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## **Role of Students of the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam In the freedom struggle (A case study on Civil Disobedience and Quit India Movement)**

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The student community has occupied a very significant place in discussion on any type of social movement. This has been particularly so in the developing countries because students of these countries have played very crucial roles in their national liberation movements, as for instance, in the case of Burma and India. Even in the developed countries like France, England, U.S.A. and Germany or the Scandinavian countries, students had participated in anti-authoritarian movements at various levels and this participation had taken various forms ranging from simple anti-authoritarianism to more complex forms of radicalism.<sup>1</sup> In Assam, particularly, in the Brahmaputra Valley, students' participation forms a very spectacular feature in the freedom struggle. The role of students in the Non-Co-Operation, Civil Disobedience and Quit India Movement drew a new dimension in the study of inter-disciplinary aspect. In fact, it was only the active part of students that contributed in attaining the mature phase in those aforesaid historical movements. In the light of these discourses, it is an attempt to reflect the role of students of the Brahmaputra Valley in the abovementioned movements in the true historical perspective on the basis of some empirical sources.

Before analyzing the role of the students of the Brahmaputra Valley, a few discussions are necessary regarding the emergence of historical background of the student organization. Noteworthy that, the Assam Students' Literary conference, one of the oldest students' organizations of India came into existence in 1916.<sup>2</sup> The origin of this organization can be traced to the socio-political condition, prevailing at the time in the province, following the British Government's introduction of Bengali, in 1836, replacing Assamese as the language of the schools and courts of Assam. It posed a serious threat to the very survival of the Assamese nationality and nascent Assamese nationalism. Therefore, in the first session of the Assam Students' Literary Conference, renamed *Asam Chatra Sanmilian*, held at Guwahati on 25<sup>th</sup> December, 1916 under the presidentship of Lakshminath Bezbaruah<sup>3</sup> it was clearly stated that the conference would have nothing to do with any political propaganda or with political movement.<sup>4</sup> Although, students throughout the country had an important role to play in the freedom struggle, the case of the students and youth of Assam was very distinct. The distinction lies according to Shiela Bora, 'the Congress had no base in Assam till 1920, and it was the student community, which was instrumental in arousing political consciousness amongst the people of the province. Presidents of various sessions of the *Asam Chatra Sanmilian* often advocated the idea of active participation of students in politics'.<sup>5</sup> Gradually, the importance of political awareness of students together with the prevailing conditions of the time, resulted in the student community taking an active part in politics. In fact, it was the students who began the movement in Assam.<sup>6</sup> In brief; it was the historical background regarding the emergence of the students' organization and their leadership in the Brahmaputra valley of Assam.



In the meantime, the nature of political developments in Assam as elsewhere substantially changed as a result of the emergence of Mahatma Gandhi in the field of Indian politics.<sup>7</sup> Pointing out the influence of M.K. Gandhi in Indian politics, Judith Brown wrote, ‘with the arrival of Gandhi in Indian politics, the doors of modern politics were opened not only to the masses or even to all those who had participated in Non Co-operation, but to the western educated of the once backward areas and to some vernacular literates from town and countryside who had acted as sub-contractors for Non Co-operation.’<sup>8</sup> In fact, it is true that the emergence of M.K. Gandhi paved the way of radicalization of anti-imperialist struggle in India. In the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam also mentioned above, the emergence of Assam *Chatra Sanmilan* (Students’ Organization) in 1916 was one of the remarkable development in the history of radical politics in Assam.<sup>9</sup> The students worked with great enthusiasm at the Tezpur session of the Assam Association held in 1920, where it was proposed that the decision to launch the Non-Co-operation in the state was to be publicized. The reception committee erected four welcome gates in the name of Tilok, Gandhi, Shaukat Ali and *Swaraj*.<sup>10</sup> These gates brought a new impetus during the session. On the importance of Tezpur session, Krishna Nath Sarmah outlines, “as the sudden political movement in India clasped Assam, Assamese people now can’t think of starting political movement separately.... young Assam is all agog to make thunderous participation. I was fascinated at the blessed spirit of young Assam”.<sup>11</sup> It is an admitted fact during the beginning of the Non Co-operation Movement, the demand of the formation of the Assam Provincial Congress on the lines of the Nagpur proposal was gaining popular support and very soon Assam Provincial Congress Committee (APCC) came into existence in 1921.<sup>12</sup> Gradually, on behalf of the APCC, M.K. Gandhi was invited to propagate the message of Non Co-operation among the Assamese people. Thus we have seen that it is the students who began the Non Co-operation Movement in Assam and gradually spread amongst the people of the rural areas of Assam. In fact, under the leadership of students’ community, peasantry became a dynamic force and came into the path of socio-economic exploitation against the colonial government.<sup>13</sup> Against this background, the Non Co-operation Movement had generated a tremendous revolutionary spirit in the rural places of Brahmaputra Valley of Assam and here the peasantry spontaneously played a vital role under the leadership of *Chatra Sanmilan*. Accordingly, vigorous no-tax campaign was started at Boko, Luki, Bangaon, Chamaria, Jorhat, Golaghat, Sipajhar, Patharughat and the like which resulted in heavy fall in government revenue collection.<sup>14</sup> Needless to say, the visit of Gandhi in 1921 and his associates brought a new impetus. The importance of this historic movement lies to the fact that many promising and devoted student leaders were the product of this movement to lead the future movements under the banner of the freedom struggle in Assam. For instances, Gandhar Borkotoky, Murulidhar Baruah, Ratnadhara Baruah, Sarbeswar Borchetia, Bidyadhar Baruah, Biswanath Borpujari, Lila Borah, Chandra Kanta Baruah, Dhodhi Mahanta, Sosodhar Malia Baruah, Babula Phukon, Rohinikanta Hatibaruah, Krishna Nath Sharma, Kuladhar Chaliha, Gongaram Bormedhi, Maheswar Baruah, Trihram Bairagi, Padmanath Borthakur and so forth were the emerging student leaders from the Brahmaputra Valley during the course of Non Co-operation Movement.<sup>15</sup>

Similarly, Gandhi’s historic march to *Dandi* on 12<sup>th</sup> March in 1930 had ushered in a new phase of the national movement. As a result, the student activities of this period laid foundation for the eventful years of the 1930s. Immediately afterwards, guidelines were sent to all the Provincial Congress Committees, to spread up preparations for launching the Civil Disobedience Movement. But to the utter disappointment of the people, the Congress leaders, of Assam, publicly declared that Assam was not yet prepared for Civil Disobedience. They argued that the Salt Law could not



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be enforced in Assam, as Assam, being remote from the sea, had no salt mines, and consequently, therefore, there should be no Civil Disobedience in Assam.<sup>16</sup> But the youth of Assam refused to remain mere spectators in this saga of national resurgence. In the meantime, J.R. Cunningham, the Director of Public Instructions of Assam issued the notorious Cunningham Circular on 9<sup>th</sup> May, 1930, proclaiming that after the summer vacation, boys would not be readmitted in the Government schools unless the parents, and in the case of the higher classes, the boys themselves also, gave a written undertaking that they would abstain from political activities.<sup>17</sup> Young Congress leaders, like Hemchandra Baruah and Omeo Kumar Das, who were eager to launch the Civil Disobedience Movement in Assam, took advantage of the issue of this circular and inspired the students to oppose it vehemently. The student community reacted strongly to circular, and it may justly be concluded that it was their agitation, against this circular, which ushered in the Civil Disobedience movement in Assam. Interesting enough, the rural peasants also supported this movement and came forward with a demand for the 50% reduction of land revenue and thus turning the movement into an anti-imperialistic mass movement under the sole leadership of student origination of the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam.<sup>18</sup> During the phase of Disobedience Movement, we have seen two interesting aspects also. As a matter of fact, many peasant organizations began to emerge under the leadership of the students. Among these *Ryot Sabha* under the right wing student and *Krishkak Sabha* under the left wing student leadership were to be emerged.<sup>19</sup> Here, discussion regarding the role of peasant organizations is not pertinent theme. But it must be admitted fact that students who organized the peasants in the wake of this historic movement, contributed to the distinct mass movement on the basis of local socio-economic issues. In fact, it is true that peasants cannot represent themselves, they must be represented.<sup>20</sup> Hence, it is seen that the local Congress leaders overcame their initial reluctance to start Civil Disobedience, the student leaders decided to extend their picketing against the liquor, *bhang* and opium shops. In order to garner the support and involvement of the rural masses, the student leaders spread out across the provinces with a view to educate them about the movement. For instances, while Bijoychandra Bhagawati and Robin Kakoti went to Tezpur and Sibsagar respectively, Narayan Choudhury took charge of Palashbari and Rampur areas of the Kamrup District.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, Tirthanath Sarma went to Korora, Sepoti and Rangia in the North Bank and Rajanikanta Goswami took charge of the Nalbari area.<sup>22</sup> Simultaneously, Debeswar Sharma, Krishna Nath Sharma, Harinarayan Baruah, Rameswar Battacharjee, Rajendra Nath Baruah, Sankar Chandra Baruah, Darakanath Goswami, Boloram Chaliha, Surjakanta Phukon and the large number of emerging students from undivided Sibsagar District successfully led the movement to popularise among the rural masses.<sup>23</sup>

The Quit India struggle was one of the important phases of the student movement in Assam. The students succeeded in forcing the closure of the schools and Colleges in Assam, for extended periods, and in bringing the whole community of students into the struggle. Unfortunately, the Congress call for the Quit India movement on 8<sup>th</sup> August, 1942, drove a wedge between the nationalist students who believed in whole hearted co-operation with the Congress programmes and the Communist-minded students who believed that this resolution would not result in Congress League unity, necessary for the formation of a national Government.<sup>24</sup> However, as fierce nationalist feelings swept the country, it had an electrifying effect inspiring the students to assume the leadership of the national movement. In this context, the contemporary papers admitted in such a way that the students who joined the campaign from the beginning in large numbers soon began to dominate the activities in the movement. As a matter of fact the direction of affairs in many places soon passed out of the hands of the Congressmen.<sup>25</sup>

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However, even amongst the nationalist group of students inspired by war cry of ‘do or die’, there were two distinct groups with divergent views regarding the strategy to be adopted for achieving their goal. One group included ardent followers of Gandhi, not prepared to depart from the principles or non-violence, under any circumstances. The second group included students like Ajit Barua, Gopal Goswami, Nilmani Das, Robin Goswami, Sankar Chandra Baruah and the like.<sup>26</sup> This group known as the ‘Augusteers’, was inspired by the revolutionary ideas of Jayaprakash Narayan.<sup>27</sup> In the meantime, at the news of the mass arrest of the leaders, the first group of students organized numerous processions of unarmed people. These often turned into an open battle, between hundreds of policemen, armed with *lathis* and bayonets and thousands of unarmed students, determined to occupy the court buildings and the police stations. The second group of students, firm in their conviction that the sequence of meetings and processions had become tedious and fruitless, resorted a series of underground activities which included the disruption of communication involving the cutting of telegraph and telephone lines and sometimes even road and railways in addition to the burning down of government buildings.<sup>28</sup> Here we are not going to trace the course of this historic movement launched by the leadership of the students. The available works on the Quit India movement show the historical role played by the students of the Brahmaputra Valley during the period of our study. In fact, the Quit India movement in Assam was predominantly a students’ movement which had drawn into in the middle class in the cities and the peasants in the villages. Hence, the heroic role played by the students was acknowledged even by the British Prime Minister who told the House of Commons very grudgingly that it was a ‘Children’s Uprising.’<sup>29</sup> It is true that when most of the Congress leaders were behind bars, the students boldly assumed the responsibilities of leadership and provided a link between the movement and the underground leaders.

Thus, it is evident from the above analysis that students of the Brahmaputra Valley played a dynamic participation through their leadership in the freedom struggle. It is reflected through the analysis that when *Asam Chatra Sanmilon* adopted a formal resolution in order to join the Non-Co-operation movement in 1920 and since then the *Sanmilon* continued to take an active part in the movements launched by the Indian National Congress and thus it gained momentum as an active students organization of the state.<sup>30</sup> It is also seen from the discussion that the students leadership had tried to draw the attention of the rural masses to the issue of the preservation of the Assamese identity in the wake of freedom struggle while at the same time keeping alive student politics. Another accepted fact is also proved that the student movements of Assam, not only of the colonial period but even of the recent times, were dominantly rural-based and therefore were able to gather considerable support for their movements for a long time, which has not been the case elsewhere in the country.<sup>31</sup>

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## Notes and References:

- <sup>1</sup>Manorama Sharma: ‘Students and Nationalism: An assessment of the Assam Chatra Sanmilian, 1916-1939’ in Apurba Kr. Baruah(ed), *Student Power in N.E. India, Understanding Student Movements*, New Delhi, 2002, p.55. For details on this issue see, A.N. Roy, *Students fight for Freedom*, Calcutta, 1967, A.R. Desai, *The Social Background of Indian Nationalism*, Bombay, 1976.
- <sup>2</sup>Shiela Bora: ‘Role of Students in the Nationalist Upsurge’ in A.C.Bhuyan(ed), *Nationalist Upsurge in Assam*, Guwahati, 2000, p.217. For details see, S. Bora, *Student Revolution in Assam 1917-1947 : A historical Survey*, New Delhi, 1992, Meeta Deka, *Student Movements in Assam*, New Delhi, 1996, Ramesh Chandra Kalita, ‘Swadhinata Andulonot Assomiya Chatrar Bhumika in Anil Raychaudhury(ed) *Natun Prithivi*, 9<sup>th</sup> years, 4 & 5 issue, Guwahati, 1981, pp.67-114. These Scholars in their writings have tried to articulate the historical root of the student organization in the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam in the pre-independence period.
- <sup>3</sup>*ibid.*
- <sup>4</sup> *Constitution of Asom Chatra Sanmilon*, Published by Upendra Chandra Rajkhowa, Guwahati, 1916.
- <sup>5</sup>Shiela Bora: ‘Role of students in the Nationalist upsurge’, in A.C. Bhuyan(ed), *op.cit.*, p.218.
- <sup>6</sup>K.N. Dutta: *Landmarks of the freedom struggle in Assam*, Guwahati, 1998 (Reprint), p.56.
- <sup>7</sup>Anjan Saikia: *Ryot Sabha in Assam : A study of Peasant Nationalism, 1900-1947*, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Department of History, N.E.H.U. Library, Shillong, 2010, p.69.
- <sup>8</sup> Referred in *ibid*, p.70. For detail see, Judith Brown, *Gandhi’s Rise to Power: Indian Politics 1915-1922*, Cambridge, 1992.
- <sup>9</sup>Anjan Saikia: *Op.cit.*, p.71. Saikia has focused in his dissertation regarding the emergence of Student Organisation in order to establish the leadership on Peasantry. Also see, Anjan Saikia, *Prak Swadhinota Andulon aru Swadhinutor Bhartor Ryot Sabha, Sramik Andulon aru Sramikpran Sarbeswar Bordoloi*, Centenary lecture on Sramikpran Sarbeswar Bordoloi, Mariani, 1<sup>st</sup> July, 2012. p.73.
- <sup>10</sup> *ibid*,
- <sup>11</sup> *ibid*.
- <sup>12</sup> *ibid*.
- <sup>13</sup> *ibid*.
- <sup>14</sup> *ibid*.
- <sup>15</sup> Benudhar Sharma: *Congressor Kasiyali Radot*, Guwahati, 1960, pp.13-21. For detail, see, Sagar Baruah, *History of the Non Co-operation Movement in Assam*, Lanka, 2002.



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- <sup>16</sup> *History of Freedom Movement Papers, R-I, file No-14/3*, a short report of the Congress Activities with Congress jurisdiction of Guwahati, State Archive, Guwahati.
- <sup>17</sup> *Assam Secretariat Confidential A, Nos 103-126 June*, file no 315 C of 1930.
- <sup>18</sup> Anjan Saikia: *Ryot Sabha in Assam : A study of Peasant Nationalism 1900-1947*, *op.cit.* p.77. Also see, Dhodhi Mahanta, *Asomat Communist Andolonor Janma aru Bikasar Samandhe*, Guwahati, 1993, Ramesh Ch. Kalita, *op.cit.*
- <sup>19</sup> For details see *ibid.*
- <sup>20</sup> Karl Marx: ‘The Peasant as a Class’ in Teodor Shanin(ed), *Peasants and Peasants Societies*, England, 1976, p.,231.
- <sup>21</sup> Shiela Bora: *Op.cit.*, p.229, also see, Achyut Kumar Sharma, *Satabdir Pandulipi*, Guwahati, 2011. Sharma has focused the role of Robin Kakoty in the freedom struggle with richly documented evidences in his book.
- <sup>22</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>23</sup> A.C. Bhuyan(ed): *Political history of Assam, Vol-II, 1920-1939*, Guwahati, 1978, pp.136-200. Sagar Baruah, *Bharator Swadhinota Andolonot Asom, Vol-II*, Bokakhat, 2000, pp.1-31, Benudhar Sharma, *op.cit.*, pp.63-69.
- <sup>24</sup> Shiela Bora: in A.C.Bhuyan(ed), *op.cit.*, p.236.
- <sup>25</sup> *J.Nehru Collections, Part-V.S. No.72*, Nehru Memorial and Museum Library, New Delhi.
- <sup>26</sup> Shiela Bora: in A.C.Bhuyan(ed), *op.cit.*, p.236.
- <sup>27</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>28</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>29</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>30</sup> Jagannath Updhaya: *Students’ Politics in Assam: A study of the All Assam Nepali Students’ Union*, Unpublished M.Phil Dissertation, Dibrugarh University, Dibrugarh, 1998, p.4. For further discussion see, Monuj Phukon, *Students’ Politics in Assam*, New Delhi, 2005.
- <sup>31</sup> Meeta Deka: ‘Student Movements in Assam: The Roots of its Continuity and Sustenance’ in J.B. Bhattacharjee(ed), *Proceedings of North-East India History Association*, 7<sup>th</sup> edition, Pasighat, 1987, p. 492.

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