CHAPTER V

Summary and Conclusion

Having examined the role of the Indian National Congress in Assam politics for a decade (1947 – 1957), an attempt is made here in this chapter to sum up the analysis and come to the conclusion. Any significant study on a political party is always deeply embedded in history and society from where it emerges. In our study of the Congress party in Assam politics, we have tried to situate the roots of the evolution of the party in Assam in the Indian Freedom Struggle and have attempted to study the role of the party in the politics of Assam in a decade which was challenging for the government from the point of view of problems that emerged.

“Compared to many other developing nations, India, in virtually all of its states, has a more institutionalized political process.”\footnote{Weiner, Myron (1968 ) (ed.). State politics in India. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 40.} The study of the Indian National Congress (INC) forms a very significant part of the study of this institutionalized political process. The present work confined to the history of the Congress party in the politics of Assam is marked by an understanding of the role of the party in the national movement, its organisational structure, ideological principles and organisational challenges faced within the party. The major problems faced by the Congress led government during 1947 – 1957 and its role in dealing with them has also been encompassed.

The work is divided into five chapters. The first chapter introductory in nature deals with the background developed for the study, the theoretical framework, objectives, hypotheses, methodology, review of literature and significance of study. The second chapter traces the evolution of the INC in Indian socio – political scenario and subsequently the journey of its formation and expansion in Assam politics. The INC formed one of the most important legacies of the historical inheritance of Indian democracy. Founded in 1885 in Bombay, it gradually evolved from a movement fighting for freedom to a political party in the post – colonial state. The ideology of the Congress party was structured by evolutionary processes and not by sudden, sweeping
events. This slow growth of the party and its ideology helped to establish good contact with the people. The Congress party in Assam too, was not developed in a day but it was a combined effort of numerous individuals, organisations and events. Democratic aspirations were aroused in the state with the promise of a meaningful self government in an independent India. The establishment of the Congress party as a legitimate political party facilitated this process. During this institutional era (briefly the Nehru period, i.e. from independence to the early sixties, when democratic institutions like political parties and pressure groups were developing), the party was able to strengthen its roots setting about a trend of legitimate institutionalized politics. Thus the evolution of this party in Assam has been helped by the spread of democratic politics and vice versa.

The process of formation of the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee (APCC) is incomplete without reference to the Assam Association formed in 1903. The latter was the first popular political organization of the period which helped to mould the Asamiya national consciousness. With the emergence and consolidation of the national movement for freedom, the INC was also gaining popularity of the masses. The emerging Asamiya middle class expressed a desire to merge the Assam Association with the INC in 1920. Thus on 18th April, 1921 by a resolution the APCC was formed and the Asamiyas became a part of the pan-Indian nationalism.

The role of the Congress party of Assam in the national movement was one of the most crucial. The party helped to mobilise the aspirations of the people for an independent country where civil and social rights were equally distributed. The seventeenth annual conference of the Assam Association held in Tezpur in December 1920 was significant in the sense that it was here that the Association was converted into a full Congress forum where discussion on national issues of the time, like the Non Co-operation was taken up. 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-operation 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. Mahatma Gandhi’s visit to Jorhat, Gauhati, Tezpur, Nowgong, Dibrugarh, Silchar and Sylhet helped to circulate the message of non
co-operation among the people. The Congressmen responded by resigning from all government bodies and boycott of British courts, carrying out picketing and processions and taking up spinning and weaving in towns and villages. Governmental repression in the form of lathi-charge, imposition of punitive taxes, prohibition of making derogatory speeches against the government and even imprisonment of Congress workers was carried out. The Non Co-operation Movement in Assam simultaneously sowed the seeds for the development of the Congress party and laid down the foundation for the execution of a struggle with broad national goals of overthrowing colonial rule from India. The Civil Disobedience Movement was also an important milestone in the history of Indian nationalism. 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. Congress workers and supporters faced arrest, lathi-charge or gun firing for their involvement in anti-government activities. Their properties were confiscated. Congress members like Tarun Ram Phookun, Bishnuram Medhi and Hem Barua worked uninterruptedly in places like Golaghat, Jorhat and Sibsagar to appeal to the people to enrol as volunteers for the movement. Different forms of the movement were 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 and promoting sale of swadeshi goods. Men, women and youth alike participated in substantial numbers. The Congress workers of the state were also not behind when it came to responding to the Quit India Resolution of 8 August, 1942. The APCC was declared as an unlawful body and most of the workers were put behind bars. The movement took place with great vigour in the districts of Nowgong, Golaghat and Darrang. Police resorted to firings in several places and mercilessly beat up Congress workers who tried to hoist National Flags in government buildings. Despite such use of brute force, the people including the Congressmen were undeterred. If anything the Quit India Movement, like in other parts of India, shook the foundation of the British imperialism. Essentially the freedom movement in Assam which was led by the Congress party apprised the Britishers of the power of the masses and made them acknowledge the fact that the stay of the colonial rulers was soon reaching an end.
The role played by the Congress party in Assam in the freedom struggle ushered in a new dynamics of politics that also helped to create a stable political order. The nature of the party politics had remained anything but stable in the decades after independence. Even political competition was thus internalised and carried on within the Congress. There were intra-party clashes both during Bardoloi’s and Medhi’s tenure as chief ministers. Individuals within party organization sometimes constituted the chief opposition to the government and exercised pressure on it. However this only helped to ensure the mobility and life of the internal power structure of the Congress.

The third chapter’s coverage of the study relates to explaining this intra-party clash which took place within party and government, within government and then between government and party. The first rift was between Gopinath Bardoloi who had formed the government in 1946 and Debeswar Sarmah, who had been aspiring for a cabinet position in Bardoloi’s ministry. Non-fulfilment of Sarmah’s political ambitions led him to oppose Bardoloi government and his actions. Another confrontation took place between Chief Minister Bardoloi and Finance Minster Bishnuram Medhi regarding policies adopted on the issue of refugees and employment. It was however not a very serious issue which could threaten the party organization. Differences of opinion on policies within a party are generally welcomed in a democratic country. The third type of altercation was between Chief Minister Bishnuram Medhi and his opponent group consisting of Devkant Barooah, Kamakhya Prasad Tripathy, Mahendra Mohan Choudhury, Bimala Prasad Chaliha and Debeswar Sarmah. This group facilitated the removal of Medhi from the state political scenario by advising the then Congress President U.N. Dhebar to appoint him as the Governor of Madras. However, despite the presence of clashes, the Congress party of Assam did not disintegrate and was able to sustain the intra-party competition.

It has also been analysed that the APCC did not confirm fully to democratic principles. Organizational activities, executive meetings and joint meetings of the Working Committee of the APCC and the Executive Committee of the Assam Congress Parliamentary Party gave an impression of vitality, but behind these outward forms the party structure lacked substance. Even though it had a Constitution, a necessary requirement of the regulatory framework within which political parties function, there
actually remained a big gap between the rules it had adopted and its implementation. It could effectively function in the formal domain following the legally binding procedures and formats. But there were weaknesses inherent in the party. The APCC could not maintain a proper register of membership or a record of decision – making about office bearers or candidates. When the question of grassroots mobilisation arose, the Seva Dals of Assam had to function amidst great financial strains and lack of resources, both men and materials. Most Congress Seva workers were found having lack of training and enthusiasm for carrying out activities of the Seva Dals in DCC’s. For decisions affecting the APCC, the people at the grassroots were hardly ever consulted during this period as most of the decisions were taken by the Executive Committee of the APCC. This shows a stark contrast in the party’s functioning between the colonial and the post – colonial period. Whereas the Congress as a movement derived its strength from the masses in the colonial period, the Congress in the post – colonial period seemed to lose its contact with the people. Declining membership was also another serious issue for the APCC. It could not identify the membership crisis which took place during the immediate period following independence. The question of reinvigorating the party organization was raised only after the 1957 general elections when declining membership caught the attention of the national Congress leaders.

Weakness detected within party organisations diminishes the ability of the party to aggregate concerns affecting the bigger picture. In this context, examination of the role of the party in dealing with the two major problems which were previously identified as immigration and food scarcity demands attention. The fourth chapter deals with this aspect in particular.

Ever since the British occupation, there had been a consistent flow of people from neighbouring states of the country for work opportunities and settlement in Assam. Partition of the country only made the situation more difficult by bringing in more and

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191 No regular records relating to decision – making and maintenance of membership registers were found in the course of data collection in different libraries of the country and the state. When an interview was conducted with the Superintendent of the APCC, Rajiv Bhavan, Guwahati, Mr. Abani Kumar Sarma in 2012, the researcher was informed that the party maintained irregular records regarding decision – making and membership.
more refugees and immigrants into the state.\textsuperscript{192} For political reasons the main issue which caught the attention of the political parties during this time, including Congress, always remained the linguistic conflict between the Assamese and Bengali. Even when issues were not remotely connected with language, tension was almost always viewed from this angle (Goswami, 1997). To maintain stability and ensure convenience, most of the political parties, maintained a mutually agreed stand to camouflage the influx issue so as not to raise this subject (Baruah, 1986). However, Bardoloi and Medhi tried to raise this issue during their respective tenures. They tried to garner attention of the centre towards this problem faced in Assam. The issue was also discussed by the Congress members in the Assembly and Parliament before and after 1947.

When the question of controlling immigration through legislation came up, it must be mentioned that the Immigrants (Expulsion from Assam) Act of 1950 was a legislation having no teeth and hence remained a dead Act. The leaders at the centre offered meagre help to control the flow of immigrants. If anything, Nehru only threatened Assam by refusing to help her financially if the state failed to take in the outsiders.\textsuperscript{193} The loose restrictions imposed on the movement of people from East Pakistan to India could not stop the flow of people to Tripura, Assam and West Bengal.\textsuperscript{194} Nevertheless, Gopinath Bardoloi tried to curb the unrestricted immigration into Assam. He completed the eviction programme in 1946 by evicting unprotected encroachers from four reserved areas in Mangaldoi, three in Barpeta and two from Gauhati. On many occasions he appealed for help to Nehru for checking immigration and illegal encroachment and took advice from Gandhiji regarding course of action to be adopted. But Bardoloi failed to tackle this challenge because he could not put forward Assam’s case strongly as he did before the AICC leaders during the Cabinet Mission Plan. From the elaborate discussion on immigration from 1947 – 1957 in Chapter 4, we can conclude that his views on immigration were shaky. Whatever steps he took for controlling immigration failed to get adequate central support for lack of internal party strength. Bardoloi also could not contribute substantially to ameliorating

\textsuperscript{192} See Chapter 4 for details.

\textsuperscript{193} See Chapter 4 for details.

\textsuperscript{194} The Times of India, 3 March, 1950, No. 52, Vol. CXII, p. 7.
the food situation in Assam. Hoarding and black marketing of foodstuffs could not be completely controlled during his tenure. Only provisional measures like distribution of varieties of seeds and manures, taking up mechanised cultivation and introduction of joint and co-operative cultivation were introduced. Whatever minimal progress was made, perennial floods and the earthquake of 1950 destroyed it. However that does not lead to the conclusion that he did not keep the interests of the people in mind or wanted to promote particular concerns. It must be remembered that Bardoloi played an instrumental role in mapping Assam. He did not neglect his brethren living in the hills and stood for representative arrangements for the protection and promotion of the interests of the hill tribes. His cause for the advancement of higher education for the people is also well-established by the fact that he was the man behind the foundation of the Gauhati University in Assam.

Regarding immigration, Bishnuram Medhi, the second Chief Minister of Assam in independent India expressed his opposition to immigrants coming and encroaching the land of the state. He also gained popularity for rendering his duty of evicting encroachers in 1946. But the fact that some of his policies regarding immigration were flawed cannot be denied. Whether it was the policy of granting rehabilitation benefits to all displaced persons irrespective of their possession of refugee registration certificates or the policy of uneven distribution of land, the Medhi government cannot be evaluated without criticising such policies. As noted earlier it was also during Bishnuram Medhi’s reign that 5 lakh East Bengal refugees got voting rights. Defective system of issuing passports was one of the important reasons behind the easy attainment of voting rights. The impact of food scarcity during Medhi’s tenure had been mitigated by schemes of the Grow More Food Campaign but again the loss of rice resulting due to earthquake, floods, drought, communal disturbances and diversion of paddy lands for growing money crops was estimated by the Department of Agriculture to be 4,41,500 tons in 1952. The extent of price rise of foodstuffs was not commensurate with the availability of food in most areas of Assam during Medhi’s tenure as chief minister.¹⁹⁵

Weaknesses in the Congress organization however did not result in inability of the party to voice the interests of the state. The issue of immigration, for example, was

¹⁹⁵ See Chapter 4
no doubt addressed but policies introduced for tackling it lacked viability because of which immigration to Assam continued in the subsequent years. Self-sufficiency in food was inconsiderably achieved even after the Second Five Year Plan Period (1956–1961). The Congress all through the period from 1947–1957 could not devise a concrete plan of action but contended itself in assuaging the impact of the situation temporarily by merely introducing short-term expedient measures which were fragile.

A primary reason for inability of the state government to solve the problems of influx and food scarcity was lack of financial aid from the centre. The state government had to keep depending on the centre for monetary aid. In his budget speech of 1948, Bishnuram Medhi, the then Finance Minister laid down before the House the special claims of Assam through which she was entitled to greater financial aid than other states of the country.\(^{196}\) Being a frontier province having less developed transport facilities and few institutions for educational, agricultural and technical development, the state should have received sufficient attention of the centre.\(^{197}\) However, the response of the centre was insufficient in this regard. The pleas for additional assistance to meet the deficit in budget of 1948 went unheard.\(^{198}\) When in 1950 the lands of Assam were destroyed and rendered infertile for cultivation by the Great Earthquake of 1950 and accompanying floods, chief minister Bishnuram Medhi received assurances of sympathy and help from Nehru, Patel and likewise.\(^{199}\) However, it will be worthy to note that help received for the disaster-affected people was mostly in the form of donations received from various sources throughout the country.\(^{200}\) It must be noted here that production, supply, distribution, trade and commerce of foodstuffs are a

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\(^{197}\) Ibid, pp. 50 – 51.

\(^{198}\) Ibid.


\(^{200}\) Up to 15 February, 1951, the total donations received in cash and credited to the Governor’s Earthquake Relief Fund amounting to Rs. 59,46,902-12-2 pais. Gifts in the form of rice, foodstuffs, yarn, clothes and blankets amounting to Rs. 8,80,500 were also provided to the fund. (Budget Speech, 9 March, 1951. Vol. 1, No. 2, p. 52).
subject which falls under the Concurrent List. As such, though essentially the state could have managed to reduce the impact of food scarcity, yet at the same time it must be remembered that the essential responsibility of sharing the burden of the problem was not taken by the centre.

The Assamese elite (upper caste Hindu group which virtually became dominant in the society because of their superior intellectual abilities) therefore raised their voice in favour of larger grants to the state of Assam and greater financial autonomy. According to the Assamese elite, one of the primary causes of Assam’s underdevelopment had been the centre’s indifference towards the state’s economic necessities. This feeling of perpetual neglect fuelled the objection of the Assamese elite towards having a strong centre during the drafting of the Constitution. This section of the society which played a vital role in forming public opinion in Assam wanted greater provincial autonomy for the state while leaving important matters like defence and preservation of security with the centre. The centre – state relationship therefore became a crucial point of discussion in Assam during this time. It must be mentioned here that due to centrifugal tendencies which appeared on the eve of independence of the country, the Constitution makers were in favour of a strong centre which would help to unify the provinces and build a stronger nation. However, taking into account Assam’s strategic location and its peculiar socio – political problems like tensions between Assamese and non – Assamese due to immigration problem, tribals and non – tribals, between people belonging to the hills and the plains together with issues like poverty, economic and industrial stagnation, the Assamese elite voiced for a greater share of financial aid and provincial autonomy so that the state became equipped with powers to tackle its unique problems.

However, the fissiparous tendencies in the period following independence necessitated the need of a strong centre. The Constitution makers therefore decided in favour of a Constitution federal in nature and unitary in spirit. Among other federal features, the makers stood for a strong centre to bring the states of India under one Union with no power of secession being vested on them. This unitary nature of our Constitution has developed the tendency of bargaining for securing grants – in – aid and loans from the centre. This bargaining takes place between centre and states and even
between states. This has in turn led to an upshot of people’s expectations from their state governments for a better standard of living.

Expectations from a newly formed state government in a newly independent country are always high. The party which wins the mandate of the people has to represent and give voice to the people, distribute equally the goods and resources between the people and above all, respond to their many demands and problems (SDSA Team, 2008). This created a sort of an ‘expectation overload’ in Assam which could not be met by the Congress government.

Successful working of parliamentary democracy requires the existence of an opposition party which constructively criticises, pressurizes and influences the government’s policies thereby forming public opinion in the interest of the people. The role of the opposition during this time played a vital role indirectly ensuring a stable and undisturbed Congress government for three decades after independence. There was no single party which acquired status as the opposition party. During this time opposition was formed by various groups and parties in the Assembly. The Socialist party, the Communist party, some Independents and the Krishak Majdoor Praja Party formed a composite opposition which was named as the United Opposition Block. But it failed to make any impact in the electoral politics. The leftist parties of Assam carried out campaigns only during time of elections and failed to actually represent the cause of the working class. Moreover, its organizational strategies were also very poor (Basu, 2007). Apart from the APCC, no other party had frontal organisations like youth, women and labour wings during this time which are very necessary for extending the support base and strengthening the overall party structure (Narain, 1976). Hence the opposition parties could not cast any significant impact on the politics of the state for which the Congress party indirectly benefitted.

It is now pertinent to make certain recommendations in relation to the subject in hand. The following are the recommendations which have been made on the basis of the findings during the course of the investigation.
Recommendations

- For developing its internal strength, a political party should fortify its organizational structure. Since the structure is the base on which the sustainability of the party’s ideology, principles and policies depend, therefore, it is strongly felt that strengthening the organizational structure and promoting unity within the party circles helps to not only address issues concerning the people of a state but also bring out sustainable policies to deal with them.

- It has been found that the state leaders could not create a favourable impression on the minds of the central leaders of that time regarding the crucial issues which affected the state. Sufficient party strength is required in order to exercise the correct quantity of pressure on the centre so that it can construct strict and durable laws to deal with the problems of the state. In respect of immigration, the planned migration programme or sealing of the borders did not help to control immigration even during the subsequent years because of which the state witnessed the beginning of the Assam Movement in 1979, the impact of which is felt even today in the socio-political conditions of the state.

- The need for revitalising the grassroots organisation of the party so that it can establish links with the people who actually constitute the foundation of a democratic structure must not be neglected. A bottom-up approach is inevitable if democracy is to be empowered. Steps should be taken to ensure that the process of decision-making within and outside the party is inclusive, i.e., it includes the views and opinions of the people at the grassroots level.

- The gap between rules adopted in the Constitution of the party and its implementation should be minimised. Every rule of the Constitution should be strictly adhered to and a record about even the smallest of activities of the party like membership registers and decision making should be regularly maintained.

- As members are the strength of a political party, therefore, initiatives to encourage members to join the party should be adequately taken. For this, membership drives need to be taken up at regular intervals. In this aspect the
goals and visions of a party should be clearly defined so that members are attracted towards them.

- The role of the opposition party is also important for maintaining the sound health of a democracy. The opposition parties help to keep in check the actions and pronouncements of the ruling party. They also aid in putting pressure on the government to adopt people-friendly policies. As it could be observed, the role of the opposition during the study period was not significant. The opposition was not a solidified whole which could create an impression in the Assembly. Though this indirectly benefitted the ruling Congress party, yet it could not be denied that a strong opposition could have taken the responsibility to give attention to the continuous development of policies and to keep these in view before parliament and the people. The opposition could also have been an effective partner in the nation-building process in the crucial period following independence of the country. The criticism of the views and policies not in the interest of the people, for example Gopinath Bardoloi’s views on the administrative set-up, opening up of 5719 acre of village grazing reserves in 1949–50 for settlement of immigrants, uneven distribution of land during Bishnuram Medhi’s tenure and the easy method of acquiring passports could have been highlighted by the opposition party which could have led to stimulation of democratic debate.

The present research work has analysed the role of the oldest political party in world’s largest democracy, the Indian National Congress in the politics of Assam from 1947–1957. It hopes to create academic utility and impart practical significance to future researchers. This work is expected to provide a right direction to those researchers who are inclined to further analyse the role of the INC in the governing process of the country and unearth new vistas in state and party politics.
References:


