliberate exclusion of Indians from it. The protest against the Commission of 1927 was also organised in other places of the state like Dhubri, Gauhati, Sylhet, Karimganj, Dibrugarh, Sibasagar, Jorhat and Barpeta. Apart from the Congress party, the Swarajists also played a crucial role in circulating the message of boycotting the Commission on the grounds of it being dishonourable to the Indians.

The reactions of the Muslim League to the recommendations of the Simon Commission was marked by differences within it. During this time, the All India Muslim League (AIML) was divided into two distinct groups – one led by Md. Ali
Jinnah and the other by Sir Mohammed Shafi. The basis of division was regarding the issue of joint electorate for the Muslims. Those who supported the joint electorates were led by Jinnah\(^{27}\) and those who opposed it were led by Md. Shafi\(^{28}\). Thus both the groups stood divided on the issues of separate electorates and regarding operating with the Simon Commission. A section of the Muslims in Assam forming the Anjuman – i – Islamia\(^{29}\) decided to oppose the Congress and support the recommendations of the Commission. The Anjuman – i – Islamia was led by Sir Mohammed Shafi. It assembled at the Moulvibazar (a district of Sylhet division in present North – Eastern Bangladesh) on 25 January, 1928 for the purpose. However, supporters of the Jinnah group who were active in Sylhet exhibited their discontentment against the recommendations of the Simon Commission because it did not include any Indian Muslim as its member.

The final report of the Simon Commission released on June 1930 was condemned by all as it failed to include even ‘dominion status’ as Britain’s India policy. For all its purposes, the Simon Commission was abandoned thereafter.

### 2.7 The Civil Disobedience Movement and APCC

The suspension of the Non Co – operation Movement after the Chauri Chaura incident in 1922 brought about a temporary lull in the independence movement. However, events related to the appointment of the Simon Commission awakened the dormant zeal in the people. This helped to shape another significant phase of struggle in the freedom movement.

\(^{27}\) The Delhi Muslim Conference under Jinnah on 20 March 1927 made an announcement declaring to give up separate electorates if their four proposals were accepted. These proposals were separation of Sind from Bombay, reforms in the North West Frontier Province and Baluchistan, representation on the basis of population in Punjab and Bengal and 33 % seats for the Muslims in the Central Legislature. Jinnah was hopeful that his proposals would soon be accepted and therefore he was ready to give up the issue of separate electorates for the Muslims.

\(^{28}\) The Shafi League on the other hand believed strongly that only by issuing separate electorates, the Muslims would be truly represented in the Legislature. It considered separate electorates to be an integral part of the Indian Constitution.

\(^{29}\) Anjuman – I – Islam was founded in the year 1874 by a group of visionary Muslims led by Dr. Badruddin Tyabji with the humble aim of advancing the Muslim community through education.
By the end of 1928, the freedom struggle entered a new phase. The full Dominion Status as demanded by the INC was rejected by the British government and so the Congress refused to participate in the Round Table Conference on the grounds of non-fulfilment of the condition. At the Lahore session of the Congress in 1929, the INC declared ‘complete independence’ to be the goal of the party and declared to observe Independence Day on January 26, 1930. Meanwhile Lord Irwin, the then Viceroy of India announced in October 1929 that the demand for ‘Dominion Status’ would be achieved by India in an unspecified date in the future and not immediately. This announcement was met with a deep sense of frustration among the Indians. As per decisions of the Calcutta Congress, 1928, a non-violent non-co-operation movement was to be carried out. According to the programme, the Congress decided to boycott central and provincial legislatures and abstain from participating directly or indirectly in future elections. The Working Committee met on 2 January, 1930 and decided to launch the Civil Disobedience Movement against the colonial rule.

During this time, there was a serious organisational crisis within the APCC. There was difference of opinion regarding participation in the Civil Disobedience Movement. The AICC had instructed all the provincial Congresses to blacklist the Central and Provincial Legislatures along with the elections. The Congress leaders in Assam however had a different viewpoint regarding acceptance of these directions. Tarun Ram Phookun, Gopinath Bardoloi and Rohini Kumar Choudhury were against the programme of resignation and boycott and hence they resigned from their offices in the Provincial Congress. It was Bishnuram Medhi who came forward at this critical point to offer himself as the candidate for President of APCC. Despite such differences within APCC, preparations were made to celebrate 26 January, 1930 as the first Independence Day.

Bishnuram Medhi’s appointment as the President of the APCC provided the much-needed stability to the organisation. The APCC spelt out in clear terms its willingness to participate in the Civil Disobedience Movement. Medhi was assisted by Hem Chandra Barua, Omeo Kumar Das, Bhubaneswar Barua, Siddhinath Sarma, Debeswar Sarma, Satradhikar Goswami of Garamur, Harendranath Chandra Choudhury, Rajendranath Barua and Lakshmidhar Sarma. In support of Gandhi’s call for organisation of a direct
action campaign of tax resistance and non-violent protest against the monopoly of the colonial rulers in the country, the Congress leaders of Assam like Hem Chandra Barua, Bishnuram Medhi, Siddhinath Sarma, Md. Tayebulla and Ambikagiri Rai Chaudhury assembled on 12 March, 1930 at the historic Judges Field at Guwahati in support of the Salt Satyagraha. Meanwhile to break the salt law, Gandhi reached Dandi on 6 April, 1930 along with his followers. From Assam, Liladhar Baruah joined the band of Mahatma Gandhi. Immediately Gandhi was arrested and the crowd was lathi-charged.

Congress workers and supporters in the provinces of the country were arrested, beaten up mercilessly, lathi-charged or gun fired for their involvement in anti-government activities. Their properties were confiscated. The AICC instructed Congressmen all over the country to select dictators in every province and state so as to carry the flag of civil disobedience movement. Driven by an urge to strengthen the Congress, a meeting of the Assam Pradeshik Congress was held. This meeting detected that there was an urgent need to build a strong organisational base for the Congress. Congress members like Tarun Ram Phookun, Bishnuram Medhi and Hem Barua worked uninterruptedly in places like Golaghat, Jorhat and Sibsagar to spread the ideals of Satyagraha in public gatherings. Bishnuram Medhi was arrested in August 1930 and this caused another setback to the organisation of APCC.

Meanwhile the Congress Working Committee gave clear instructions to the Pradesh Congress Committees to follow the course of action to be adopted. Among others, it included boycott of foreign goods and legislatures, boycott of liquor shops, disobedience to various government ordinances, refusal to pay government revenue and taxes, boycott of British banking, promoting sale of swadeshi goods and motivate youths to participate in the movement for emancipation. This phase of agitation was carried out in Tezpur, Nowgong, Pandu and Sibsagar. On 12th August, 1930 the implementation of the Criminal Law Amendment Act resulted in the declaration of voluntary organisations and the Congress itself as illegal. The Act also gave the power to the police to arrest Congress workers and search domestic premises at their will. Yet nothing could deter the spirit of the Congress workers. In Jorhat, Debeswar Sarma30 was

30 Debeswar Sarma was born at Kenduguri, Jorhat in 1897. He graduated from Cotton College, Guwahati and took his law degree from the Ripon College, Calcutta. He took active participation in the non co-operation, civil
one of the leaders who took the lead to organise picketing in front of opium and liquor shops. The responsibility to disseminate the message of *Purna Swaraj* (as endorsed in the Lahore session of Congress in 1929) in almost all the Mauzas of Jorhat Mahkuma was also undertaken by Debeswar Sarma. Under his leadership, a demonstration was organised here as a mark of protest against Lord Irwin’s visit to Jorhat on 4th January, 1931. Congress workers like Sankar Chandra Barua, Dhiren Dutta, Nandeswar Gogoi, Harish Chandra Gogoi, Bogai Saikia, Khagiram Kakoti, Dharmeshwar Thakur, Purna Chandra Goswami, Gangadhar Borkotoky, Uma Phukan, Bhadra Kanta Phukan, Keshab Chandra Sonowal, Rameshwar Bhattacharyya, Bholu Barua, Tilak Chandra Sonowal and Surendranath Phukan carried out a black flag demonstration shouting slogans like ‘Irwin Go Back’.

The role of women of Assam during the civil disobedience movement cannot be ignored. In Nowgong, it was Chandraprabha Saikiani who organised a mass upbringing and called upon women to respond to the call of freedom struggle. Immediately she was put behind bars along with her compatriots Guneswari Devi, Muktabala Baishnabi, Mohini Gohain, Dariki Kachari and others. However this failed disobedience and the Quit India Movement because of which he was imprisoned many times. In 1937 he was elected to the Assam Legislative Assembly and became the Chief Whip of the party and then of the Congress Coalition government of 1938. Later he also became the Speaker of the Assembly from 1946 – 47, President of the APCC from 1949 – 1950 and Minister of Finance from 1957 – 58.

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32 Chandraprabha Saikiani (1901 – 1972) was born in Doisingari village of Kamrup district. At the age of 13 she established a school herself at Akaya village. She soon became the forerunner of change in her immediate society. She raised her voice against the evil caste system and advocated women’s education. While working in Tezpur as the Headmistress of Tezpur Girls School, Saikiani came into contact with illustrious personalities of Assam like Omeo Kumar Das, Chandranath Sarma and Jyotiprasad Agarwala. She was actively associated with the Assam Chatra Sammilan. Inspired by Gandhiji’s ideas, Saikiani joined the Non Co – operation Movement in 1921. Under her leadership the Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti was born in 1926. She was the editor of the Samiti’s magazine ‘Abhijatri’. She won the Padmashree award for her literary contributions in 1972.

33 Guneswari Devi, Mohini Gohain and Dariki Kachari were actively associated with Chandraprabha Saikiani in establishing the Assam Mahila Samiti. Devi was imprisoned many times for her association with the freedom struggle. She was the first lady from Assam who was court arrested for her political activities. Gohain and her associates Swarnalata Barua and Basantalata Hazarika established a Woman’s Wing in Golaghat in 1930 – 31.
to deter the spirit of the many enthusiastic Assamese women who were instead inspired to contribute towards the goal of shaking the foundations of the British empire in Assam.

The role of student participation in the movement of 1930 was also very significant. In May 1930, a circular by the then Director of Public Information of Assam, Mr. Cunningham was issued which required students and their guardians to sign an undertaking in writing that the students would ‘refrain from participation of any kind in political activities, e.g. by way of hartals, school strikes, attendance at political meetings, picketing and the like, and that they will respect and abide by the disciplinary rules and orders of the school authority and the Education Department.’ This circular provoked sharp reactions from all over the province. On July 21, 1930, a special session of the Assam Chatra Sanmilan was organized at Gauhati under the presidency of Omeo Kumar Das against this circular. Many students of the Cotton College left the college protesting vehemently against the terms of agreement of the Circular. Outside government control schools like Kamrup Academy at Gauhati was established during this time and large number of students got themselves enrolled here as well as in schools established in places like Barpeta (Barpeta Vidyapith), Tezpur (Tezpur Academy), Sibasagar (Sibasagar Vidyapith) and Dibrugarh (Dibrugarh Public School). The Circular had to be relaxed after all these protests. Later on the students’ movement got integrated into the Civil Disobedience Movement.

The civil disobedience movement in Assam during the period 1933 to 1940 did not die down completely but was progressing at a very slow pace. Mahatma Gandhi’s visit to Golaghat on 15th April, 1934 for the purpose of harijan upliftment motivated the Congress workers of this quiet town. Sharma (2007) gives a vivid description of Gandhiji’s visit to Golaghat and the response of the people that the visit elicited. “Thousands of people, both men and women, lined up on either side of the road from Furkating railway station to Golaghat town to welcome him...As per unofficial estimate nearly forty thousand people gathered in the place of the meeting to listen to him...The volunteers placed their Gandhi caps before the people like begging bowls for collection of money for the welfare fund of the harijans. A sum of rupees seven hundred eighty seven, twelve annas and nine pais was reportedly collected in the site of the meeting.
Various public institutions and organisations of Golaghat also contributed an amount of rupees one thousand seven hundred thirty five, fourteen annas and three pais to Gandhiji. From these activities one can easily have an idea about the Congress base in Golaghat and the growing national consciousness of the people of the district.\textsuperscript{34}

Meanwhile preparations for the holding of general elections of 1936 were taking place. The Congress decided to reject the Government of India Act, 1935 in pen and paper. This was also set up as an election agenda because according to Jawaharlal Nehru this Act did not guarantee absolute freedom as desired by the people. A coalition government was formed on April 1, 1937 under the Chief Ministership of Sir Mohammed Saadulla. The government consisted of the United Muslim Party, Assam Muslim Party, Assam Muslim League, United People’s Party, European Group and Tribal members. Saadulla’s ‘leaking boat’ could not survive for long as it proved to be incapable of proving its worth in the Assembly (Guha, 1977). Meanwhile the opposition was also making serious efforts to consolidate its strength. The Congress under the leadership of Gopinath Bordoloi succeeded in ousting the Saadulla government and thus the third coalition and Congress’ first ministry was formed on September 19, 1938. Bordoloi’s ministry carried out some programmes which was left incomplete by Saadulla’s government. Some of such tasks were release of political prisoners, considerable eradication of opium, reduction of land revenue and steps to ease labour unrest. But unfortunately this Congress ministry could not be in power for long. The Second World War brought Great Britain and Germany against each other in the battlefield. As India was a part of the British Empire, Britain wanted India to participate in the war against the Axis Powers. However, within the declared war aims, India’s independence was not mentioned. Very soon a Congress Committee meeting held at Wardha on 22 October gave a call to all the Congress ministries in the states to resign. This was a form of declared protest against the war efforts of the British. Bordoloi also resigned from his post. “Bordoloi’s resignation showed how the movement’s leadership in Assam could rise above immediate provincial gains to go to the whole hog with the demands of the country’s freedom movement.”\textsuperscript{35}

\textsuperscript{34} Sharma, Anil Kumar (2007). \textit{Quit India movement in Assam}. New Delhi: Mittal Publications.

2.8 Nehru’s visit (1937)

1937 was an eventful year for the Congress and the state. For it was in this year that Jawaharlal Nehru came to Assam. On behalf of the Assam Samrakshini Sabha, a Memorandum was presented to him on 24 November, 1937 highlighting the problems faced by Assam, viz., (1) The economic exploitation of Assam during the British regime by the outsiders (2) Separation of Sylhet from Assam (3) Muslim immigration especially Mymensinghias and (4) Communalism.

The problem of unabated, continuous immigration was put by the Assam Samrakshini Sabha before Nehru in their Memorandum. The memorandum stated:

“The Bengali Hindu and Muslim who run at one another’s throat in their province, are all in one in Assam in this respect, not with a view to fighting for the cause of national freedom, but for establishing their Bengali Kingdom in close cooperation with the British Government. There has been a serious setback to the process of assimilation with the Assamese. The Mymensingh immigrants who had voluntarily come forward to identify their interest with those of the Assamese are now persuaded to give that up and are forced to read Bengali.”

In this connection the role of the All India Muslim League which had pleaded for an “unrestricted immigration as a deliberate and definite policy” was brought to light. The Samrakshini Sabha also expressed concern at the demand expressed by

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36 The Assam Samrakshini Sabha founded in 1926 by Ambikagiri Rai Choudhury was established for preserving the interests and identity of the Assamese people. It was later rechristened as the Assam Jatiya Mahasabha.

37 The Assam Samrakshini Sabha helped the Assamese people to voice their opinion against the issue of immigration. It favoured restricted entry of immigrants and wanted them to assimilate with the greater Asomiya society. Before the Sabha, the Assam Association in December, 1925 in a sitting at Nowgong pleaded with the government to curtail immigration.

38 Memorandum presented to Jawaharlal Nehru, his Assam Tour. File No. 4(1) /22. 1937. AICC Papers. NMML, New Delhi.

39 The Muslim leaders of both the valleys opposed the anti–immigration move as demanded in the Brahmaputra Valley. Sayidur Rehman, a member of the Council termed the objections of the local people as ‘sentimental’. Again on 16 March, 1936, Nuruddin Ahmed demanded the abolition of the Line System as it was an obstacle for the immigrants who wanted to enter Assam. (Assam Legislative Council Proceedings, 1936 cited in Bhuyan, A.C & De,
some Councillors to get the Line System abolished which had been prevalent since 1920.40 In this regard Nehru opined that he was strictly against outsiders who wanted to destroy the indigenous Assamese language and culture. But according to him restricted immigration to Assam could be embraced. The Sabha favoured the transfer of Sylhet district to Bengal. The Asomiya Deka Dal also urged the separation of Sylhet from Assam along with placing other demands like a total ban on immigration to the Brahmaputra Valley for 20 years and strict naturalisation laws for the Bengali residents. But Nehru in an attempt of surpassing the importance of the issues said that the question of Sylhet separation and immigration was not as important to him as the other bigger problems that were facing the country.41 Congress members from Sylhet also met Nehru placing a demand before him regarding the formation of a separate Provincial Congress Committee. They felt that neither Assam nor the Bengal PCC was concerned about the interests of Sylhet. On this issue, Nehru wrote to Abalakanta Gupta of Sylhet: “The District Sylhet is peculiarly situated between Assam and Bengal and you well know it has to suffer to some extent to this situation...It may be that because of this neither PCC is very much interested in you. This is unfortunate and ought to be looked into.”42 It appears that Nehru expressed sympathy for the issue. However he disagreed on the issue of formation of a separate PCC for the Sylhet district.

It was also first in 1937 that the issue of Assam’s secession from India was contemplated by the Assam Samrakshini Sabha. The growing hegemony of the Bengali middle class and the constant threat of unchecked immigration into Assam from the Eastern Bengal districts created a fear psychosis among the Assamese who feared that they would be reduced into a minority in their own land. For a section of the Assamese


40 The introduction of the Line System empowered the district officers to draw lines in order to restrict immigrants from occupying new lands. It thus helped in eliminating the developing tensions between the Assamese Hindus and the immigrant Muslims as the movement of the immigrants were restricted within definite tracts.

41 Memorandum presented to Jawaharlal Nehru, his Assam Tour. File No. 4(1)/22. 1937. AICC Papers. NMML, New Delhi.

intelligentsia secession of Assam appeared as the only way to save the Assamese nationality from being wiped out. Nilomoni Phukan, Ambikagiri Roy Choudhury and Gyannath Bora were the leaders of this movement. Expressing this fear, the Assam Samrakshini Sabha in its Memorandum stated, “It is perhaps difficult for the outsiders to realise the true feeling of the outraged manhood of Assam. Desperation has taken possession of the minds of the people. And as a means of saving the Assamese race from extinction a considerable section of the intelligentsia has even expressed their minds in favour of secession of Assam from India.”

The Asomiya Deka Dal also echoed similar sentiments in their memorandum given to Nehru. It said, “...the temple of swaraj when it is built on the bank of the Brahmaputra it will be on the grave of the Assamese nation...the only alternative...that we can think of is that we should get separated from India as Burma has done.”

It can be seen from the above how associations like Assam Samrakshini Sabha and Asomiya Deka Dal voiced their concerns on the issue of incessant immigration from East Bengal. The feeling of loss of identity and resources in the face of greater dominance of Bengalis in administration was strongly felt by these associations who in a move to save Assam from being usurped by outsiders wanted to break away from the Union itself.

A grievance was also placed which cited that the Congress party had been hitherto neglecting Assam. Nehru assured the masses by saying that Assam was an essential part of the body politic and hence the question of paying insufficient attention to Assam would imply that the organic whole would be weakened. Therefore he urged the people to discard such assumptions.

2.9 The Quit India Movement, Congress party and Assam

The role of the Congress party in the Quit India Movement was also worth noting. According to Guha (1977), this landmark movement in Assam was essentially a

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43 Memorandum presented to Jawaharlal Nehru, his Assam Tour. File No. 4(1) /22. 1937. AICC Papers. NMML, New Delhi.


45 Ibid.
Congress Movement as it was carried on mainly by Congressmen. In Assam, the responsibility of building up a non-violent resistance to the colonial rule was entrusted to Rajendra Nath Barua and Hari Narayan Barua. Their main responsibility was to build Santi – Senas (peace brigades) so as to empower youths by training them for self-defence and self-discipline to carry out regular night-patrolling in rural areas. Rajendra Nath Barua organised these training camps to train Satyagrahis and volunteers in the Golaghat district of Assam.

The party adopted the Quit India Resolution of 8 August, 1942 resulting in the detention of Congressmen like Md. Tayebullah, President of the APCC, Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, Bishnuram Medhi, Debeswar Sarmah, Dr. Harekrishna Das, Liladhar Barua, Gopinath Bordoloi and Siddhinath Sarma. It was followed by the arrest of other leaders like Mahendra Mohan Choudhury, Bijoy Chandra Bhagawati, Haladhar Bhuyan, Motiram Bora, Purna Chandra Sarma, Mahendra Nath Hazarika, Pitambar Goswami Satradhikar of Garamur, Bimala Prasad Chaliha, Kamakhya Prasad Tripathi, Jyotiprasad Agarwala, Pratul Goswami, Mahadev Sarma, Lakheswar Barua, Rajendra Nath Barua, Krishnanath Sarma, Debakanta Barua, Mahikanta Das, Hari Narayan Barua, Beliram Das, Purnananda Chetia and Robin Kakoti. These were only a few names out of the many others who were jailed for their participation in the movement. Immediately through a Gazette Notification the Government declared the APCC, District Congress Committees (DCC’s) and the lower level committees along with santi – senas as unlawful bodies. The Offices of the D.C.C.’s were raided and Congress funds were seized under Section 17 A of the Criminal Law Amendment Act XIV of 1908. These anti-people activities however strengthened the resolve of the people. The streets of Assam were filled with protesters who had gathered to register their demonstration against the colonial government. The masses who were left to themselves after the arrest of all important leaders decided their own course of action after suffering atrocities at the hands of the Britishers. Moreover the imminent threat of Japan

Rajendra Nath Barua was born in Golaghat on 29 September, 1897. He was educated at the Presidency College, Calcutta and later in the Calcutta University. He had taken active part in the Satyagraha Movement and was even imprisoned for his participation. He was also the Chairman of the Golaghat Municipal Board from 1927 – 1932 and Chairman of the Golaghat Local Board from 1931 – 1933. He was also the member of the Legislative Assembly in 1937 and then afterwards in 1945 and 1951.
advancing towards Assam during the course of the Second World War resulted in a consistent loss of confidence in the government which only grew stronger day by day.

The movement took a violent turn in places like Barpeta where colonial establishments were attacked and destroyed. In Sarbhog on 26 August, 1942 an armed attack was organised by Brajanath Sarma\textsuperscript{47}, Vice – President of Barnagar Congress Committee. He and his associates launched a mid – night raid on the military aerodrome at Barnagar and demolished colonial establishments like military dumps, post – office, police station, inspection bungalow etc. After this attack, Sarma and his associates went underground to avoid arrest but they were found later and jailed three years for their offence. In Nowgong district, police misbehaved with three Congress youths and dragged them out from a meeting. A clash resulted in police – firing in three places – Jalah, Rehbari and Nityananda.

The motto of ‘\textit{Do or Die}’ accentuated the patriotic impulse in the hearts of people of Assam. Bishnuram Medhi, chief minister of Assam from 1950 – 57 wrote the following about the Quit India Movement in the souvenir of the INC published on the occasion of its 60\textsuperscript{th} session at Avadi, Madras – “When the then Government found other means at their disposal to be of no avail, they resorted to firings in Nowgong, Darrang, Goalpara and Kamrup districts on unarmed people, who in their patriotic zeal either tried to hoist the National Flag on Government buildings or took out processions in defiance of the existing ban, or tried to dismantle bridges or remove fish – plates from railway tracks in their attempt to hold up movement of essential military supplies etc.”\textsuperscript{48}

In Nowgong district, the August Movement had clearly set new benchmarks. From different corners of the districts, agitational activities like sabotage and cases of arson

\textsuperscript{47} Brajanath Sarma (1894 – 1960) born in Barpeta district of Assam is lovingly called Natyacharjya (guru of dramatics) in Assam. He left his studies to join the British army in the First World War. Simultaneously he pursued his passion for acting and organized theatres in various places of Assam. He established the famous Kohinoor Opera party. To join the freedom struggle he left his passion and soon became the President of the Barnagar Congress Committee. Later he severed his ties with the Congress party and contested election from the Socialist Party in the 1952 elections.

were reported. After 9 August, Congress workers in Nowgong district spread out throughout the entire district to disrupt road, telecommunications and rail links. Military establishments and installations were burnt by angry youths. Flouting prohibitory orders, people took out processions shouting Congress slogans. On 25 August in Kampur, a crowd led by Congress leaders damaged the post – office, circle office and the railway station at Kampur. They also forced the police personnel to wear Gandhi caps and shout Congress slogans with them. Crowds turned violent destroying railway station at Phulaguri, post office at Jajori, inspection bungalow at Kathiatoli, circle office at Raha and some other government offices at Puranigudam, Bebejia and Kaliabor. On 16 September, Nowgong observed Panchabir Dibas in the memory of five martyrs who had been killed by the police. They were Kolai Koch, Hemoram Borah, Hemoram Pator, Gunabhiram Bordoloi and Tilak Deka. On 18 September, when the Congress workers were celebrating the opening of their office in Berhampur, which was held by the British for a long time, the District Magistrate appeared on the scene with a huge contingent of an armed police to destroy the office and ordered the people to disperse. Bhogeswari Phukanani, an aged lady of 60 years who had a flag in her hand hit an officer with it. The officer was enraged at this and immediately shot her along with Lakhi Kanta Hazarika, Thogiram Sut and Boloram Sut. While protests and hartals were still continuing, a band of people formed the Santi – Senas at the instruction of Congress leaders who had assembled at a meeting on 31 January at Nowgong to implement the war constructive programme in Assam. Out of this Santi – Senas, Mrityu – Bahini (Suicide Squad) was formed to launch attack on the symbols of the colonial government.

The Congress workers also were active in Darrang district. On 20 September the Congress flag was to be hoisted in all the police stations of the district. In Dhekiajuli under the leadership of Kamala Kanta Das, a crowd of Congress volunteers marched towards the police station where Monbar Nath and Golok Neog successfully hoisted the flag. In the clashes which occurred in the aftermath of this incident, eight people were killed by the police. Women leaders like Kumali Nath Kakati, Tileswari Devi, Padumi Nath were also killed. The police also took up lathis and beat up the Congress volunteers assembled there. In Gohpur of Darrang district, Kanaklata Baruah and Mukunda Kakoti were shot mercilessly when they tried to hoist the National Flag on the
Gohpur police station building. However the Congress workers successfully hoisted the Flag at Sootea, Behali and Jamuguri police stations and also at Dergaon of Sibasagar district.49 On 27th September, a group of 200 women tried to hoist the Congress flag on the Teok Police Station. Despite being lathi – charged, the spirit of the people could not be subdued. Under the leadership of Aitila Bora, the Congress flag was hoisted inside the police station. On 26 January, 1943 a large number of women had assembled in Pathsala to gather to celebrate Independence Day under the presidency of Chandraproboa Saikian. The police force which arrived at the spot arrested Saikian and other significant women leaders like Puspalata Das and Guneswari Nath. Serious disturbances also occurred in Golaghat and Lakhimpur districts. Roads and railway lines were damaged, colonial establishments like government buildings, post offices and military petrol depots were burnt down in Goalpara, Dhubri, North Salmara, Patiladaha etc. These kind of sabotaging activities were particularly noticeable in Kamrup, Nowgong, Darrang and Sibasagar districts. Dutt (1998) says that it was not established clearly whether Congressmen were connected with these railway sabotages although a Congressman named Kushal Konwar was awarded death sentence in connection with the derailment at Barpathar. Dutta (1991) also notes down that Congress leaders like Omeo Kumar Das who stood by Gandhiji’s ideals condemned such acts of violence.

The Quit India Movement continued to create circles of disturbances in various parts of the state. Guha (1977) notes that no other movement even the non co – operation or the civil disobedience movement was as impactful as the August Movement of 1942. Hundreds of people were arrested and quite a large number of people killed in different incidents of police atrocities. People irrespective of gender and age participated in this uprising. Youth, particularly students gave up their studies to contribute to the struggle. Student unions like The Cotton College Students’ Union Society was suspended during the war years because it had played a prominent role in provoking the youth to launch attack on the colonial government. The movement carried on in the name of the Congress was a mass upsurge which shook every little establishment of the British Empire in Assam. The statistics below connected with Congress disturbances from 9 August 1942 – 31 December, 1943 highlight the extent of

colonial property damaged by the rebellions and the repressive activities carried out by the government in response to the movement:

Occasions on which police fired – 4.
Casualties inflicted – 22.
Casualties inflicted (non–fatal) – 19.
Casualties suffered (fatal) – 0.
Casualties suffered (non–fatal) – 17.
Police Stations damaged or burned – 4.
Other government buildings damaged or burnt – 64.
Other public buildings damaged or burnt – 66.
Private buildings damaged or burnt – 61.
Estimated loss to government – Rs. 3,13,782
Estimated loss to other parties – Rs. 1,94,847
Bomb explosions – 10
Bombbs discovered with damage – 9.
Casualties from bombs – 0.
Cases of sabotage to roads – 43.
Other cases of sabotage – 29.
Cases of collective fines – 98.
Collective fines imposed – Rs. 4,24,661
Collective fines collected – Rs. 2,94,727
Collective Fines refunded – Rs. 22,025.
Courts set up under Special Courts Ordinance – 4.
Cases disposed of by Special Courts – 133.
Persons convicted by Special Courts – 162.
Cases disposed of by ordinary courts – 949.
Persons convicted by ordinary courts – 1003.
Death sentences passed – 4.
Death sentences revoked by superior courts – 3.
Arrests made – 2707.
Cases of whipping – 0.
Local authorities superseded – 0.
Though the Movement could not immediately overthrow the British from the Indian soil, yet its impact and glory cannot be underestimated. Equal number of men, women and youths, particularly college students of Assam participated in this crusade. For the colonial government it became explicit that another uprising of similar nature would be detrimental to their existence. It also became apparent to the authority that transfer of power was imminent, sooner or later. The Quit India experience apprised the British of the power of the masses and the effect of this experience was also long lasting. Dutta (1991) mentions that the British were very apprehensive of the Congress attitude even after announcement of elections in 1945.

2.10 Cabinet Mission Plan and Gopinath Bardoloi

In August 1945, an announcement was made by the British authorities that elections to the Central and Legislative Assemblies in India which were forestalled because of the war situation would be held towards the end of the year. In accordance with the instructions, Lord Wavell made an announcement on 19 September, 1945 which was also approved by Clement Atlee, the new British Prime Minister. The announcement was as follows:

“It is the intention of the His Majesty’s Government to convene as soon as possible a Constitution – making body, as a preliminary step they have authorised me to undertake, immediately after the elections, discussions with the representatives of the Legislative Assemblies in the Provinces, to ascertain whether the proposals contained in the 1942 declaration are acceptable or whether some alternative or modified scheme is preferable. Discussions will also be undertaken with the representatives of the Indian
States with a view to ascertaining in what way they can best take their part in the Constitution – making body.\textsuperscript{50}

For the AICC, the proposals were unsatisfactory as there was no mention of the goal of independence within them. However, it decided to contest the election with the ultimate goal of acquiring independence from British rule. In the elections, the Congress attained the status of a single majority party in the Assam Legislative Assembly. Under the leadership of Gopinath Bardoloi, a nine member cabinet was formed in September 1946.

For Bardoloi the announcement of Lord Wavell ushered in a lot of hope for the country as well as the state because his party had been demanding for a very long time, establishment of a free India by constitutional means. The Cabinet Mission comprising of Lord Pethick Lawrence, Secretary of State for India, Stafford Cripps, the President of the Board of Trade and A.V. Alexander, the first Lord of Admiralty arrived on 23 March, 1946.

The main objectives of the Mission were:

1. To hold preparatory discussions with elected representatives of British India and the Indian states in order to secure agreement as to the method of framing the constitution.
2. Set up a constitution body.
3. Set up an Executive Council with the support of the main Indian parties.

The fundamental nature of the Constitution as recommended by the Mission was as follows:

1. A Union of India comprising both British India and the States was to be formed.
2. The Union was to have an Executive and Legislature constituted from British Indian and State Representatives.

3. Other than the Union subjects and residuary powers, all other powers were to be vested in the Provinces.

4. Provinces were free to form groups with executives and legislatures, and each group could ascertain the provincial subjects to be taken in common.

5. The Constitutions of the Union and of the Groups were to contain a provision whereby any province could call for a reconsideration of the terms of the Constitution after an initial period of ten years and at ten yearly intervals thereafter.

The Cabinet Mission announced its statement on May 16, 1946 which contained a number of clauses. Out of them the most controversial one gave rise to anxiety in the entire Brahmaputra Valley. This clause envisaged the division of provinces of India into sections A, B and C. Assam according to Section C was to be grouped along with Bengal and become a Muslim – majority province. This violated the basic principle of provincial autonomy because of which Assam and particularly the APCC reacted immediately. The Working Committee of the APCC sent a telegraph to the then Congress President Abul Kalam Azad on 16 May, 1946 communicating their decision of resentment against the grouping clause of the Cabinet Mission. Jagadish Chandra Medhi formed a five member Committee to organize an anti – grouping movement in the province. It was decided that 5 June would be observed as anti – grouping day. The APCC rose to the occasion and made an appeal to the various organisations, students and youths to sensitize and mobilise public opinion on the issue of grouping. Bardoloi also wanted the Congress volunteers to prepare themselves for a mass movement in the wake of the Congress Working Committee’s session on 10 June in which Bardoloi feared that the recommendations of the Cabinet Mission would be accepted in its entirety, which would mean that Assam would be grouped with East Bengal. Bardoloi was thus ready to go against his own party to save Assam’s future. The APCC also shared similar concerns with Bardoloi.

The response to Bardoloi’s call was felt in different directions. The Assam Jatiya Mahasabha fully supported Bardoloi and its General Secretary, Ambikagiri Rai Choudhury announced that he would go on a fast – unto – death strike to save Assam from being grouped. The All Assam Students Union and the Communist Party of India
in Assam also lodged their respective reservations against the Cabinet Mission. The Muslims of Assam had different opinions on the issue. The Muslim League and the Surma Valley Muslims favoured the grouping. Saadulla held the view that Assam was dependent on Bengal for economic purposes and grouping would help in administration of Assam. According to him, the Cabinet Mission had shown “great statesmanship in grouping Assam with Bengal”.

On the other hand, the Assamese Muslims were in doldrums regarding maintaining their identity. They wanted to preserve their Assamese ties with the greater Asomiya population though accepting the grouping clauses would imply the numerical strength of their community.

Meanwhile, as decided, 5 June was observed as the “anti – grouping day”. Meetings and processions were held in towns of Kamrup, Nowgong, Darrang, Sibasagar, North Lakhimpur, Barpeta and Golaghat districts. Lawyers, students, women and youths came out in support of APCC’s call for opposition to the Cabinet Mission’s grouping plan.

On the other hand, the AICC had accepted the Cabinet Mission Plan on 10 August, 1946 and had planned to proceed with the Constituent Assembly. As far as the Muslim League was concerned, it welcomed the formation of groups. Mohammed Ali Jinnah justified the grouping on the ground of availability of the provision of opting out of it, if the identity of the province felt threatened. But Bardoloi steadfastly opposed the proposed grouping of Assam and was not ready for any compromise. The national Congress particularly Nehru and Azad, dismissed off Assam’s concerns expressed by Bardoloi as ‘unjustified’. Officially it also believed that differences between the Congress and the League could be interpreted and resolved by the Federal Court.

As per the decision of the APCC, Gopinath Bardoloi submitted a Memorandum to the Congress Working Committee on December 9, 1946 expressing firm determination to reject the Grouping clause. He wrote, “If Her Majesty’s Government’s proposals are to be accepted both our constitution as well as Grouping will be
determined by the majority of the Constituent Assembly Members sitting in Group ‘C’, with the inevitable result that we shall be thrown entirely at the mercy of the Muslim League both for our provincial constitution as well as our Grouping. With this perspective of a Section before us, we, the members of the Constituent Assembly from Assam, can have but only one decision; and, that is that we refuse to go to that section.\textsuperscript{53} In this regard it must also be mentioned that the Working Committee of the National Congress had offered little help to the Congressmen of Assam on the course of action to be adopted. Instead, Nehru and Azad persuaded the Assam delegation to dismiss off their fears about the grouping. However, Gandhiji was much more supportive than the National Congress in meeting the demands of the people. Therefore the APCC sent Bijoy Chandra Bhagabati and Mohendra Mohan Choudhury to meet Mahatma Gandhi on 15 December, 1946 to acquire advice from him on this matter. Gandhiji clearly remarked, “...if there is no clear guidance from the Congress Working Committee Assam should not go into the sections. It should lodge its protest and retire from the Constituent Assembly. It will be a kind of \textit{Satyagraha} against the Congress for the good of the Congress....If Assam keeps quiet it is finished. No one can force Assam to do what it does not want to do.”\textsuperscript{54} Thus, the void created by the indifference of the Working Committee of the INC was filled in very appropriately by Gandhiji’s advice to Bhagabati and Choudhury. The Congressmen returned to their state confident and determined to oppose the Cabinet Mission Plan of 1946 tooth and nail.

Gandhiji’s encouragement to the Assam Congress leaders helped them to frame their mind regarding the stand to be adopted regarding the Cabinet Mission Plan. Bardoloi thereby informed Nehru that Assam would firmly go by Gandhiji’s advice and frame her own Constitution. The AICC at a plenary session in January 1947 reviewed the situation in the wake of similar reservations expressed by the Sikhs and the people of Assam. In a resolution adopted on 6 January, 1947, the AICC stated that the provinces of the country should be vested with the power of deciding their own fate, should they be compelled to join another province which might endanger their


\textsuperscript{54} Ibid, pp. 14 – 15.
autonomy and rights. In this crucial AICC meeting, eight members were present out of which only Md. Tayebullah voted for the resolution. But this AICC’s resolution could assuage the fears of neither the non-Muslim Assamese nor the APCC. The APCC consistently reiterated its stand of framing the province’s Constitution only by its own representatives. In the face of Assam’s unswerving opposition to the Cabinet Mission’s Grouping Plan and with solid support from the APCC, the recommendations of the Plan could not be materialized and the Cabinet Mission remained, for all its purposes, null and void. Lord Wavell was replaced as the Viceroy of India and in his place Earl Mountbatten was appointed. Mountbatten was convinced that the Cabinet Mission was unsuitable for the country in the changed circumstances. Therefore, partition of the country on communal basis was inevitable.

2.11 The Mountbatten Plan, Assam and the Sylhet Referendum

On 20 February, 1947, the Prime Minister of Great Britain, Clement Atlee announced that British Government would grant full self-govern ment to British India by June 1948 at the latest. This announcement ushered intimations of freedom for the country. After this, Lord Louis Mountbatten as the last Viceroy of British India was entrusted with the responsibility of making an arrangement for transfer of power. Mountbatten constructed a Plan wherein the country would be divided on a communal basis. As it came to be known, the Mountbatten Plan of 3 June, 1947 envisaged partition of India and formation of a new Constituent Assembly. According to this plan, the princely states were free to join either of the two Dominions or remain independent. Regarding Assam, the Mountbatten Plan recognised the demand for inclusion of Sylhet within East Bengal and announced that a referendum would be the deciding factor for ascertaining the geographical future of Sylhet. For the purpose of holding the Sylhet referendum, the Boundary Commission was constituted which was presided over by Cyril Radcliffe. It published the results on the basis of the referendum held on 6 July, 1947. Approximately 56.6 per cent of the votes of the referendum were in favour of Sylhet’s inclusion with East Pakistan and 43.4 per cent voted for an undivided Assam. The result as Guha (1977) says was almost unexpected and more than anything, it reflected the communal composition of the district population. The Sylhet referendum resulted in the transfer of majority portion of Sylhet with East Pakistan whereas the
three thanas of Patharkandi, Ratabari and Badarpur and about one – half of the thana of Karimganj remained in Assam.

In this connection it must be remembered here that since the Direct Action Day observed by the Muslim League on 16 August, the social atmosphere in the country was marked by bitter communal feelings. After this incident in Sylhet too, a minor communal clash where thirty people were injured had taken place. Bardoloi was keen to avoid any such conflict which could escalate and cause major damages to lives. Moreover, during this time under Bardoloi’s eviction programme, which was started after Saadulla government’s departure, was in progress in the Brahmaputra Valley.\(^{55}\) Apprehending any kind of further retaliation between communities, Bardoloi issued instructions to district and sub divisional officers to keep the situation in check.\(^{56}\) Thus, communal clashes could be prevented in both the valleys of Brahmaputra and Barak by Bardoloi’s timely orders. When the Sylhet referendum was announced, the Brahmaputra valley hailed it with relief. It was an opportunity for the Assamese leadership to create a more homogenously linguistic province.\(^{57}\)

The Mountbatten Plan also provided for the partition of India into two dominions of India and Pakistan. India was granted independence by 15\(^{th}\) August, 1947. With it, India emerged as a sovereign and independent nation. Freedom had been

\(^{55}\) See Chapter 4 for details on Saadulla’s eviction programme which was actually completed by Bardoloi.

\(^{56}\) For this purpose local peace committees were formed and the officers were asked to adopt even the ‘sternest’ of measures, should the situation go out of control.

\(^{57}\) Sylhet was composed of majority of Muslims and Bengalis. Between 1874 and 1947 many Sylheti Hindus had taken a number of jobs in Assam. The indigenous Assamese in reaction to the continued presence of the Sylheti Bengali bhadralok developed a kind of resentment towards them and to the continuous streams of East Bengali refugees that were flowing into Assam. The Assamese leadership had also started to feel insecure in their own land because of Bengali immigrants who had been migrating to Assam from East Bengal since a very long time in search of economic opportunities. (See Chapter 4 for details on pre – colonial immigration). They felt that their land, language and identity were threatened by the penetrating immigrants and the growing dominance of the Sylhetis. Hence the separation of Sylhet from Assam was a blessing in disguise for the Brahmaputra Valley. Therefore the Assamese leadership perceived it as a ‘God – sent opportunity’ for creating a linguistically homogenous state. (Guha, 1977)
achieved but it was only the first step. A tougher task of nation – building and development lay ahead for the Congress leadership in the subsequent years.

The next chapter will discuss the organisational structure of the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee, the ideological principles of the party and the primary challenges faced within the organisation.
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