CHAPTER-VI

CRITIQUING COLONIALISM: THE NATIONALIST PROJECT ON FLOODS AND EMBANKMENTS IN ASSAM

As has been mentioned already, the magnitude of floods showed an upward trend since the second decade of the twentieth century. This led to a conflict of opinion between the Indians and the colonial administrators. The former blamed the latter for aggravating flood situation in the province while the latter tried to defend itself from all such allegations. In the same vein, question of constructing and maintaining marginal embankments or **bunds** became a serious matter of dispute during the 1920s, particularly after the formation of Reformed Councils in Assam in 1921, between the Assamese intelligentsia and the colonial State. Although both the issues were separate, many a times they became interwoven. It became a struggle of competing ideas. The present chapter will delineate the chief contours of this nationalist project on floods and embankments in Assam, which assumed serious proportions during the period of our study. Accordingly, the chapter is divided into two sections. The first part deals with how the nationalist intelligentsia addressed the issue of floods vis-à-vis colonial responsibility in the making of it in the Surma-Barak Valley. In the second, emphasis will be on the question of marginal embankments in upper Assam, an issue that was very dear to the Assamese nationalist leadership in the 1920s and 1930s.

SECTION -I: Floods and the Nationalists: Views from the Surma- Barak Valley

The formation of the Assam Legislative Council in 1912 was a vital administrative development in the political history of Assam. Although the powers of the Council were limited, it nevertheless afforded some opportunity to the Indians to question
British policies and measures in various matters. No doubt, matters of administration took precedence in Council deliberations, but other issues of vital interest affecting common people were also taken up for discussion. And one such unlikely issue, but which had a direct bearing on the material condition of people, was flood. Right from its inception, Council members took a keen interest to focus on the problems of people caused by floods. Not only this, they also pointed out harmful implications of policies and measures adopted by the British government and its allied interests such as the railway companies in this regard in Assam. Council members from Sylhet and Cachar were most vehement in opposing the railway construction policy that was put into practice in the said districts from the late 19th century.

However, it goes to the credit of an European viz., A.J.G. Cresswell to have first raised the issue of floods in the Council. In the budget session of 1914, he enquired from the government, ‘whether the disastrous floods that occurred in the Surma valley during the year 1913, were caused or accentuated by- (a) The railway embankment between Fenchuganj and Sylhet? (b) The silting up of channels; or both?’ It was for the first time in the history of Assam that ‘railway embankment’ was held to be a probable cause of floods in the Sylhet district. Mr. W. McM. Sweet, replying on behalf of the government pacified Cresswell by saying that the floods of 1913 were due to ‘abnormal rainfall over the upper part of the Surma Valley’. However, he did admit, ‘locally in part of the Sylhet district they were aggravated by the Sylhet-Fenchuganj road and railway embankment.’ It was promised by him to the Council that Government would take adequate steps to ‘ensure proper provision for waterways on the railway’. Similarly, it was assured, ‘the road will not be restored so as to raise it above high flood-level and hence it will not present any obstruction in future.’ But the promise remained unfulfilled and became a serious issue of dispute in the years to come.


The Assam Gazette, Part VI, 1914, P.21
However, the attitude of prominent Indian members of the Council from the Surma- Barak valley such as Babu Ramanimohan Das and Kamini Kumar Chanda otherwise remained appreciative of the relief measures adopted by the British. During the budget discussion of 1916-17, both of them thanked the Government for providing more than sufficient agricultural loans and gratuitous relief after the floods of 1915. Kamini Kumar Chanda in his speech complimented Mr. A.W. Botham, the Finance Member of the Government with the following words, ‘..., in the first place I beg to thank you for the liberal and generous measures which you were pleased to sanction towards the alleviation of distress in the Surma Valley caused by the floods of last July. ..., unless the Administration came to the rescue of the people so promptly as it has done, the situation would be very serious.’ He went to the extent of saying, ‘..., we are justified in feeling proud of the administration we lived under.’

But, this uncritical and appreciative stance of the Indians received a sharp revision after the disastrous flood of October 1916 in Sylhet and Cachar. This flood was at the time considered the largest in the history of the region. Moreover, three large-scale floods in 1913, 1915 and 1916 within a span of four years were sufficient to create apprehension in the minds of people. Council members from Sylhet and Cachar districts lost no opportunity to raise certain important matters connected to floods in the Surma- Barak Valley. The lead was taken by Babu Ramanimohan Das who was most forthright to ask immediately after the October floods,

‘(a) will Government be pleased to state if it proposes to investigate the causes of the repeated floods occurring year after year in the province? (b) Whether it is due to incessant downpour or to any breach of natural or artificial bunds? (c) Is it a fact that some natural obstruction has been caused to give way, somewhere in the hills of Manipur, last year, owing to heavy rains? (d) If so, will Government be pleased to take any feasible steps to prevent such catastrophe to occur in future?’

The demand for an enquiry to investigate the reasons of recurrent floods was also raised by Babu Radha Binod Das and Munshi Riaz Baksh. According to Das, floods of

3 Ibid., 1916, p.49

4 Ibid., 1916, pp. 87-88
past few years were 'abnormal' and there was reason to believe that they were due to anything but excessive rains. He was of the opinion that floods were probably due to some 'preventable causes'. However, the provincial Government was not at all ready to admit the fact that something beyond rainfall had aggravated the flood situation. B.C. Allen, on behalf of the government categorically stated that abnormal floods in the Surma-Barak valley were due to abnormally excessive rainfall and therefore caused by a factor that was not preventable.

It is to be remembered here that the notions of flood that was entrenched in the minds of people in the Surma-Barak Valley did not view it with much anxiety in earlier decades. Floods were one of the commonest occurrences in the region and people had over the centuries devised means to negotiate them. The valuable silt carried by floodwaters was responsible for the fertility of soil. It sustained agriculture in the region. It was a seasonal affair, the drainage of the country was by, and large equipped enough to carry the excess water. Even if there was a huge inundation, the uplands in the form of tillas provided safe refuge. People were adept at constructing machans or tree houses in times of flood. But this idyllic situation was disturbed when people in large numbers poured into the Valley leading to settlement of low-lying flood plains, which were earlier avoided for habitation purpose. In addition, railway and road embankments were constructed across flood plains totally disturbing the drainage of the country since the end of 19^th century. Accordingly, people's vulnerability to floods also increased. As the drainage system was disturbed, it began to take more time for floodwaters to subside. Floods became 'abnormal', which had no precedent and people's risks inturn increased manifold. The Council members from Sylhet and Cachar were intelligent enough to grasp this change and voiced the concern of people. The criticism and demands for enquiry after the floods of 1916 had to be seen in this light.

^ Ibid., 1917, p.8

* Ibid., 1916, pp. 89; Ibid., 1917, p.10
As the criticism grew, the provincial administration could not sit idle and ultimately an investigation was commissioned under Mr. F.O. Lechmere-Oertel, the Chief Engineer of Assam in 1916. His was the first thorough enquiry on the causes and remedies of floods in Assam, particularly in the districts of Sylhet and Cachar. But, the findings were already anticipated as has been already discussed in a previous chapter. He basically blamed excessive rainfall and jhuming practiced in the neighbouring hills as the main reasons for the unprecedented floods of 1916. In certain cases, he did hold railway embankments responsible for aggravating flood situation but otherwise his views were ambiguous on the issue.

This indistinctness however, could neither silence nor satisfy the Indians. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, insufficient waterways in the railway embankments remained an issue of discontent between the British administrators and the Indians. The formation of the Reformed Council in 1921 and the dominance of Swarajist members in it since 1924 led to the raising of this particular issue on a number of occasions.

In 1924 itself, Krishna Sundar Dam, a member of the Council from the Surma-Barak valley raised the question of insufficiency of waterways in the railway embankment constructed by the Assam- Bengal Railway near Satgaon railway station of South Sylhet subdivision. It was pointed out by him that the railway line was putting obstacles in the flow of rainwater from north to south along the watercourse locally called ‘Ratna’ causing health hazards.7

The Satgaon issue became a major apple of discord in the following years. In the budget session of 1925, Babu Basanta Kumar Das, citing from a report of the Director of Public Health, Government of Assam, pointed out that on account of narrowness of bridges at Satgaon water logging had assumed serious proportions. As a result of which, malaria was fast spreading in the area. Secondly, certain provisions of the Railway Act IX of 1890 that allowed railway companies to shake off their responsibility to provide waterways after ten years of construction of the line were also severely criticized by him.

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7 Ibid., 1924, pp.24-25.
Participating in the debate, Rohini Kanta Hati Barua also highlighted the sad plight of the people of Satgaon who were constantly suffering due to water logging. The provisions of the Railway Act also appeared to him as preposterous.\(^8\)

The construction of culvert at Satgaon was a long-standing demand from the inhabitants of the region. The railway line was constructed there in 1897 and immediately thereafter water logging began to take place. When the railway company disowned its duty after ten years, the responsibility to build the waterway initially fell on the shoulders of the Public Works Department. But its failure to take any effective action in this regard put the matter ultimately in the hands of the Department of Public Health. Even the Surma Valley Railway Conference of 1916 failed to suggest anything tangible. Hati Barua therefore severely castigated the government for its lackadaisical approach and put a very pertinent question, ‘why was the construction of culvert so long delayed? Why the railway authorities were not compelled to construct the culvert?’\(^9\)

Water logging at Satgaon also attracted the attention of print media. ‘Servant’ a daily newspaper of Calcutta reported,

‘Some villages near the Satgaon station on the Assam- Bengal Railway line have been suffering from floods every year owing to the absence of a water passage with the result that malaria has taken its permanent abode in them. The difference of water level on the two sides of the line is great; in the flooded area the water rises as high as 6 to 7 feet; on the opposite side the fields lie generally dry. The villagers have been trying for the last nine years to secure redress for this miserable condition. The Deputy Commissioner of Sylhet, the Public Works Department Overseer, Engineers, both Government and Railway, the Sub-Deputy Collector of South Sylhet, visited the place several times. The result of all this trouble and the drawing up of travelling allowance bills have been nil.’\(^10\)

It was an uneasy and difficult situation for the provincial administration. Already in 1924, when faced with the criticism of Krishna Sundar Dam, it tried to shield itself behind the veil of Railway Act of 1890 and instead blamed ‘aggrieved villagers’ who

\(^8\) \textit{Ibid.}, 1925, pp. 1084-85

\(^9\) \textit{Ibid.}

\(^10\) Cited by Rai Bahadur Promode Chandra Dutta in \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 1088-89 (italics in original)
refused to financially support the government to construct the culvert when it became quite apparent that the Assam-Bengal Railway would not do anything in this matter.\textsuperscript{11} As the degree of criticism increased the following year, Mr. O.H. Desenne had to assure the Council members that steps had already been taken by passing a resolution according to which no new railway alignment would be constructed without sufficiency of waterways. A committee would be formed consisting of the Sanitary Commissioner, representatives of railway and local engineering authorities as well as from cultivating class and tea gardens. The Deputy Commissioner of the district would be the chairman of the Committee. This committee would have full powers to investigate the provision of waterways in the railway embankments.\textsuperscript{12} It was only a belated attempt on the part of colonial administration to implement one of Oertel's suggestions made almost a decade back. The Assam Government was most apathetic to put into practice the recommendations of Oertel and had to concede this fact in 1927 in reply to a question from Babu Brajendra Narayan Choudhury.\textsuperscript{13}

The condemnation of railways for aggravating floods in Assam assumed a general tone from this time. Nilmoni Phukon's intervention was vital in this regard, as he clearly brought out the popular perception about floods and its linkage to railways. To put it in his own words, 'The people have long learnt to suspect that these railways are responsible for floods, malaria and other insanitary condition of places through which they are laid, in many cases.' He went on to argue, '..., now the question is if these railway lines are allowed to be laid through the country where there are natural outlets for water before, the Government ought to take sufficient precaution by legislation or otherwise to compel the railway authorities to leave these water-ways totally undisturbed. I believe the Railway Act also demands the railway authorities to do that. But I do not know under what law the railway authorities now disclaim this liability.' He

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 1924, pp. 24-25

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 1925, p. 1087

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 1927, pp. 994-1003
therefore requested the Assam Government to ensure that railway companies take 'utmost precaution' of 'simple laws of sanitation and health' while laying new lines in the province. 

Rai Bahadur Promode Chandra Dutta also voiced the anxiety that railway companies in Assam were very adamant to admit their fault. He pointed out that in the case of Satgaon, P.W.D's preliminary investigation confirmed the popular perception that widening of bridges and providing a new culvert in the railway line would be essential to ensure free flow of water. But the Assam- Bengal railway company refused to accept these recommendations and instead held its own enquiry, which in turn blamed siltation and raising of the banks of river Ratna as reasons for the blockage of water.

The different and competing interpretations of floods between the rulers and the ruled became persistent phenomena during the 1920s and 1930s. Behind their adamancy, the provincial government and the railway companies actually tried to hide their evil doings and indifference to the question of floods in the Surma- Barak valley. It was also against holding any fresh enquiry to investigate the causes and suggest remedies of exceptional floods in Sylhet district as had been demanded by Babu Brajendra Narayan Choudhuri in 1924. This indifferent attitude became all the more glaring when Mr. D.G. Harris, C.I.E., a consulting Engineer to the Government of India visited Assam in early 1929 in connection with assessing the flood situation. The Assam Government failed to furnish any reliable and detailed information about the hydrology of the province to him. Harris was left high and dry and could not recommend anything substantial. In his report he categorically stated, 'it is most unfortunate however that absolutely no information exists such as is necessary to enable the exact location and data to be determined. Practically nothing is known of the hydraulics of the rivers in question. I am told by the Chief Engineer that the accuracy of the few observations which have been made is so


questionable that no reliance can be had upon conclusions from them. In the absence of proper data it is quite impossible to form conclusions or to suggest remedial measures."  

However, this slumber was broken by the June floods of 1929. The magnitude of it was such that it came to be known in common parlance as ‘Deluge’. Suresh Chandra Bhattacharjya, a contemporary observer immortalized the events of this unprecedented flood in his famous booklet called *Deluge in Assam: History of the Assam Flood of 1929 in Anglo- Bengali*. In the apologia or preface of the said book he wrote, ‘From the circumstances of the unprecedented event-the Deluge-like Flood, no mishap or accident could reasonably be considered impossible’. He further said, ‘It will be no less interesting to compare the recent Assam flood with the Biblical narrative of the Deluge ...’ Even newspapers sympathetic to European interests like *Statesman* termed it as ‘unprecedented’ and described the flooded area as ‘a huge lake’.  

The Deluge provided the Swarajists a great opportunity to grill the provincial government once more on the issue of railway embankments. Basanta Kumar Das moved a Resolution in the Council, which asked the government,

‘... to take steps for an enquiry by at least three experts... into the following problems regarding the Surma and Brahmaputra Valleys in Assam:-

(1) rainfall and total volume of water to be carried;
(2) sufficiency or insufficiency of the existing drainage;
(3) in case the drainage be found insufficient what measures could be taken for discharge or storage of water to prevent damaging floods, with rough estimates of the projects recommended;
(4) how far railway embankments and public roads or insufficient water passage through them aggravate, have aggravated or tend to aggravate the effects of the floods in the

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18 Suresh Chandra Bhattacharjya, *Deluge in Assam: History of the Assam Flood of 1929 in Anglo-Bengali* (Silchar,1929), p. II


20 Quoted in *ibid.*, p. II
two valleys. What remedies (including alterations of alignments or even abandonment of the ways where essential) could be suggested to minimize the effects, if any.\textsuperscript{21}

While moving the Resolution he remarked that during the June floods there were complaints from numerous localities ‘that it is the railway embankments and the public roads that obstructed the easy flow of water, there being no sufficient water passage through them, thus causing accumulation of water in these localities for some days to the great distress of the people.’ However, according to him, the government had all along disputed the truth of this complaint and was not ready to accept this fact.\textsuperscript{22}

The Resolution was vehemently opposed by the government. Sir Muhammad Saadulla, the Judicial Member in the Council even went to the extent of saying that such an enquiry would be a ‘waste of time’ considering no data was available as pointed out by Mr. D.G. Harris not very long ago, on which the committee could work.\textsuperscript{23} But this time the European tea lobby strongly supported the Indian members as many tea gardens were also flooded in the last flood. Lt. Col. W.D. Smiles severely rebuked Saadulla and the provincial administration for being so careless in collecting the required information, which was in fact a recommendation of Chief Engineer Oertel. To put it in his own words, ‘Thirteen years ago in 1916 there was a report recommending that proper data be kept. Here in 1929 and no data are yet available.’\textsuperscript{24}

In the teeth of such opposition, the Government had to concede defeat and ultimately the Resolution was carried. Accordingly, a Flood Enquiry Committee was formed under the presidency of Mr. A. Lines who was the Chief Engineer of Railway Board.\textsuperscript{25} However, its recommendations were disappointing as well. Insufficient passages

\textsuperscript{21} *The Assam Gazette, Part VI*, 1929, p.1020

\textsuperscript{22} *Ibid.*, p. 1021

\textsuperscript{23} *Ibid.*, p.1024

\textsuperscript{24} *Ibid.*, p.1034

\textsuperscript{25} *Report of the Flood Enquiry Committee, Assam, 1929 (Shillong: Assam Secretariat Printing Office, 1930)*, p.1
in railway embankments, the chief object of nationalist criticism were virtually marginalized in the report. For instance, it was alleged by Kumar Gopika Romon Roy, a prominent landholder of the Surma-Barak Valley and a member of the Council that bridges in the Assam-Bengal railway alignment between Karimganj and Kalkalighat and between Baraigram and Durlabhchhara, which numbered about ninety-nine, received no serious attention from the committee members. According to him, most of these bridges were mere pipes and therefore insufficient to carry heavy load of water during floods. At the same time, these railway alignments being surrounded by hills on three sides, and haors on the other complicated the situation further and created more problems of water logging ever since they were laid in the region. The faulty construction of railway line had deteriorated the flood situation so much that even tea gardens located high up could not escape the flood of 1929. It was further alleged that instead of listening to people's voices and grievances, the Committee members went by their books and technicalities and blamed excessive rainfall as the root cause of catastrophic floods in the valley.26

Throughout the 1930s, the subject of insufficient waterways remained an essential ingredient of nationalist critique of colonial rule. But after the flood enquiry of 1929, the British became all the more unsympathetic and lukewarm to this issue. Any suggestion of further enquiry was always opposed on grounds of monetary constraints.27 At the same time, questions probing the implementation of Lines Committee report were either avoided or deliberately not given any importance.28 To complement this official indifference, the absence of Swarajists from the Council between 1930 and 1936 and the commencement of Second World War in 1939 obviously had a depressing impact on the functioning of the Assam Legislature in raising matters of vital public interest.

26 The Assam Gazette, Part-VI, 1930, pp.334-336


28 The Assam Gazette, Part-VI, 1936, pp.1158-59. For instance, in reply to a question put by Maulavi Mahmud Ali in 1936 on the implementation of Lines' Committee report, Saadulla said, 'whatever possible was done' and 'many of these outlets and bridges were widened'.
SECTION-II: Embankments and the Nationalists: Views from the Brahmaputra Valley

Marginal embankments or *bunds* in upper Assam, particularly in the districts of Lakhimpur and Sibsagar were an important feature of the landscape from the time of the Ahoms. The Ahom kingdom built an intricate network of *bunds* along river banks to protect agricultural lands from inundation. These embankments also served as highways in medieval period. However, in the chaos of late 18th century and early 19th, maintenance of these suffered a setback. The British, who succeeded the Ahoms in the Brahmaputra Valley were initially indifferent to maintain them. Only since the 1880s, some attempts were made to repair these *bunds*, which came to be considered as valuable from agricultural point of view. But this venture was short-lived and soon the colonial administration took its hands off from maintaining them even though demand from the Assamese for their upkeep never actually subsided.

The British policy in this matter was guided by the decisions taken by two committees. As early as 1915, a Conference was convened at Sibsagar under the chairmanship of Lt. Col. P.R.T. Gurdon to study the impact of embankments on silt discharge as well as fertility of soil. This committee after a threadbare discussion came out strongly against construction of marginal *bunds* in upper Assam rivers. It was said, 'no new bunds or extensions should be undertaken.' The Committee took cognizance of a report prepared by the first Chief Commissioner of Assam Colonel Keatinge in 1878 but which was lost sight of in the intervening period. Keatinge vehemently opposed embankment construction on the ground that these *bunds*, particularly on both the banks of rivers, would increase silt deposit on riverbed as escape routes for silt-laden flood waters were already blocked by these embankments. Accordingly, in course of time, riverbeds would slowly but steadily rise above surrounding low lands making the *bunds* superfluous and ineffective to contain floodwaters any longer. Gurdon however, granted few concessions. One was to allow maintenance of existing *bunds* and the other was to allow construction of *bunds* in only one side of the river. But, both of these concessions were to be put in action only after taking note of the condition of provincial finances and
expert opinion.\textsuperscript{29} Besides Gurdon’s report, Chief Engineer F.O. Lechmere-Oertel also recommended in 1917 complete suspension on building marginal embankments for purposes of land reclamation through silt deposit called \textit{bonificazione} process.\textsuperscript{30}

Although, the government standpoint on the matter assumed a clearer shape by the end of 1910s, it could not keep silent the emerging nationalist opinion, which was diametrically opposite to the official view. Throughout the 1920s, the colonial state faced condemnation from the Assamese intelligentsia over the issue. The formation of Reformed Council in 1921 opened the floodgates of nationalist offensive.

The maintenance and restoration of \textit{bunds} in the Bhogdoi river of upper Assam was raised as early as 1924 by Kuladhar Chaliha\textsuperscript{31} and Rohini Kanta Hati Barua\textsuperscript{32} but nothing positive came out. In the same year, Nilmoni Phukon also moved a resolution asking the Government of Assam to take steps ‘to repair the old bunds on the north bank of the Dehing river in the Dibrugarh sub-division for reclamation of vast arable lands.’ While moving the resolution he pointed out that if the bunds in question were repaired, 17,000 acres of wasteland could be brought under cultivation’.\textsuperscript{33}

Mr. O.H. Desenne, the Chief Engineer, reiterated the official position on this matter. According to him, ‘... it is an exceedingly dangerous thing to do to embank both sides of a live alluvial river. As a result of the embankment the silt gets deposited in the channel, the bed of the river rises and ultimately you find yourselves involved in a race between the height of the embankment and the bed of the river...’ He was thus categorical to say, ‘\textit{There is no question of repairing the bund. In any case the bunds will}

\textsuperscript{29} \textit{The Assam Gazette, Part- VI}, 1924, pp.481-482

\textsuperscript{30} F. O. Lechmere-Oertel, \textit{Floods in the Surma Valley, Their Causes and Remedies}, Assam, Shillong, 1916

\textsuperscript{31} \textit{The Assam Gazette, Part- VI}, 1924, pp.207-208

\textsuperscript{32} \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 213-15

\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Ibid.}, p.480
not be repaired. There is no question of that. The bund will not be repaired; I am entirely against it." 34 The official opposition appeared so convincing that the resolution of Nilmoni Phukon had to be amended and in the amended version which was adopted, no mention of bunds were made, only the government was asked to take steps to reclaim agricultural lands in whatever way they might deem fit.35

This obstinacy was obviously not to the liking of the Assamese intelligentsia. These embankments in their perception not only represented the glory of Ahom Raj but also effective instruments to spread agriculture. Rohini Kanta Hati Barua made scathing attack on the Government in the budget session of 1926-27. His frustration was ventilated when he opined, 'the Government have no policy with regards to embankments rather they have a policy of destruction.' He was extremely critical of the role Public Works Department for being instrumental in destroying many embankments of the Ahom administration. Because of which, the Government had to provide remission of land revenue annually for the flood damage done to people by the annual overflowing of Brahmaputra in the Sibsagar district. According to him, the embankment policy made no sense if remission of several thousand had to be given every year. He castigated the Government for giving up repair and maintenance of embankments on upper Assam rivers because of their being alluvial. It was to him only an ostensible reason to avoid responsibility and nothing else.36

Even this emotional outburst failed to bring about a change of heart. Instead, Mr. B.A. Blenkinsop, Secretary in the Public Works Department suggested an alternative model of river training introduced previously in Burma by one F.H. Leete, a forest officer in Burma administration. Leete described his method in his book The Training Rivers without Embankments. According to Blenkinsop, this method involved construction of '... low bamboo fences placed parallel to and on either side of the river with intervals of

34 Ibid., p.484 (italics ours)
35 Ibid., p.485
36 Ibid., 1926, pp. 440-441 (italics ours)
9" between each of the stakes forming the fence, so that when the river comes down in flood it can freely spread out and flood the country, but in passing through these open bamboo fences the velocity is checked and its silt deposited on the further side of the fence thus raising the country steadily to a considerable distance on either side of the river.\textsuperscript{37} This methodology was highly recommended by him for upper Assam rivers as he found it to be not only cheap but also non-interfering with the behaviour of active alluvial rivers. In addition, he pointed out that as similar hydraulic conditions existed in both Burma and Assam, there was more possibility of it being successful in Assam. Therefore, he recommended the necessity ‘to begin the work at once’.\textsuperscript{38}

But it appears this proposal of Blenkinsop did not receive any support among the Indian Council members as at a later date in the same session Rohini Kanta Hati Barua again put up a Resolution demanding the repair of Bhogdoi \textit{bund} on both banks. Blenkinsop had to yet again come forward and defend the Government standpoint on embankments particularly of the Bhogdoi river. To put it in his own words,

\begin{itemize}
    \item ‘… the silt which this river carries down from the hills is the crux of the whole problem. If that silt cannot escape through the river being embanked on both sides and is therefore deposited in the bed of the river, sooner or later trouble must result. If in the other hand the floods are free to escape and deposit this silt on the surrounding country, at the cost of some temporary minor damage, lasting good must result.
    \item … I will now sum up only the direct evils which must result in the course of time from confining an alluvial river between marginal embankments. These are that the invaluable silt is deposited in the bed of the river where it is not wanted instead of being spread over the country raising the low areas and producing in time excellent land for cultivation.
    Secondly, that the maintenance of these bunds becomes steadily more costly and dangerous. Dangerous because when the bed of the river rises, as it must do, these bunds have eventually to imprison not only the flood water but the whole volume of the river itself making the consequences of any breach most serious to villages and cultivation which will have grown up in the false security of the bund.’\textsuperscript{39}
\end{itemize}

Eventually, the Resolution was lost.

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., pp. 456-457
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., pp. 534-535
As the Assamese intelligentsia failed to impress upon the colonial State, who took shelter in the safe precincts of scientific and technical knowledge to thwart off these criticisms, they resorted to a strategy that they believed would hurt the self-image of the British and bring about a change of policy. In the next budget session, Brajendra Narayan Choudhury moving a budgetary cut motion very emotionally highlighted that in the history of Assam, Ahom Rajas were successful to keep out river floods by constructing bunds but the ‘engineers of the twentieth century could not do the same.’ He showed surprise at the helplessness of the Engineering department. Taraprasad Chaliha provided the nationalist tinge to this argument. According to him, the Ahoms could build such large embankments because of the cooperation of people. Even today, he opined, ‘it is possible to get the same amount of cooperation if the people can be made to feel that the country is theirs and the Government is also in their interests, if we are given Swaraj.’

It was in all probability for the first time, the issue of restoration of embankments was directly linked with the question of restoration ‘Swaraj’. It was the apogee of nationalist criticism, but not the culmination of it. Sarveswar Barua, Basanta Kumar Das, Rohini Kanta Hati Barua and others kept alive the high peach of denouncement in the next Council session also. The Government had to adopt a different ploy to dissuade the Swarajists. Khan Bahadur Kutubuddin Ahmad assured the Council members that it was awaiting the findings of Orissa Flood Enquiry Committee on the effects of embankments on floods and fertility of soil and there upon would decide on the future course of action in Assam. If necessary, he promised, the services of Mr. D.G.Harris, a consulting engineer to the Government of India as well as a member of the said committee would be taken into consideration.

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40 Ibid., 1927, p.468

41 Ibid., p.473 (italics ours)

But this assurance could not pacify the agitating members. Lakheswar Barua renewed the criticism of the Government for its ‘heartless indifference’ to the question of embankments in 1929. According to him, ‘This question has been brought in for discussion in House time and again in the shape of resolutions, interpellations and budget cuts by the representatives of the many districts... since the birth of the Reforms (1921). But to our great surprise Government has not been found to do anything more in this matter than enunciating theories which are not based on the actual conditions of the country with which this Government is concerned.’ He further commented, ‘the subject of embankments has been a very vexed question, and however much the Government may desire to silence the people with fine theories about the harmful effects of embankments and future benevolent effects of the silt deposited by inundations the people cannot agree to keep silent over the matter because questions of bread and life are intimately intermingled with it.’

The core of nationalist grievance was thus clearly brought out in his speech. It was not just his own opinion but reflected the mood of most of the Indian members except those few who were part of the Government machinery such as Md. Saadulla or Kutubuddin Ahmed. In the mean time, as told in the House, Mr. D.G. Harris visited Assam and submitted a report in early 1929. His report again became a source of discontent. Several Council members including Lakheswar Barua, Brajendra Narayan Choudhuri and Kameswar Das criticized it on several grounds. In the first place, it was pointed out that his visit was far too short to take correct stock of embankment and flood situation in Assam. He neither visited the affected areas nor was he supplied with adequate information by the provincial administration. As such, his recommendations were not substantial and did not hold out any real hopes for amelioration of the condition. It was once more a case of disappointment for the Assamese intelligentsia.

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\(^{43}\) Ibid., 1929, pp. 449-458

\(^{44}\) Ibid.
As a matter of fact, Harris himself was critical of the functioning of the Assam Government in flood management. He was shocked to find that absolutely no reliable information existed on the hydrology of rivers in Assam, which made it awfully difficult for him to suggest anything meaningful. In the report, he therefore, recommended the formation of a 'special establishment' to look at 'the entire question of embankments, flood protection, reclamation and drainage in Assam' far more systematically than was the case in past. Hence, he requested the Government to first collect adequate and reliable information before fixing on a policy. Nevertheless, he also spoke about the evil effects of bunds on either side of the river and suggested a total cessation of such construction. In line with Oertel's suggestions, he was also in favour of land reclamation through bonificazione schemes.

Thus, the whole question of embankments and flood control now had to depend on the formation of a specialized department. Even the Assam Flood Enquiry Committee of 1929 suggested the establishment of a Waterways Division in Assam to deal with all matters relating to floods and flood control. These suggestions not only gave a much-needed breather to the colonial state but also appeared attractive to the Assamese intelligentsia who could see some light at the end of the tunnel.

But, all hopes were belied in 1930 itself when the Assam Embankment and Drainage Bill was drafted to establish this Waterways Division. The draft bill empowered the Government to enter on property, to take land, earth or materials necessary for the repair of an embankment and to enforce the supply of labour at reasonable rates. It also allowed the Government to remove or take over any private embankments which endangered the stability of an embankment maintained by Government or which obstructed drainage of the country. Provision was also made that Government would be protected from any action in a civil court for damages done to property owing to the removal of such embankments. Government was also empowered to forbid repairs being

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45 Ibid., p.1025

46 Assam Legislative Council Debates, Part-VI-B, 1938, p.203
made to any embankments, to declare the erection of new embankments in specified areas illegal and to remove any new embankments constructed in such areas. An estimate of the Waterways Division was also prepared. But, as soon as Saadulla placed the draft bill in the Council, it was opposed not only by the European members but also by several Indian members. In the first place, estimates were found to be too costly. Secondly, the provision of impressments of labour was opposed on the ground of it being against individual liberty. But, most importantly, the power of the Government to encroach upon and take up whatever land that would be required for bunding or purposes of digging khal was vehemently countered by those Council members who had landed interests in both the valleys. As a consequence of this opposition, the bill was withdrawn. In 1936 again, Mr. Abdul Khaleq Choudhury introduced the same bill but it was defeated in the Council. The bill was re-drafted in 1938 by Md. Saadulla, the Chief Minister, by getting partially rid of certain objectionable provisions, but even before he could introduce it in the Assembly, the Muslim League government resigned. The Congress coalition ministry headed by Gopinath Bordoloi made all out efforts to see the bill through but in vain, as it was feared by many that some of its provisions would be difficult to implement. Of particular importance was the provision of forcibly acquiring land in the Sylhet district, which was a permanently settled one. At the same time, as the finances of Assam was tottering in the wake of world wide Depression, providing adequate compensation to the affected people might not be possible. There was persistent opposition to it because of financial considerations as well. For instance, when Karuna Sindhu Roy in 1937 put up a question on the formation of it at the Assembly, Saadulla expressed his inability in view of the expense involved in it. Although, he contemplated to open it in ‘future’ when the finances would improve. Unfortunately, that ‘future’ never arrived under the colonial rule. The Embankment and Drainage Bill

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47 The Assam Gazette, Part-VI, 1935, pp. 1352-53

48 Assam Legislative Assembly Debates, Vol-I, No.13, 1940, pp.1148-1154

49 The Assam Gazette, Part-VI, 1937, p. 393
could not receive the legislative approval till the end of British Raj. Consequently, the formation of Waterways Division also did not see the light of the day.

Both the nationalists' projects on floods and marginal embankments in the final analysis could not bring about a change in the attitude or policy of the British. The suffering of the common agriculturalists continued without any signs of redress. Nevertheless, by raising these issues they kept the colonial state on their toes all the time. The vehemence of this criticism was most visible in the 1920s. Cutting across ideological distinctions, Indian members of the Council voiced their sincere concern about the unwanted changes that were occurring in the landscape of Assam, which had significantly upset the lives of people. The vulnerability of people and agricultural fields to floods was a concern, which not only informed nationalist discourse in colonial times but also sustained post-independence politics based on environmental issues.